

THE PERSONALITY TRAITS OF YOUTH MINISTERS

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INTRODUCTION

North American youth ministers have gained a reputation for being young, single, athletic, energetic, fun-loving, sensitive, humorous, guitar-playing men and women who are utterly winsome with adolescents. As search committees deliberate the future of youth ministry in their churches, it is often the personality characteristics of this stereotype which drives the decision-making process in hiring the "ideal" youth minister.

While one may observe youth ministers who are representative of this image, one must question whether this perceived stereotype is accurate for the majority of those ministering to youth. One may also wonder if these are the personality characteristics which truly describe the "ideal" youth minister.

This research attempts to describe the most common self-reported personality characteristics of youth ministers, as well as those personality traits which youth ministers consider to be important for ministering to adolescents.

BACKGROUND

While research on youth ministers is severely lacking, there are numerous studies on traditional clergy which provide an adequate foundation for this study.

Using the Edward's Personal Preference Schedule (EPPS) and the Jackson Personality Preference Form, Murry (1958) concluded that there were five major personality traits common to the majority of seminary students. The unranked data indicated that seminarians are 1) serious, 2) cautious, 3) outgoing, 4) socially oriented, and 5) people-helpers. Similarly, Naus (1973) found seminary students to be 1) extroverts, 2) reflective, 3) environment ordering, and 4) nurturant-succorant.

Further, Breimeier (1967) found seminarians to exhibit a desire to empathize with others to the extent of actually providing help for those in need. Forest and

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Zuccaria (1968) found that Lutheran seminarians had a higher need for affirmation, intrareception, and change, but a lower need for endurance and order than the norms.

Ekhardt and Goldsmith (1984) reported that seminary students were generally found to have person-helping character traits when compared to the general graduate student population. Male seminarians ranked higher than the norm on nurturance, succorance, and social desirability. Female seminarians ranked lower than the norm on aggression and change, but high on affiliation, dominance, exhibition, understanding and social desirability.

Ekhardt and Goldsmith (1984) made two general conclusions from their study. First, they suggested that there may be consistent motivational needs that characterize ministers. They also concluded that this pattern may be subject to change due to unstable social values and expectations. Hence, we must be careful in generalizing these characteristics of seminarians to youth ministers since the expectations of youth ministers are often radically different than other clergy positions and the past decade has witnessed an enormous change in social values.

That notwithstanding, it seems reasonable to suggest that youth ministers may very well exhibit similar personality traits as seminarians when it comes to people-helping, nurturing, and socially outgoing. However, such a claim should not be accepted without research dealing specifically with youth ministers.

METHODOLOGY

In order to obtain data on the personality characteristics of youth ministers, a survey was administered to 100 youth ministers at various churches and youth ministry-related conferences in the Greater Boston area in the spring of 1988. Because subjects were drawn primarily from New England this study may be regionally biased, thus skewing generalization possibilities.

After answering basic demographic questions, subjects were asked to select fifteen personality traits which were most applicable to themselves, and another fifteen which, in their opinion, should be characteristics of the ideal youth minister. Finally, subjects were asked to indicate the relative value of eight stereotypical traits of youth ministers using a five-point Likert scale. The trait lists were comprised of fifty-two various potential traits applicable to persons (see Appendix A), randomly selected from a possible list of approximately 18,000 trait names. The Likert scales were developed by selection of and reference to a particular trait deemed likely to belong to the stereotype of youth ministers that exists in the minds of the general public.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study focuses on four questions concerning specific personality traits of those involved in youth ministry.

1. What are the most common personality traits of youth ministers?
2. What ideal personality traits do youth ministers themselves perceive to be important to youth ministry in general?
3. How important do youth ministers feel certain stereotypical traits are to youth ministry?
4. How do the self-perceived personality traits of youth ministers differ demographically?

FINDINGS

The results of the data are presented in five sections: the total sample response, a comparison of responses by gender, age, years of experience in youth ministry, and marital status.

Personality characteristics of the total sample. Table 1 reports the combined results of the first and second research questions concerning self-reported personality traits common to youth ministers and ideal personality traits perceived to be important for youth ministry. Over all 65% or more of the respondents claimed their top five traits to be understanding, honest, personable, responsible, and flexible. However, 75% or more listed creativity, understanding, enthusiastic, honest, and energetic as the five most important traits of the ideal youth minister.

Table 1. Self-reported and ideal personality traits of youth ministers (N=100).

Trait	SELF-REPORTED		IDEAL	
	Rank	Percentage	Rank	Percentage
understanding	1	74%	2	82%
honest	2	73%	4	77%
personable	3	70%	9	71%
responsible	4	67%	12	66%
flexible	5	65%	11	68%
enthusiastic	6	59%	3	79%
loyal	7	56%	17	43%
dependable	7	56%	13	64%
cooperative	9	54%	21	31%
appreciative	10	53%	15	47%
outgoing	11	52%	6	74%
humorous	12	50%	7	73%
patient	12	50%	7	73%
creative	14	48%	5	85%
energetic	15	44%	5	75%
organized	15	44%	10	70%

Table 2 compares the way in which youth ministers describe themselves with that of their perceptions of ideal youth ministers' personalities. Several observations should be noted concerning this data.

1. Youth ministers believe they are similar in several personality traits with their view of the ideal youth ministry personality: understanding, dependable, honest, flexible, personable, responsible, appreciative, loyal (based on +/- 15% from no difference).

2. Youth ministers believe they are more cooperative than they should or want to be. Perhaps a sign of the "Messiah complex" often found in ministry or a need to appease the youth, their parents, and/or supervisors (based on more than a 15% negative difference).

3. Youth ministers believe there is a gap between their personality traits and those of the ideal youth ministers' in the areas of creativity, energy, organization, humor, patience,

sociability, and enthusiasm (based on more than a 15% positive difference).

Table 2. Ranked differences (%) between self-reported and ideal personality traits of youth ministers (N=100).

Trait	Self-Reported	Ideal	Difference
creative	48%	85%	+37%
energetic	44%	75%	+31%
organized	44%	70%	+26%
humorous	50%	73%	+23%
patient	50%	73%	+23%
outgoing	52%	74%	+22%
enthusiastic	59%	79%	+20%
understanding	74%	82%	+8%
dependable	56%	64%	+8%
honest	73%	77%	+4%
flexible	65%	68%	+3%
personable	70%	71%	+1%
responsible	67%	66%	-1%
appreciative	53%	47%	-6%
loyal	56%	43%	-13%
cooperative	54%	31%	-23%

These results are partially confirmed by another series of questions which were associated with research question 3, concerning stereotypical traits. The results are reported in Table 3. The youth ministers rated eight characteristics on a five-point Likert scale. Understanding, creativity, counseling skills, and organization ("be goal-oriented") are rated high. Yet, dynamic speaking and being athletic are only moderately rated, while these respondents disagreed with the notion that youth ministers should have a seminary education. It is also interesting to note that respondents were evenly divided on the importance of self-sacrificing as a characteristic of youth ministers.

Table 3. Selected Characteristics of Youth Ministers (N=100).

<u>Characteristic</u>	<u>Mean</u>
	(5=Strongly Agree, 1=Strongly Disagree)
A youth minister should . . .	
understand adolescent development	4.26
be creative	4.19
have counseling skills	3.87
be goal-oriented	3.86
be self-sacrificing	3.60
be athletic	2.96
be a dynamic speaker	2.93
have a seminary education	2.11

Personality characteristics by gender. Slightly different results were obtained concerning gender analysis of personality traits as reported in Table 4. Men viewed themselves to be primarily honest and personable while women considered themselves to be mainly understanding and responsible. Both groups felt they were flexible. Concerning the ideal traits of a youth minister men and women maintained surprisingly similar perceptions. One difference that did stand out was that men rated humor as a high priority, while women rated energy as more important.

Table 4. Comparison of male and female personality traits.

Trait	Male (N=49)				Female (N=51)			
	Self-Report		Ideal		Self-Report		Ideal	
	Rank	%	Rank	%	Rank	%	Rank	%
Honest	1	76%	2	76%	3	71%	4	78%
Personable	1	76%	—	—	4	65%	10	69%
Understanding	3	4%	2	76%	1	75%	2	88%
Flexibility	4	67%	9	69%	5	63%	—	—
Responsibility	5	61%	—	—	2	73%	—	—
Humorous	6	57%	2	76%	—	—	8	71%
Logical	6	57%	—	—	—	—	—	—
Enthusiastic	8	55%	7	71%	5	63%	3	86%
Appreciative	8	55%	—	—	—	—	—	—
Patient	8	55%	5	74%	—	—	7	73%
Creative	—	—	1	80%	—	—	1	90%
Energetic	—	—	5	74%	—	—	5	77%
Outgoing	—	—	7	71%	9	57%	5	77%
Organized	—	—	9	69%	—	—	8	71%
Loyal	—	—	—	—	7	59%	—	—
Dependable	—	—	—	—	7	59%	—	—
Cooperative	—	—	—	—	10	55%	—	—

Personality characteristics by age. While the top ten personality traits of the respondents and their perceptions of the ideal traits of a youth minister were similar across the three age groups (18-25; 26-40; 41+), there were some interesting differences among the top ten as reported in Table 5.

Within the top ten self-reported traits, the younger and older respondents reported honesty as a strong trait, while the 26-40 year-olds reported honesty as merely a moderate trait. Flexibility was a strong trait among the youngest group, but only a moderate one among the two older groups. The middle group viewed themselves as highly personable while the younger group seemed only moderately personable and the oldest group ranked the same trait at the bottom of the list. Finally, the younger two groups did not view themselves as enthusiastic, while the oldest group ranked enthusiasm as their number one trait.

Among the top ten ideal traits the youngest group highly valued outgoingness while

the two older groups ranked outgoing near the bottom. Patience was highly valued by the middle group while the youngest and oldest ranked it much lower. Humor was valued moderately by the middle group, but it was of low value by the youngest and oldest groups. Honesty was moderately valued by the youngest group consistently increased in value as the respondents aged.

Table 5. Comparison of personality traits by age groups.

Age Groups:	Self-Reported						Ideal					
	(18-25) N=30		(26-40) N=51		(40+) N=19		(18-25) N=30		(26-40) N=51		(40+) N=19	
Trait	Rank	%	Rank	%	Rank	%	Rank	%	Rank	%	Rank	%
Honest	1	83%	4	67%	2	73%	4	80%	6	73%	2	84%
Flexible	2	73%	6	59%	4	68%	—	—	10	69%	5	74%
Understanding	3	71%	2	77%	2	74%	4	80%	3	80%	1	90%
Personable	4	67%	1	78%	10	53%	4	80%	7	71%	—	—
Responsible	4	67%	3	71%	6	58%	—	—	10	69%	—	—
Dependable	6	57%	6	59%	—	—	8	77%	—	—	8	63%
Humorous	6	57%	8	57%	—	—	10	73%	4	77%	8	63%
Cooperative	8	53%	—	—	6	58%	—	—	—	—	—	—
Outgoing	9	50%	—	—	6	58%	1	87%	7	71%	8	63%
Enthusiastic	9	50%	8	57%	1	79%	8	77%	2	82%	5	74%
Appreciative	9	50%	8	57%	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Creative	9	50%	—	—	5	63%	1	87%	1	84%	2	84%
Loyal	—	—	5	63%	6	58%	—	—	—	—	—	—
Joyful	—	—	—	—	10	53%	—	—	—	—	—	—
Logical	—	—	—	—	10	53%	—	—	—	—	—	—
Organized	—	—	—	—	—	—	3	83%	—	—	—	—
Energetic	—	—	—	—	—	—	4	80%	7	71%	4	79%
Patient	—	—	—	—	—	—	10	73%	4	77%	8	63%
Confident	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	5	74%

Personality characteristics by years of experience. Once again the top ten personality traits of the respondents and their perceptions of the ideal traits of a youth minister were similar across the three levels of experience (<1 yr; 1-3 yrs; 4+ yrs). However, there were some interesting differences among the top ten as reported in Table 6.

Within the top ten self-reported traits, those with less than four years experience ranked understanding as their strongest trait, while those with four or more years experience ranked understanding as a moderate trait. As youth ministers gained experience they also seem to become more personable and more enthusiastic.

Concerning the ideal personality traits of youth ministers, those with the least and most experience ranked enthusiasm as highly important while those with moderate experience ranked enthusiasm as a low priority. Humor was also ranked much higher by the least and most experienced groups than it was by the group with moderate

experience. On the other hand, understanding and honesty were ranked as the two most important qualities by those with moderate experience, while respondents with the least and most experience ranked understanding and honesty as moderately important.

Table 6. Comparison of personality traits by years of experience in youth ministry.

Yrs. of experience	Self-Reported						Ideal					
	(< 1)		(1-3)		(4+)		(< 1)		(1-3)	(4+)		
	N=34		N=39		N=26		N=34		N=39		N=26	
Trait	Rank	%	Rank	%	Rank	%	Rank	%	Rank	%	Rank	%
Understanding	1	79%	1	80%	6	62%	5	77%	1	92%	6	73%
Honest	2	71%	2	74%	1	73%	7	74%	2	82%	6	73%
Dependable	3	65%	—	—	—	—	9	68%	—	—	8	69%
Responsible	3	65%	4	72%	6	62%	—	—	—	—	—	—
Flexible	5	62%	5	64%	3	69%	5	77%	—	—	—	—
Personable	5	62%	2	74%	1	73%	—	—	—	—	8	69%
Appreciative	7	59%	7	59%	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Enthusiastic	7	59%	—	—	3	69%	1	85%	7	72%	2	85%
Cooperative	9	56%	10	56%	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Logical	10	53%	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Loyal	—	—	6	62%	6	62%	—	—	—	—	—	—
Organized	—	—	7	59%	—	—	9	68%	4	80%	—	—
Humorous	—	—	7	59%	—	—	4	79%	8	67%	3	77%
Outgoing	—	—	—	—	5	65%	7	74%	5	77%	8	69%
Creative	—	—	—	—	6	62%	1	85%	2	82%	1	88%
Energetic	—	—	—	—	10	54%	3	82%	5	77%	3	77%
Patient	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	8	67%	3	77%
Confident	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	10	62%	—	—

Personality characteristics by marital status. The top ten personality traits of the respondents and their perceptions of the ideal traits of a youth minister were similar among single and married youth ministers. There were a few interesting differences among the top ten as reported in Table 7.

Within the top ten self reported traits singles viewed themselves as highly athletic, yet married youth ministers did not see athletics as one of their top ten attributes. Singles viewed themselves as highly personable while married respondents viewed themselves as only moderately personable. On the other hand, married youth ministers ranked understanding as their strongest trait, while singles did not list understanding among their top ten attributes.

Table 7. Comparison of single and married personality traits.

Trait	Single (N=55)		Married (N=44)	
	Self Report Rank %	Ideal Rank %	Self Report Rank %	Ideal Rank %
Personable	1 75%	5 64%	9 65%	8 73%
Athletic	2 71%	—	—	—
Honest	2 71%	2 75%	3 78%	6 75%
Enthusiastic	4 64%	7 55%	2 82%	4 77%
Responsible	5 62%	3 73%	—	8 73%
Loyal	6 60%	9 50%	—	—
Appreciative	6 60%	—	—	—
Flexible	6 60%	4 71%	9 66%	—
Cooperative	9 56%	9 50%	—	—
Outgoing	10 55%	—	7 67%	3 82%
Understanding	—	1 77%	3 78%	1 86%
Dependable	—	5 64%	—	8 73%
Creative	—	8 52%	1 84%	1 86%
Patient	—	9 50%	—	6 75%
Humorous	—	9 50%	5 75%	—
Energetic	—	—	6 73%	4 77%
Organized	—	—	7 67%	8 73%

These results describe a number of differences and similarities across a variety of variables. While further study is warranted, some tentative conclusions may be drawn regarding the current characteristics of youth ministers and their perceptions of the ideal traits that a youth minister should possess.

CONCLUSION

The image of an athletic, guitar-playing, energetic, humorous and eminently likable young single man as youth minister has been challenged. In this study we have found that youth ministers are as likely to be female as male, single or married, with relatively few years of experience. The female youth ministers described themselves as understanding, responsible, personable, flexible, and dependable. However, they wish that they could be more creative, organized, humorous, and patient. Male youth ministers viewed themselves as logical, appreciative, patient, and humorous. However, they wished that they could be more creative, outgoing, and organized.

While the majority of respondents believe a seminary education was not necessary for a youth minister, many of the outstanding traits they expressed as self-descriptive were similar to those traits reported in the studies of seminarians, cited earlier. Generally, the traits which youth ministers perceived as important in youth ministry were also the traits which were most prevalent in themselves. This is good news for church leadership, who seem to be employing the right people for the task.

Implications of the study. The gender barrier may be declared officially broken in youth ministry, at least among the volunteer ranks (volunteers made up the majority of respondents in this study) and in terms of quantity. No doubt there are still many qualitative gender barriers to be overcome. The vast majority of youth ministers are volunteer lay leaders rather than full-time professionals. This is a healthy model which gives adolescents a variety of role models to choose.

One interesting trait holds implications for the training and education of future youth ministers. Overwhelmingly, respondents felt that understanding adolescent development was essential to successful youth ministry. Youth ministry educators in denominations, college, seminary, and seminar speakers should make adolescent development a priority in their curriculum.

While few respondents cited creativity as one of their strengths, they ranked it as the single most important personality trait necessary for successful youth ministry. While the church is often resistant to change and creativity, it seems that persons who possess a high level of creativity may be better suited for youth ministry than others and that creativity in thought, curriculum, methods, and presentation should be encouraged.

Before we pigeon-hole youth ministers into another perhaps unfair stereotype it is important to remember, as many of our respondents suggested, that God can use anyone, with any personality, to serve the kingdom. It should also be remembered that it is far more effective if these highly sought-after personality traits are delivered through a multi-talented team of leaders than through one super leader. God calls us to community and more often than not supplies all our ministry needs through teams of people rather than a single individual.

Suggestions for further research. As the most cursory examination of this data will attest, this study was not by any means exhaustive. Further research could focus upon spiritual aspects and concerns regarding education and continued growth of youth ministers. Since creativity seems essential, perhaps further studies could be made regarding the nurture of this trait. Other relevant topics include the shifts from male to female and full-time to part-time and volunteer youth ministers. Questions concerning the seemingly disproportionate number of single youth ministers should also be examined.

While this study focused on personality traits another related area of study concerns motivational factors. What is the correlation among motivational factors and those personality traits which this study found to be essential? Spiritual gifts theology is another area which must have some correlation to the findings of this study. Finally, more comprehensive research needs to explore the limitations of the regional nature of this study.

Personality is notoriously hard to test or qualify, and the personalities of youth ministers are no exception. Hopefully this study has opened the door for further discussion concerning the attributes of an effective youth minister, and that future consideration will be given to the types of people who occupy this important role as spiritual educators of our children: the role of youth minister.

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Appendix A
Complete List of Personality Traits

introverted	extroverted	impulsive	patient
domineering	aggressive	logical	apprehensive
humorous	ambitious	submissive	understanding
immature	autonomous	creative	obnoxious
outgoing	persevering	responsible	relaxed
flexible	optimistic	complacent	tactful
energetic	honest	greedy	reserved
suspicious	impersonal	assertive	compulsive
cooperative	manipulative	loyal	modest
organized	demanding	independent	practical
frivolous	egotistical	confident	dependable
enthusiastic	joyful	apathetic	abrasive
appreciative	personable	athletic	"hip"

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