

Interview with Jay Tucker author of *The Whole Youth Worker: Advice on Professional, Personal, and Physical Wellness in the Trenches*

Today, Tyler R. Tichelaar of Reader Views is pleased to interview Jay Tucker, who is here to talk about his new book “The Whole Youth Worker: Advice on Professional, Personal, and Physical Wellness in the Trenches.”

Jason (Jay) Tucker is a full-time youth minister in South Florida. Jay has been married to his wife, Kimberly, for thirteen years. Together they have two children. Working with young people has always been his life's calling. Jay earned his B.S. Degree in elementary education and then spent two years teaching fifth grade. After teaching, he spent a year traveling the country as an educational/motivational speaker. Jay entered full-time youth ministry in 2001 and hasn't had a decent night of sleep since. His first book, “The Whole Youth Worker,” is an insider's look at the Monday through Friday of youth ministry. In his book Jay talks about his own experiences with being a professional youth minister as well as the important role that physical health plays in being the success you were called to be.

Tyler: Welcome, Jay. I'm glad you could join me today. To begin, will you tell us a little about your own experiences in youth ministry that resulted in your qualifications for writing this book?

Jay: First of all, thank you for the opportunity to talk about my book. I started as a volunteer in my local church after I graduated from high school. The youth pastor at my church, Jerry Gardner, took a real interest in me and we developed a great friendship. I started by teaching Sunday School to a small group of middle and high school students. As I gained experience I was allowed to get involved in more of the “inside stuff” like planning events and running smaller parts of our midweek youth program. In time, I was elected by our local church to serve on our Sunday School board and then eventually our church board. After years of helping out, I was given the opportunity to lead the youth ministry in the interim period after Jerry accepted a position at another church. That valuable experience lasted about six months.

After I graduated from college, I taught fifth grade for two years. I then received the opportunity to travel the country as an educational/motivational speaker for a company called Study Smarts. This experience allowed me to craft my speaking skills. Shortly after 9/11, I realized that I didn't want to make a living traveling on airplanes so I applied for a position with a local church in Bradenton, FL. The pastor of the church saw something in me and took a chance on a guy with no seminary training. Since then I've had the honor of working in two different churches. I've learned my craft through trial and error and lots of study. I firmly believe that my on the job training has grounded me in reality about this profession.

Tyler: What was your main purpose in deciding to write “The Whole Youth Worker”?

Jay: I learned everything about youth ministry the hard way. The important things about the profession like how to plan curriculum to how to be a professional in the office during the week came through trial and error. I wrote the book as a way to give back to this profession that I love so much and to help other youth workers get on a faster track to success than the one I was on. Sharing my joys and pains will hopefully be an inspirational way for others to be all that God is calling them to be.

Tyler: When you use “Whole” in the title, what do you mean?

Jay: Often, youth worker training focuses purely on the theological part of the job. The rest is left for people to figure out the hard way. I’ve encountered so many hard working people that simply don’t know how to take care of themselves as they are ministering to others. I believe this has a lot to do with the high burnout rate that youth ministers suffer from. Being a “whole” youth worker means that you are balancing the professional, personal, and physical aspects of being the minister you are called to be.

Tyler: Jay, is this book’s audience limited specifically to youth workers in a specific denomination? Could it be used by those helping youths outside of a religious setting?

Jay: The Whole Youth Worker was written for a person of any denomination to benefit from. There are enough books out there that describe in great detail the differences between theological thoughts. The purpose of this book is to help with the parts of the profession that all youth workers deal with across the board. We have a lot more in common than we have differences.

The book absolutely offers advice that any person working with youth can use. People who work with youth outside the religious setting still have to develop a vision for their program, relationships with parents, professional excellence in the office, thicker skin for dealing with criticism, a balance between their profession and their personal life, and the view that physical health will benefit them professionally. “The Whole Youth Worker” provides my experience in these areas and more.

Tyler: Would you explain to us what are some of the basic duties of a youth worker?

Jay: The youth worker has many responsibilities. The most important duty is to establish a relational program that focuses on people rather than programs and statistics. The professional youth worker has to maintain an excellent youth program while also being a professional in the office. Event planning, fundraising, book keeping, communications, media design, publicity, public speaking, and being an ambassador for your organization are just a few of the duties that a youth worker has to excel at.

Tyler: Your book’s promotional material talks about how to survive the job Monday-Friday 9-5, but youth ministers often have to do extra-curricular activities. Will you tell us about some you have participated in and the challenges that you face?

Jay: Being a full-time church employee often means that you will have to do things that are outside of your title. In my career I have been a college ministry organizer, a sound board technician, a stand-in preacher, a secretary, a janitor, a chef, a Sunday morning service designer, a bus driver, and a summer camp counselor just to name a few. These additional parts of the job are very challenging because they take time away from the main thing that you are being held most responsible for by your congregation. However, most of us don’t have the luxury of working in an environment that has a hired person for all of those jobs. They have to get done, and often I have been called upon to fill those roles while maintaining a youth program at the same time.

Tyler: Jay, you mentioned earlier about preparing curriculum. Will you explain what curriculum requirements exist in your position and how you determine the curriculum?

Jay: Curriculum requirements vary church to church. Everything you teach should be consistent with your particular denomination’s beliefs. I have heard many horror stories about youth ministers that chose to go their own way with their curriculum choices. While you should have freedom to interject your personality and teaching style into the curriculum, the information should always be in line with what your church teaches as a whole. Many youth workers choose to use ready prepared curriculums because they simply don’t have the time, talent, or desire to write original material. I would recommend that new youth workers make use of the ready-made materials that have been approved by their church. As your understanding of the Bible and trust within your congregation builds, you can then begin to interject some of your own commentary and understanding of the Scripture. More

experienced youth workers usually have the trust of their pastors, boards, and congregations to choose the curriculum. Experienced or new, however, always make sure that the curriculum chosen is one you are comfortable with.

Tyler: People who go into youth ministry do so to make a difference in young people's lives, expecting it to be rewarding. Will you tell us what you view as the rewards that make it worthwhile?

Jay: Nothing is more rewarding than to see young people grow in their relationships with God. In that relationship they learn the important things in life. Things like treating others with kindness, working for a greater good, and loving others without reservation. These are the types of things that change the world when they are lived out.

Tyler: As a youth worker, will you tell us about a specific experience you found rewarding?

Jay: Last year our youth group had a local mission project all nighter. I had a number of projects for them to do that benefited our area. Earlier in the year, a young couple in our church lost their first child to a mysterious disease after only 67 days of life. I made a short presentation about the family for our group and asked them to write messages for them that we would attach to their son's memorial tree on our church grounds. The messages would be on the tree for them to see when they arrived at church for Sunday worship. I asked my group if I could read their messages, and I was floored by their level of compassion and love for this family. Moments like those make everything you encounter worthwhile. The family was so moved by the group's comments that they personally thanked our youth group in a very moving way. The students in our group learned that even the most simple of efforts can mean a great deal to others.

Tyler: Beyond working with the youth, a youth minister usually has to report to a parish board or a congregation. Will you tell us about some of the politics or administrative issues that a youth minister must deal with?

Jay: This is the part of the job that many have the hardest time with. When you work for a church, you are working for a professional organization. The church has budgets to meet, expectations to meet and go beyond, and time tables for those things to be accomplished in. It isn't unusual for a youth worker to be judged by the size of the youth group rather than the lives he or she is helping to improve. Members of church congregations usually don't get to see what you are teaching during your youth meetings. But, they do see how many youth show up to Sunday morning worship. Often, the youth worker has little-to-no say as to what happens during that worship service. Sadly, numbers do count to 99% of your congregation.

Being a youth worker is a little like being a lineman (blocker) on a football team. It's not a glamorous position, but it's vital in the overall success of the church. Young people don't often donate large sums of money or large blocks of volunteer time. They spend most of their time absorbing teaching that becomes more evident when they move past your group. A knowledgeable pastor or congregation member will realize that those fruits often began as seeds that the youth worker planted. All too often though, those efforts aren't recognized the way they should be.

Tyler: While your job may be to recruit youth for the church, what is the reason most youth become involved? Do their parents push them into involvement, or are they also searching for God and meaning?

Jay: I think most young people join youth groups because they are looking for a safe place to belong. The friendships that they build really become catalysts for spiritual growth. While our job as youth worker is important, it's really the students in your group that do the most ministering.

Tyler: What age group primarily have you worked with, and how do your methods vary depending on the age group of the children?

Jay: I primarily work with middle and high school students. (6th grade through 12th). I have worked with college-aged students as well. It is very challenging to deliver your messages and activities at age appropriate levels. We currently combine our middle school and high school groups. I have found that the older students learn a lot from mentoring, and the younger students learn a lot from being mentored. Small groups are one way to be more specific to the different needs of your students. In the small group setting, you can really design your lessons and activities to reach them where they need it most. Obviously, it's a necessity to develop small group opportunities so that all of your students are having their spiritual needs met.

Tyler: Jay, what is the one thing you wish you knew when you started as a youth minister that you know now?

Jay: I wish I knew the emotional strength that is required for the job. The short block of time that your youth program covers each week is just the tip of the iceberg. The real ministry occurs when you are praying for your youth, visiting them at work or during school events, or helping them through the tough times in their personal lives. A youth worker has to be spiritually strong themselves to have enough emotional power to do that on a consistent basis while they are paying enough attention to themselves and their family.

Tyler: What do you feel the youth you work with view as your role? Do you serve as a teacher, a friend, a surrogate parent?

Jay: I serve as all of those and more. It really depends on what the student needs. Some young people need positive adult attention because they don't get it at home. Others come from strong families and they really desire to be taught about the Bible above anything else. It is vitally important that you take the time to get to know your students independently as much as possible so that you can diagnose exactly what each student needs from you.

Tyler: One of the biggest aspects of "The Whole Youth Worker" is the focus on taking care of yourself and ways to keep yourself healthy. Will you give us a preview of some of your information on this topic?

Jay: It all starts with maintaining your own spiritual health. Youth workers have to take the necessary time to strengthen their own relationships with God on a daily basis. Youth workers also have to remember that they have to take the responsibility to take care of themselves physically as well. We spend a ton of time with hundreds of people every week. All of that exposure increases the chances that the youth worker will become ill. If we eat well and exercise on a regular basis we build resistance to those pesky little germs. Also, we spend so much time with teenagers that typically eat a lot of junk. It's easy to fall into the trap of eating just like them. "The Whole Youth Worker" contains a menu guide for the most popular fast-food places around. If you follow the guide, you can eat with your group and put better food into your body. Also, I've included an exercise routine that can be done on the road with little space and no equipment required. I firmly believe that physical fitness is an act of worship.

Tyler: Will you tell us about the organization of "The Whole Youth Worker" and the best way to use the book?

Jay: The book is divided into three sections. The sections are: Working with your group, Working with your congregation, and Taking care of your health. Each of these sections includes advice that can only come from someone who has been there. I've written the book in a way that puts a lot of information into a short, humorous, and easy to digest format. The best way to use the book is to read it and jot down the nuggets of information that speak to you where you are at in your ministry. The book contains advice that even the most seasoned youth worker will find useful.

Tyler: Jay, your book includes a chapter on being a youth minister even if you didn't go to the seminary, but for the person considering this vocation, how would you advise them to begin?

Jay: If seminary or Bible school isn't in your plans, I would advise them to spend as much time as they can shadowing an experienced youth worker. Pick their brains about things like creating a vision for the group, how to study, how to create lessons that speak to young people, and how to lead a youth program that benefits the lives of the students that attend. There are also many great youth worker conferences nationwide that teach different aspects of the profession. A great one to attend is the National Youth Workers Convention put on annually by Youth Specialties. Finally, read everything you can get your hands on that pertains to youth ministry.

Tyler: Beyond people who want to be youth ministers, who do you think will benefit from reading "The Whole Youth Worker"? For example, would parents find it informative?

Jay: Anyone who works with youth will benefit from the book. I would also recommend it to pastors who want to know more about their youth minister, church board members who should understand more about what their youth worker does, hiring boards that are putting together job descriptions, and of course parents who have children in a youth ministry. It's vital that they understand the level of commitment that these dedicated people put into the young people within their congregation.

Tyler: Thank you for joining me today, Jay. Before we go, will you tell us about your website and what additional information may be found there about "The Whole Youth Worker"?

Jay: My website is www.betteryouthministry.com. On the site they can learn more about the book, more about me, regularly updated tips for youth ministry, links to some sites that I have found useful, a link to my personal blog about youth ministry, a page to send me their thoughts and concerns, and of course a link to purchase “The Whole Youth Worker.”

Tyler: Thank you for letting me interview you today, Jay. I wish you much success with your continued commitment to youth. I hope “The Whole Youth Worker” helps many like yourself continue to help others.

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