

A large sunburst graphic composed of numerous black lines radiating from a central point behind the title text.

10 WAYS TO SAY THANK YOU

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INTRODUCTION

After a two-hour baseball practice one evening, ten-year-old Brandon looked up at me and exclaimed, “Coach! That was a fun practice!”

I responded, “Thanks, Brandon! You were great tonight!”
He looked me in the eyes. “Thank you!”

Those two words immediately staggered me. Really! They were spoken with such sincerity. They represented an appreciative attitude—about an ordinary baseball practice—that was so genuine to him. His mom didn’t prompt him: “Go tell Coach Doug thank you.” I could sense within this boy’s soul that what he had just experienced was meaningful. The playing of baseball, the running, the high fives, the affirmation, the smiles, and the occasional gang-wrestle-the-coach triggered this young boy’s response. Even though I had conducted hundreds of practices for my children’s sports team over the years I can honestly say that I enjoyed hearing those particular words on that Little League field. For whatever reason, those simple words (“thank you”) struck me in a profound way. When I was reflecting on that moment, it suddenly hit me—as a youth worker I don’t hear those words from the teenagers I work with.

When I’m honest, I long to hear thank you from students in my church. If you’ve been in youth ministry for even a short amount of time, you probably need to hear those words, too. That’s why I wrote this... to simply say thank you. Thank you for who you are and for what you do.

I wish I could have you over to my house just to sit and talk youth ministry. I imagine you might arrive a little tired, wondering whether your work with students is making any difference. Once inside my home, I’d direct you to the comfortable recliner we have in our living room, and I’d open my heart to you and say, “Thank you.”

I know you’re not in youth ministry for the gratitude. If you were, you’d have chosen a different career by now. But still, something dwells within each of us—a need to be appreciated. I’ve never heard a youth worker beg, “Stop encouraging me. Seriously, please stop! I’ve had it up to here with your encouragement! I can’t take it anymore.”

You may experience times when you’re not thankful to be working with students—***but there are plenty of people who are grateful that you do. Your students are, their families are, and your church is, even though they may not say it often enough.***

So, for the next several minutes, please allow me to express the thanks they want to give you—in ten different ways.

- Doug Fields

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1. THANK YOU FOR FOLLOWING GOD'S LEAD.

I don't know how you began working with students. Maybe you were begged to or forced. Perhaps you stepped out of a church board meeting to go to the bathroom and when you returned, you found yourself appointed to the youth ministry team.

But somehow, in God's unique and mysterious ways, He called you, and you listened. God's call is a mystery. I won't pretend to understand it or try to explain it. God moved. You listened. ***Now God works through you and you're pointing students toward Jesus.***

Don't try to figure everything out—allow God's mysterious nature to work in you and through you. When He does, you can point to his greatness and to your inadequacy. Following God's lead and the mystery that surrounds it is one of the many supernatural elements that make youth ministry fun.

I have a friend who likes to illustrate God's mysterious nature through the common example of a youth ministry program gone bad. Undoubtedly, you've had one of those. Have you planned a youth program in which you invested a lot of time and energy? The program time rolls around, and you're thrilled to see all your planning pay off. Then the unthinkable happens. The guy leading the music busts his guitar strings and can't lead anymore. The student who was going to give her testimony got so nervous she threw up (and now everyone is sick). The pinnacle of your creativity was showing a hilarious YouTube clip during your message, but you accidentally started at the wrong point in the video and displayed a cussing scene—right when an elder walked into the room. Then your planned thirty-minute message lasts only six minutes because one kid in the middle of the group passed gas and all the other boys started laughing and pointing and now no one is paying attention to your thoroughly prepared message. You're totally frustrated so you just close in prayer.

After the disastrous event, a student comes up to you and says, "I want to thank you. I felt God's presence tonight."

This comment startles you so much that you blurt out, "You couldn't have felt God's presence! He wasn't here! That wasn't His presence. That was Tim's gas. No way was God here tonight."

Part of God's wonderful mystery is that sometimes He shows up more powerfully in times when you wouldn't expect him to. As he told the apostle Paul in 2 Corinthians 12:9, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."

I realize you might be tempted to think, "If God's power shows up in my weakness

then maybe I shouldn't plan anything—which will lead to disaster—and God's power will be revealed." Well, it's an appealing thought, but part of following God's lead is doing *your* part—the possible—and having faith that God will do the impossible.

When you follow God's lead, His power follows. Even when you don't know if you're doing the right thing, you follow God's lead and say, "God, use me!" That's what you do!

Thank you for listening to God and following His lead.

2. THANK YOU FOR STANDING UP FOR THOSE THE CHURCH OFTEN FORGETS.

In your call to be a youth worker, you often must stand up for those the church wants to forget—and often ignores. Some people in the church don't like people who are troublemakers, noisy, messy, and impulsive, or those who think differently: which describes the majority of students (Ironically, it also kind of describes the original disciples.) You may actually get in trouble for reaching out to and caring for those types of teenagers.

You know the ones I'm referring to. They don't dress or look "right" for "church people" or the church environment. They don't use the right language. They don't respect the sacred church parking lot when they ride their skateboards too long with their pants too low and their music too loud. How are these types of students treated? Some parents will say, "Why are *those* kids coming to *our* church?" Well *those* kids are curious about Jesus, and they need to be part of a faith-gathering at church where they can learn more about Him.

If your youth ministry is filled only with clean-cut, smiley, always-want-to-be-at-church kids, something's wrong. Those kids are the ones who always seem happy, want more church activities to keep them busy, and will do anything and everything because they want to be with their other few church friends. Test this. Say something like, "Would anyone like to cast a demon out of that guy and go out to lunch with him?" These churchy students will say, "Sure! That sounds like fun youth group activity. How much will it cost and do I need a permission slip?"

Even as I give thanks for what you've done so far, I want to challenge you to continue to find the people that the church wants to ignore. You love Jesus, and you understand his words: "Healthy people don't need a doctor—sick people do. I have come to call sinners, not those who think they're already good enough" (Mark 2:17, NLT), and "There is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents" (Luke 15:10, NIV).

Chances are good that those students will never thank you, so from a fellow youth worker who understands God's call on your life, I thank you for believing that Jesus can change every type of young person and for believing that your church is a place where students might gather to meet Him.

Thank you for raising your hand when the church ignores students to say, "Couldn't we consider a teenager for that?" Thank you for putting up with the laughter when you suggest the ridiculous idea that students might be able to greet at the adult service. Thank you for caring enough about teenagers to say, "Let's not forget them. A student can do this job in the church."

Adults often say, "Students are the church of the future." I realize adults make this comment assuming it's motivational and empowering...but it's wrong. Teenagers aren't the future. Teenagers are the church of today and need to be viewed and treated like the church of today. Jesus didn't say, "Follow me when you're an adult." ***Teenagers may scare some people in the church, but they're dying for somebody to notice and to love them.***

I want to say thank you for not ignoring those the church often forgets.

3. THANK YOU FOR CHOOSING A MINISTRY THAT NEVER ENDS.

When you started your youth ministry journey, you probably weren't told that youth ministry never ends. There's always more to do. It's not the easiest job within the church. People regularly say, "I'm no longer in youth ministry. I can't handle the all-nighters and events and keep up with everything the students are doing. I'm out."

I tease my pastor that if I wanted an easy job in the church, I'd become a senior pastor. How many senior pastors do you know whose houses get toilet-papered on a regular basis? None. I used to get up early on Sunday mornings to look outside. If my house had been toilet-papered, I had to clean it up before going to church so that it didn't blow around the neighborhood and frustrate my neighbors. If I was spared, I thanked the Lord for a weekend of freedom and went back to bed for another hour.

In youth ministry, there's always more to do: another student to talk to, another campus to visit, another email to write, another curriculum to review, more toilet paper to clean up. Something else is always waiting to be done.

Many times, I dreamed about getting out of youth ministry and into a normal 9-to-5 job. I would drive by our local McDonald's from time to time and think, "That would be a great job!" The pay would be about the same. I could work all day and then check out when I'm done. A job that could actually be finished when I leave! I can barely imagine it. A McDonald's employee doesn't get called at midnight by a parent complaining, "My Big Mac is missing. It just fell to the ground, and now some of the sesame seeds have scattered. I can't find them all, so can you come over to help?" That would never happen. When you're done working at McDonald's, you're done.

But that's not God's design when you work with students. ***Your job is never over.***

***Thank you for sticking with a ministry that never ends.
Thank you for your incredible commitment.***

4. THANK YOU FOR TEACHING WITHOUT SEEING MUCH FRUIT OR AFFIRMATION.

The youth workers I know who teach on a regular basis typically pour their lives into their messages. They work hard, anticipating the change God's Word can make in students' lives. These teachers study and reflect and think about their words and the construction of their message. Some even practice delivering it... again, they pour their hearts into their messages.

At the conclusion of a message, a student approaches the teacher with a smile. Anticipation runs through the teacher's mind: *Oh yeah, this teenager is going to thank me for all my hard work. He was obviously impacted by it and thinks it was an awesome message!* Then reality awakens the daydream when the teenager says, "Uh ... hey ... I don't have any cash. Can I borrow a buck for the Coke machine?" Few teenagers ever say, "That was great!"

If you want affirmation after you teach, you'll need to find a roomful of adults. Adults smile. They pay attention. They nod in agreement. They make you think you're the wisest human on the planet. At my church, I used to get opportunities to preach to the adult congregation and I was always blown away by the kindness of adults:

"Thank you, Doug. That was great!"

"Wonderful message."

"Very challenging."

"I sure appreciate how you allow the Spirit to speak through you."

(What made me laugh was that I'd just given a message I presented to the youth a week before.)

Honestly, I didn't even know what most of those comments meant. I needed to walk through the church courtyard with a translator who clearly understood adult-spiritual vernacular. In all my years of working with teenagers, I hadn't heard a lot of affirming words pouring out after teaching them God's Word. I remember preaching to the "adult service" one time and between services I walked into the youth room only to hear a teenager make fun of me by saying: "Hey Doug, why are your pants so high?"

I held my response in check: "Thank you! I think I'll go back to where people actually pretend like they appreciate me!"

I know the feelings you have after you teach. You're vulnerable. You're tender. You're left wondering if you've made any difference. You question whether students are listening, let alone if they actually care about your content. Be encouraged:

You are making a difference. You're planting a seed. You're taking God's Word and translating it for the life of a teenager. Even though you may not see fruit, you keep faithfully teaching God's Word. Believe me, if you're in ministry long enough, those students will come back, and you'll see the fruitfulness of your teaching and God's Word displayed in their life. My former students would come back, sometimes as soon as their college years and say things like, "Doug! I'm leading a small group on my campus. I'm president of CRU (Campus Crusade for Christ)."

I wanted to say, "Really? You? You were a punk in high school. What happened? How? Really?"

God's Word will not return void. Thank you for believing that God's Word will make a difference in the life of a teenager, and thank you for continuing to teach even when you don't see fruit or receive affirmation.

5. THANK YOU FOR LOVING DIFFICULT PEOPLE.

There's a difference between caring for students that the church ignores and loving those who are difficult to love. You probably know the type of students I'm referring to. Every youth group in the world has at least one difficult-to-love student. You may even have a student who better fits the impossible-to-like category, but *you* love him or her anyway. I believe these students are a part of your ministry by God's design—to teach you patience (or, is it just me?).

You may try to pray these students into other youth ministries, but God keeps them in your group to humble you and teach you about unconditional love. You try to pass these students to other leaders, but no, these challenging kids want to be with *you*. Some hard-to-love students may even lurk around, walking up to you and standing there listening to your conversation with another student. Lurkers don't leave.

While some lurk, other students make mean comments. They're actually trying to be funny, but they're just mean: "I was looking at my camp pictures from last summer, and I was amazed how much fatter you are now than last year." Conversation after conversation brings a degree of wounding and pain. Everyone has a story about a student like this. You're not alone.

But you love these teenagers anyway. Maybe you feel guilty not loving them because you acted the same way when you were a teenager. But you love them mostly because you know they need love and attention.

You love them because you know that's what Jesus would do. Loving the unlovely is difficult, but I want you to hear these words, "Well done. Thank you."

6. THANK YOU FOR GIVING OF YOUR RESOURCES THAT WILL NEVER BE REIMBURSED.

People in your church may not know that you spend money out of your own pocket to be a youth worker... but I know. Thank you.

Students borrow money they never intend to repay. How many times has this happened to you? You're on a youth event and a student comes to you saying, "I didn't know we were supposed to bring money!" You give out your money. Then, when you try to snag a french fry from the kid who took your money, he whines, "Knock it off! These are mine!"

You chauffeur teenagers around, and they never offer to pay for gas. They come over to your house, eat your food, wear out your furniture, and spill soda on your carpet. You finance all of it, the food, the furniture, the cleaning bills.

Why? Because you care about teenagers, you go to their sporting events, musicals, and plays and are forced to pay an admission fee. Can you believe they actually charge money for you to watch a freshmen basketball game? This is crazy! I've got to pay five bucks to watch ninth grade girls play basketball. Have you ever seen thirteen- and fourteen-year-old girls play basketball? It's a rough experience. The score at halftime is 3-to-2. It tests my faith to watch them play. I want to shout, "Put the ball in the hoop or I'm leaving, and I'm the only one in the stands right now. I paid five bucks to be here—alone—for lousy basketball just because I care about you and want to see you out in *your* world!"

Thank you for giving of your resources and making financial sacrifices. Volunteers make sacrifices, but so do those who are paid by the church. I know many youth workers who left better paying jobs to work with students in the church. They sacrificed to work with teenagers. They don't own a car—they drive the church van. Wow! Driving the church van with the plastic praying hands on the top of the roof! Neighbors *love* that type of vehicle parked on the street near their house. "Uh, could you park *that thing* in the garage?" You would, but it won't fit.

You might a youth worker—one of many—who has no youth ministry budget. Any resource you buy to help you be a more effective youth worker comes out of your pocket. I recognize that. Hebrews 13:16 says, "Don't forget to do good and to share with those in need. These are the sacrifices that please God" (NLT). Thank you for doing that. *I know it's costly to be a youth worker. Thank you.*

7. THANK YOU FOR SEEING SOMETHING IN STUDENTS THAT OTHERS DON'T SEE.

Many teenagers are dying for someone to notice them and to simply believe in them. Thank you for being the type of adult who regularly notices and believes in them. A church's youth ministry should be a place where students are lifted from their self-defeat and raised to a place where they can see themselves as God's original masterpiece. Thank you for painting a picture of what a teenager's life can look like when it is invaded by Jesus.

I would never have become a youth pastor if it weren't for the youth leaders who invested in me when I was a teenager. They saw something in me that I didn't see in myself. They observed a teenager who was loud, impulsive, and obnoxious. I was overly competitive and constantly breaking rules. Still, one of my youth leaders pulled me aside: "Doug Fields, I see leadership qualities in you. You're not always the most likeable student I know, but I see something in you that you don't see. I believe that if you would follow Jesus rather than your own plan that He will change you and do great things through you."

That's all I needed to hear. I needed to hear what he was saying. I had a longing to be validated and for my life to matter. That's exactly the picture he painted. I had been in leadership roles at school, but I hadn't seen myself as a leader until the caring, adult youth workers collectively sang my praises and painted a what-if picture for me. They actually believed Philippians 1:6: "I am sure that God, who began the good work within you, will continue his work until it is finally finished on that day when Christ Jesus comes back again" (NLT).

Thank you for being a youth worker who believes in students. You're a rare individual within the church, and your belief will impact teenagers more than you can ever imagine.

I also want to encourage you to stop reading this for a moment and ask God to bring one teenager to mind who needs your I-believe-in-you support. All students need a caring adult to look them in the eye and say, "Congratulations! You're gifted." Scripture informs us that everyone who has a relationship with God has been spiritually gifted. One of the great tasks of youth work is to help teenagers discover their gifts and use them to build up the body of Christ. Choose someone to lift up this week.

Thank you for seeing qualities in students that others don't see.

8. THANK YOU FOR BEING VULNERABLE IN A CULTURE THAT WANTS PERFECTION.

Adult leaders give students hope when they're real about their humanity. Thank you for being honest and not hiding all your struggles. *When you allow others to see some of your imperfections, you are actually giving teenagers a glimpse of hope.*

You might be thinking, "Hope? How?"

Your failure can provide teenagers with a tangible, realistic model of what a spiritual journey looks like. Students need models in all aspects of their lives, including the ups and downs of the spiritual life. They need adults in their lives who have flaws and yet, in their imperfection, still love and follow God.

"Perfect" youth workers discourage students. Students see "perfection" and think to themselves, "I can never be like her. I might as well give up," or, "He's got everything so together in his life that I'll never obtain a spiritual life like that." By occasionally exposing some hurts and struggles, you enhance teenagers' willingness to open up to you, connect with you, and grow spiritually. As weird as that may sound, sharing your struggles gives them hope to keep going and growing in their relationship with Jesus.

When I was a teenager, I thought the youth workers at my church were amazing... if I didn't think they were perfect, I thought they were close to perfect. I viewed them as being on the same level as Jesus. I was spiritually immature so I didn't know better, but since I was still struggling in certain areas of my life, I thought I wasn't a good enough Christian. Every time I messed up, I thought I was alone. I didn't want to say anything about my messiness to the leaders because I didn't think they would understand.

Then I met Randy. He was athletic, funny, smart, and a strong Christian—someone I looked up to. The more time we spent with each other, the more humanity I observed in him. I'll never forget when he told me about his struggles to have consistent devotional times with God. I felt so much better about myself. Then he shared how he had difficulty praying on a regular basis. With great excitement, I exclaimed, "Me too! That's great!"

Randy kept me in the spiritual game and gave me hope. He was on the journey. He hadn't arrived yet. Years later I came to realize that the other leaders hadn't arrived yet either.

Randy never told the youth group, "Yes, I struggle with lust." But he did share those struggles with me and let me know I wasn't the only human, who was trying to

follow Jesus, who lusted. He didn't reveal to me everything he was thinking, feeling, and doing, (total self-disclosure isn't the goal), but he knew that vulnerability was both attractive and a tool to help others grow.

I encourage you to beg God for wisdom and discernment about what to reveal and when to be transparent—because it could become a real gift to the teenagers you work with. *Vulnerability is a risk, so I want to thank you for being vulnerable in a culture that wants perfection.*

9. THANK YOU FOR TAKING THE HEAT WHEN YOU DESERVE THE PRAISE.

Thank you for having the depth of character that is willing to take some heat without turning everything into a battle. It seems as though youth workers are always getting in trouble for something. We're the easiest ones to blame because we work with an age group that is targeted when trouble arrives. Can you relate to any of these situations?

- Trash is scattered in the parking lot. *"It must be the teenagers."*
- Someone has been messing with computers in the church office. *"It must be the teenagers."*
- The church is on fire. *"It must be the teenagers."*
- The janitor finds the baptismal full of bubbles. *"It must be the teenagers."*

Now your students may only be guilty of the last one (which, by the way, that *is* a funny bit), but you'll take the heat for all of them. You'll graciously and tenderly respond, "I'll look into it. I'll say something to the students. I'm sorry." I understand. If you had to fight every accusation you'd be very tired of youth ministry, and sometimes the complaints aren't worth arguing or fighting about.

After spending an entire weekend at camp, you return home exhausted. You were busy with many emotionally draining conversations; the late-night cabin talks; finding the missing pastor's kid; assisting in the music, games, skits, and programming, enforcing curfew (well, at least trying to). It was a fulfilling, tiring retreat. God used you, but you're ready for your own bed instead of the concrete floor you slept on because there weren't enough camp mattresses.

When you arrive at the church, you meet an angry parent in the parking lot. Instead of thanking you for sacrificing your weekend and praising you for being away from your family, job, friends, pets, and home repair projects, the parent yells at you because her child lost a sleeping bag. Then another parent chews you out because you pulled in thirty minutes after your estimated arrival time. Finally, one of the church elders gives you the disappointed look and clucks, "You're not going to leave the church van in this condition, are you?" Classic youth ministry.

You're not alone. This scenario is all too common in youth ministry. Thank you for taking the heat. Thank you for being humble. Thank you for not always being defensive and turning everything into a battle. Thank you... know that God honors this type of attitude.

10. THANK YOU FOR LOVING GOD AND TRUSTING HIM TO USE YOU.

Thank you for knowing that healthy youth ministry isn't about directing activities or discovering the newest wild game to entertain students. It's my observation that healthy youth ministries are filled with men and women who love God and who are willing to be used by Him.

Most youth workers I meet feel unprepared, untrained, unskilled, and uncool. Here's the truth: they are. Yep, they are unprepared, untrained, unskilled, and uncool. Me too!

I started the Uncool Youth Workers Club—you just have to acknowledge that you're uncool to join the club. Typically, youth workers who feel prepared, trained, skilled, and cool enough to work with teenagers fall into one of three categories: (1) arrogant, (2) disillusioned, or (3) really young. I've been working with teenagers for over thirty years, and I still don't have the total combination of prepared, trained, skilled, and cool. It took me many years to realize that I'll never have all of them, and that it's okay.

At my age, I have no hope of ever being cool. I'm the same age as the parents of teenagers. I don't dress like teenagers. I don't drive a cool car. I have no body piercings or tattoos. And I don't listen to their music. (I listen to news radio.) I don't have the energy to stay up all night like I once did. My reflexes are slowing down, so I'm usually the first eliminated when I play dodgeball.

What a loser, right? Yes and no. Yes, because there are many times when I feel old and I feel like a loser, but no because God continues to use me to impact teenagers.

Being a good youth worker is not about being young and cool. It's about loving and following Jesus, trusting Him, caring for teenagers, parents and families, and pointing them to the God you love. When you trust Jesus to use you despite your inadequacies, He does. It's an amazing truth being proven in churches around the world. Teenagers connect with adults because they place their faith in God and that's an attractive quality to students.

I'm often asked, "How do I know whether I'm trusting God with my youth ministry?"

I typically respond with another question: "Are you still in youth ministry?"

If the answer is yes, chances are good that you're trusting God. ***God's power shows up when youth workers keep moving and don't give up.*** Moses had to march to the Red Sea before God's power showed up. He had to keep moving forward. Joshua

had to step into the Jordan before God's power showed up. He was moving forward. God's power seems to follow our steps of faith.

Thank you for being consistent in your love for God and for being faithful in trusting Him with who you are and what you have to offer.

WELL DONE, GOOD AND FAITHFUL SERVANT!

I believe youth workers are healthier, happier, and more effective when they occasionally hear the words *thank you*. These two words are common and simple, but when they're used at the right time, they can be powerful and inspiring. I hope you've been encouraged as you've read my words of appreciation. Here's my prayer for you:

God, bless the youth workers reading these words and refresh their souls. So many of us question our effectiveness. Please remind us that your love for us is not based on our skills, our gifts, or on the size of our ministry. Help us to remember that you love us because we are your children. Thank you for that love! In Jesus' name, amen.

You may not see it, but your ministry is reaching others. What you're doing will be remembered by God, and you *will* be rewarded for eternity. You have answered a call that's often unrewarding and requires tremendous faith and commitment. And even though you often feel weak and powerless, you have faith that God's Spirit will work through you. Thank you.

"So my dear brothers and sisters, be strong and steady, always enthusiastic about the Lord's work, for you know that nothing you do for the Lord is ever useless."

—1 Corinthians 15:58, NLT