



CATALYST
COLLECTIVE

GUIDE TO MEANINGFUL CONVERSATIONS

**AN ALTERNATE WAY TO MEASURE
STUDENT MINISTRY SUCCESS**

by Joe Elliott

A photograph showing two young men from behind, walking through a lush green forest. The man on the right is wearing a red backpack. The scene is brightly lit, suggesting a sunny day.

INTRODUCTION

How do you measure the success you are having as a student ministry? Is it by counting attendance? Is it baptisms? Or is it something more subjective like the evidence of a changed life?

Leaders who have worked with students for years know the pain of seeing young people leave their faith behind even after years of mission trips, rededications, lock-ins, emotional testimonies, bible studies, and consistent youth group participation which seemed to solidify the foundation of their faith.

We made youth ministry fun, relevant, and engaging; we saw the fruit of their relationship with Jesus as they navigated some very rough waters in school. They had support at home, and they were being covered in prayer by the church. Every possible form of support was provided, and yet, they reached their twenties and grew lukewarm at best.

The ones you thought would go on to be great leaders in the church took a drink of the post-Christian culture Kool-Aid and fell in love.

Student ministry has been dying a slow death for decades and church leaders tend to recognize these trends and adapt their strategies at the speed of a tortoise. So what do we have to lose by embracing risk and trying a different approach? How much worse can it get?

If necessity is the mother of invention then now is the time for youth leaders across the nation to put all of their crazy ideas to the test. At Catalyst, we have been testing one of our own ludicrous ideas by rearranging some of the sacred metrics student ministries have used since the beginning of time to measure success such as confessions of faith, baptisms and church attendance.

WHAT IS A "MEANINGFUL CONVERSATION"

One of our epiphanies over the years has been the idea that we should pay more attention to the quality of the conversations we are having with students. It's something we have instinctively known but not something we have intentionally thought to measure or develop until now. For us, discipleship is a process that begins pre-salvation and continues post-salvation.

Our influence begins from the moment we first engage with a new student and continues on well past our time in youth ministry.

We live in the digital age now so the social connections you make with students through Facebook, Instagram, and whatever the new social media fad of the year might be, will likely exist their entire lives.

Think about this for a minute: never before in history has a spiritual leader had the ability to track and connect with their 'disciples' on a daily basis no matter where they go in the world. The speed at which we can learn about what's happening in their life and respond to it with empathy and wisdom has never been greater! If we desire to model Jesus to a transient and globally-minded generation, then we better be willing to embrace methods that allow us to be an influence in their lives for the rest of their lives. And it starts with a focus on knowing how to have meaningful conversations.

A meaningful conversation (MC) is something we define as being an interaction with a student that is deep and significant and requires a follow-up.

This MC can be as short as a few minutes or as long as a few hours. It can take place face to face or digitally. It can be about anything that is significant to the student and does not have to have a spiritual teaching point (although, they almost always do). Let's break this down so you know what to look for.





1 MC'S HAVE DEPTH

Depth is where you arrive when you have pushed beyond the realm of small talk and landed in a place where more vulnerable ideas and thoughts are shared. Instead of using closed-ended or simple response questions like:

- How was your week?
- What are you doing this weekend?
- What's new with you?

We make an intentional effort to ask open-ended questions that require a more thoughtful and personal response. For example:

- Tell me about one of the biggest challenges you faced this week?
- What are some things you have been passionate about lately and why?
- I was reading about the rise of mental health concerns like anxiety, depression, and suicide among teens this week. What are your thoughts on these issues?

Questions like these create depth in our conversation, and according to studies, go on to trigger positive emotional states, which are vital to establishing a meaningful connection with someone.

2

MC'S HAVE SIGNIFICANCE

You can have a deep conversation with a student and still miss out on creating a strong connection if what you are discussing has no perceived significance to them. Something is significant when it aligns with a topic the student you are talking to is passionate about. In the past, we discounted the value of any conversation that did not lead to or end with a spiritual talking point. That was so foolish.

Every conversation in life can be a segue to a spiritual analogy or talking point when we need it to be.

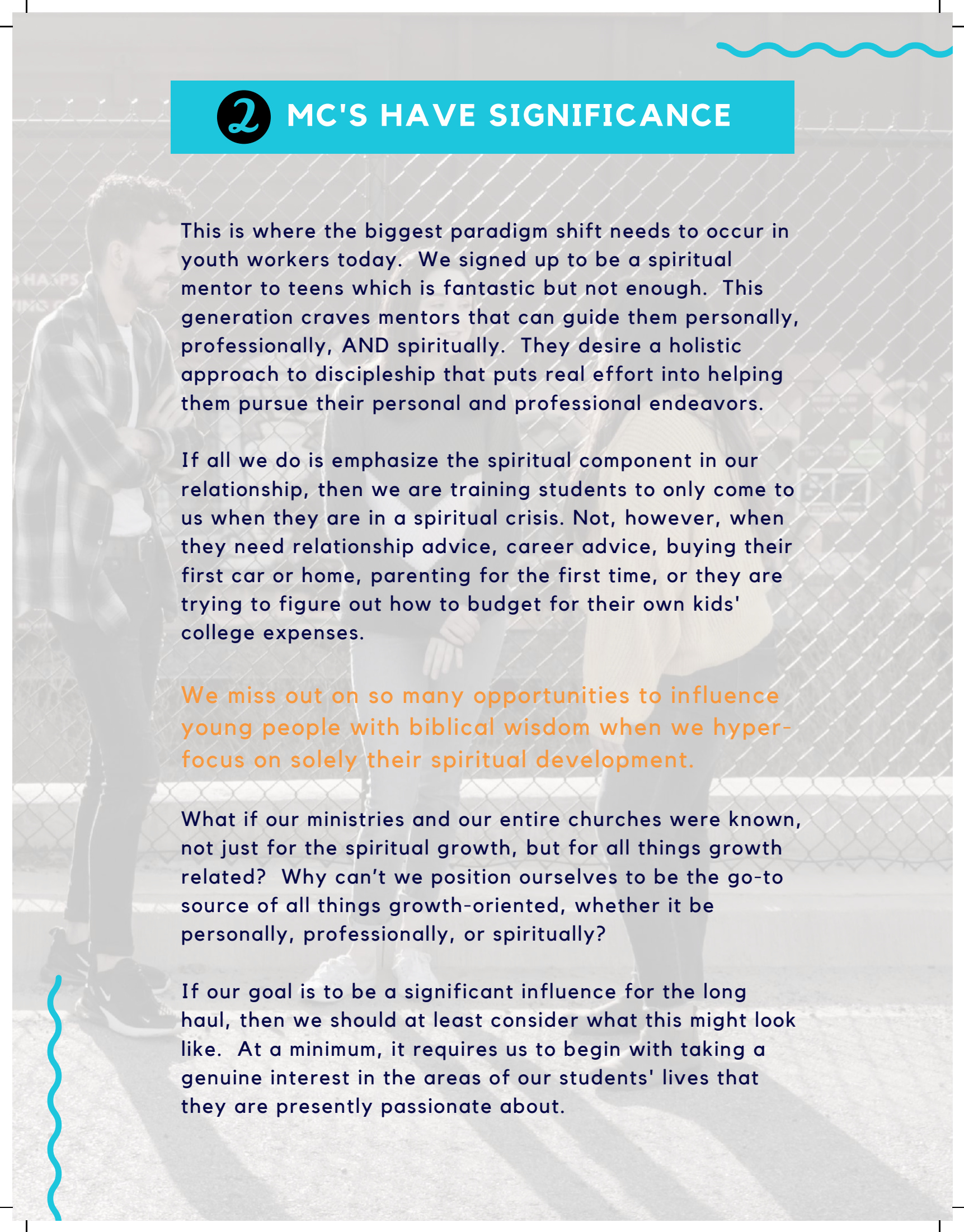
Teens and humans are looking for someone they can confide in who won't judge them, critique them, or try to immediately fix them. They have tons of new thoughts and ideas in their heads every day.

With those, they are looking for safe outlets to say what is really on their mind - with no filter! As leaders who desire to influence a generation now and in the future, it was wise for us to shift our focus into creating lasting bonds with our students. The more we created depth and significance in the conversation, the stronger our connection became.



2

MC'S HAVE SIGNIFICANCE




This is where the biggest paradigm shift needs to occur in youth workers today. We signed up to be a spiritual mentor to teens which is fantastic but not enough. This generation craves mentors that can guide them personally, professionally, AND spiritually. They desire a holistic approach to discipleship that puts real effort into helping them pursue their personal and professional endeavors.

If all we do is emphasize the spiritual component in our relationship, then we are training students to only come to us when they are in a spiritual crisis. Not, however, when they need relationship advice, career advice, buying their first car or home, parenting for the first time, or they are trying to figure out how to budget for their own kids' college expenses.

We miss out on so many opportunities to influence young people with biblical wisdom when we hyper-focus on solely their spiritual development.

What if our ministries and our entire churches were known, not just for the spiritual growth, but for all things growth related? Why can't we position ourselves to be the go-to source of all things growth-oriented, whether it be personally, professionally, or spiritually?



If our goal is to be a significant influence for the long haul, then we should at least consider what this might look like. At a minimum, it requires us to begin with taking a genuine interest in the areas of our students' lives that they are presently passionate about.

3 MC'S REQUIRE A FOLLOW-UP

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SO WHAT NOW?

You are digesting all of this right now and some of it really resonates with you. Some of it you are not sure if you agree with at all. The post-Christian era is complex. It would be easier if we could all point to one thing we need to fix but we can't. In many ways, we are all learning together and figuring out what steps to take next.

Imagine what it would look like if every student in your ministry had one MC per week with a leader. That's 52 MCs per year vs the 24 times they likely attended in person over that same time, yet only have an MC in 12 of those encounters. 52 vs 12. Which student ministry is likely to form deeper, lasting connections with their teens once they move away?

Making MCs a focal point of your ministry is not hard. People may not stand and cheer when you get back from a camp when you tell them you had 1 baptism and 174 meaningful conversations, but that is fine. Are we in this for the applause or are we in this to make an eternal difference in someone's life?

SO WHAT NOW?

Here is what we suggest you do:

- 1) Talk about MCs with your leaders and parents constantly. Explain what it is, teach them how to have them, and celebrate the heck out of them when they happen.
- 2) You need to measure your digital engagement. If MCs are happening, then your social media activity should gradually increase. Students will be more active on your wall or channel because they are starting to feel more bonded to the church community.
- 3) Create a simple, shareable spreadsheet to track which leader had an MC with a student. If there is a follow up that happened, then record those too.

Finally, don't be afraid to try something different. So much of what we do in church today started out as some crazy youth ministry idea until it worked, and it became the norm. If you need someone to bounce your nutty ministry ideas off of, then please reach out. We don't have all the answers, but we can be a source of encouragement and resources that may help.

