

The bottom half of the image features a close-up, high-contrast photograph of sand dunes. The dunes are dark, with deep shadows and bright highlights that create a rhythmic, wavy pattern across the entire lower section.

SMALL GROUP
LEADER MANUAL

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Dear Student Ministry Leader,

I am so grateful that you have the desire to impact students. Thank you for being willing to give up your free time to serve this church and these amazing students.

These students will be the future, not just of the church but of the coming generation. You and I have a unique opportunity to help shape the coming era. When we team up we can; empower students, partner with parents, and we can shift the future culture to honor and glorify God.

As you already know, HRC is a great church, and our youth ministry is a great place to allow your time to make eternal investments in students' lives! I am looking forward to a great year.

Excited to do this with you,

Mitchell Leach
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THE AMBULANCE DOWN IN THE VALLEY

JOSEPH MALINS (1895)

'Twas a dangerous cliff, as they freely confessed,
Though to walk near its crest was so pleasant;
But over its terrible edge there had slipped
A duke and full many a peasant.

So the people said something would have to be done,
But their projects did not at all tally; Some said, "Put a fence
'round the edge of the cliff,"

Some, "An ambulance down in the valley."

But the cry for the ambulance carried the day, For it spread
through the neighboring city;

A fence may be useful or not, it is true, But each heart be-
came full of pity. For those who slipped over the dangerous
cliff;

And the dwellers in highway and alley Gave pounds and
gave pence, not to put up a fence,

But an ambulance down in the valley.

"For the cliff is all right, if you're careful," they said,

"And, if folks even slip and are dropping, It isn't the slipping
that hurts them so much

As the shock down below when they're stopping."

So day after day, as these mishaps occurred,

Quick forth would those rescuers sally To pick up the vic-
tims who fell off the cliff,

With their ambulance down in the valley.

Then an old sage remarked: "It's a marvel to me

That people give far more attention

To repairing results than to stopping the cause,

When they'd much better aim at prevention.

Let us stop at its source all this mischief," cried he,

"Come, neighbors and friends, let us rally;

If the cliff we will fence, we might almost dispense

With the ambulance down in the valley."

"Oh he's a fanatic," the others rejoined, "Dispense with the
ambulance? Never! He'd dispense with all charities, too, if
he could;

No! No! We'll support them forever. Aren't we picking up
folks just as fast as they fall?

And shall this man dictate to us? Shall he? Why should people of sense stop to put up a fence,

While the ambulance works in the valley?"

But the sensible few, who are practical too,

Will not bear with such nonsense much longer; They believe that prevention is better than cure,

And their party will soon be the stronger. Encourage them then, with your purse, voice, and pen,

And while other philanthropists dally, They will scorn all pretense, and put up a stout fence

On the cliff that hangs over the valley.

Better guide well the young than reclaim them when old,

For the voice of true wisdom is calling. "To rescue the fallen is good, but 'tis best

To prevent other people from falling." Better close up the source of temptation and crime

Than deliver from dungeon or galley; Better put a strong fence 'round the top of the cliff

Than an ambulance down in the valley.

AN INTRODUCTON TO VENTURE

The poem is really describing the difference between proactive and reactive mindsets. To me, it represented the difference between the role of a health teacher and the role of a counselor: The role of the health teacher is to help prevent negative results, whereas a counselor helps repair and heal what's already been done.

How many of us know someone while we went to school who was a "Christian," but later turned their back on God, for whatever reason? All of us, and that is the problem.

We have a unique opportunity to shape and help safeguard a generation away from falling off the cliff.

It is no longer "okay" for us to have the expectation that we get these students for four years, and after they graduate we hope they remember what we told them.

This is our problem and this is our prognosis.

This is why we must go "all in" to Venture. Because this is our last chance to put up a fence for students, instead of collect adults with ambulances.

Join us as we change the future.

THE SHIFT

Twenty years ago students had a sense of identity. They knew who they were (more or less). They sought out people who shared the same ideals and beliefs as they did. Their identity dictated their belonging. For better or worse a huge shift happened.

Today students have no sense of who they really are. To-

day students are lonelier than any other generation before them. The students we see, seek belonging first than adapt themselves and their beliefs to that groups ideals. What if we could be a group that truly was a place for all students. We know that the beliefs we share are the greatest, because we believe in the Greatest. Let us make this place, the easiest place for all to belong. When we do that, watch to see a region changed for generations to come.

MISSION

FOSTERING A LIFE LONG
RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN STUDENTS
AND GOD.

VISION

IN THE NEXT 3 YEARS VENTURE
WILL

GROW NUMERICALLY

1. GROWN 50 PERCENT IN
ATTENDANCE.

ORGANIZATIONALLY HEALTHY

2. RECRUIT AND EQUIP 15 NEW
LEADERS.

REACH OTHERS

3. ESTABLISH A LONG TERM,
SHORT RANGE MISSION
RELATIONSHIP.

GROW SPIRITUALLY

4. HAVE 40 PERCENT OF
GRADUATED STUDENTS HIT
THE APOPRIATE SPIRITUAL
BENCHMARKS.

PLUMB LINES

Whether you're building a house or getting a degree or formulating a theology, you need a standard that serves as your center. Without a standard, corners get cut and foundations get wonky and beliefs go off the rails. Without a standard, we tend to focus more on the way we think things should look than the way they actually should look. We develop tunnel vision and blind spots, and we forget what we originally set out to do.

The talking points we developed are called "plumb lines" – short, sticky phrases that capture the essence of who we are and where we're headed. They're an imperfect way to capture the things a perfect God has called us to, and they're a method to easily reproduce those things to the entire church.

BELONGING + IDENTITY + PURPOSE

We can accomplish this vision and mission by providing a place for students to; belong, find identity, and find purpose. These are the things we value at Venture. Ministry values reflect attitudes and beliefs that “influence” our way we do and how we do it. We try to incorporate these values into all aspects of our ministry.

BELONGING

Belonging means everything from how a student is greeted to the community he or she has in his or her small group. Small group is where every student knows they can belong. It is their “membership,” where students will know they are missed if they are missing. Small groups act as discipline where small group leaders can have the trust to “call out” students when they see sin in their life. Truly students will grow and become disciplined because of this. In order to be the best at this we need to be...

RELATIONAL

Although we understand the need to balance ministry with our other priorities, we also recognize that the most effective ministry comes through adults who build relationships with students. We want to be effective, so we purposely build relationships with students and facilitate students building relationships with one another.

REAL

Students desperately need to see the “real thing.” Because of this, we try to be authentic in our approach to ministry. We value an environment that is transparent and genuine.

IDENTITY

Students will see identity through the faithful teaching of God’s word, sound doctrine, and when the gospel is taught regularly. When a student is exposed to the power of the gospel, they will see themselves more and more as Christ sees them.

RELAXED

Students are under enormous stress today. Stress to fit in, to get good grades, to please their parents, etc. We strive to create a ministry that helps relieve the stresses of life, not add to them.

BIBLICAL (ITS IMPLIED, BUT JUST TO BE SURE)

The biggest value we have in student ministry is showing who God is to students through the bible. The bible is our best way to understand God and see him for who He says He is. The bible is our ultimate authority, its perfect, and everything we do must fit inside of what the bible has commanded us to do.

PURPOSE

When a student feels that they can belong, and that their identity is in Christ, they will seek a purpose. This purpose is to see others come to know Christ through evangelism. If you can make a student feel like he or she is wanted,

they will want to be about what the group is about, and if the group is about the gospel, that student's heart will be set on fire with a passion to spread the good news where ever they go.

RELEASED

We release students to do the work of the ministry. Students who know who they are follow what God calls them to. We must be ready to release them to do ministry as Sr. High students, so they can do ministry when they leave to; go to college, enter the work force, parent, or go into ministry.

LOVE GOD & KNOW GOD

This is the primary way we disciple students. These two ideas should encourage eachother like a dance. As we experince God, we should have a deep huger to get to know more of who He is. And - at the same time - when we gain knowledge of who He is, we should desire to experince and interact with God in those ways.

LOVE GOD

Loving God means that you are experiencing Him in a real way. The danger of only knowing God is that become like pharasees. Loving God is a short hand for experincing God in a profound way. At Venture, we will not become stuffy people who know what is right, but don't live our faith out.

KNOW GOD

On the opposite side of this is getting to know who God is. Knowing God means that we are searching out the God of the Bible. The danger of only loving God is that we will worship others gods. Jesus calls us to worship in Spirit and in truth. Also God gave us His word for us to know Him and not for us to believe whatever we want to about Him.

EXPECTATIONS

BE PRESENT

Connect their faith to a community

It is so important that students have a person in their lives that they can trust and know they will see on a weekly basis.

SHOW UP PREDICTABLY

- To attend leadership team meetings as needed
- Attend monthly small group leader training meetings
- To "BE COMMITTED TO WHAT YOU'VE COMMITTED TO"

- To be faithful in church attendance; committed to personal growth
- To communicate with us regularly (needs, frustrations, etc.)
- To be loyal to Hudsonville Reformed Church and Venture

So, the expectation is that you are here for every Venture night. Of course people get sick and things happen, but signing up for this means you won't plan to be anywhere else on the nights you're supposed to be caring for your few.

SHOW UP MENTALLY

When you are in the room with your few, makes sure that your mind is there with them too. We all have lots of things that can distract us from leading well, but when you come to Venture, make your few your primary focus.

SHOW UP SPORADICALLY

No, I'm not contradicting myself. This doesn't mean that you can show up to Venture whenever you want to. This means that you show up when you aren't expected to. Like at sporting events where they are playing, calling before a big test, recitals, and anything else that one of your few is into.

Showing up when you aren't expected to, will impact whether or not you have influence in your few's life.

CREATE A SAFE PLACE

Clarify their faith as they grow

When you lead a small group and choose to create a safe place you help your few clarify authentic faith. When you choose to create a safe place, that means you 1) lead the group, 2) respect the process, 3) guard the heart.

LEAD THE GROUP

If you expect someone to share openly with you there has to be a foundation of acceptance. The more you can be positive and specific the more you will build trust and an atmosphere of acceptance. Your job is to balance the tension between encouraging confidentiality and knowing when to prompt one of your few to use discretion.

Honesty is the only way for your few to; be themselves, share doubts, ask questions, and admit struggles.

Before you tell a personal story, thought, or anecdote, you need to ask, "why am I telling them this?"

RESPECT THE PROCESS

This takes time. There is no finish line for these students. You will (hopefully) be one of the core people who shape them to be who they will become.

You don't have to know it all to be a small group leader, it ok (and encouraged) to say, "I don't know."

GUARD THE HEART

Faith is personal. We often process the most difficult times in our lives through the filter of faith. Which is why, as a small group leader, you should expect some pretty tough, even shocking things to be revealed during small group time.

When one of your few is being hurt, hurting themselves, or hurting others, it is your responsibility to guard their heart by seeking the help of someone in an authority position. You need to talk to whoever is in charge right away.

In Venture all leaders will follow the Child Protection Policy set by Hudsonville Reformed Church. And we have our own safety practices in Venture.

As a small group leader you are a mandated reporter. If you suspect that one of your few is being abused or neglected, you must report this. You don't have to do this alone, if this happens contact Mitchell and he will walk through this with you.

PARTNER WIT PARENTS

Nurture an everyday faith

When you chose to lead, we must choose to partner with parents by 1) Cue the parent 2) Honor the parent, 3) Reinforce the family.

CUE THE PARENT

This means giving them the right information at the right time. Simply letting parents know little concepts you are discussing in your group can significantly impact the way parents can continue the conversations at home.

HONOR THE PARENT

Every story has more than one side. If we don't have parents back we aren't on the students side. Ten, fifteen, twenty years down the road, the way a child learns to handle conflict with their parents will affect that child's; dating, marriage, parenting, authentic faith, etc.

REINFORCE THE FAMILY

A parent will have 3,000 hours with their child. Where small group leaders will have less than 40. Although parents have way more time, our time is usually more intentional. So, be aware that there might be certain conversations that parents want to have with their children.

MAKE IT PERSONAL

Inspire their faith by your example

When you chose to lead, we must choose to make it personal by 1) living in community, 2) setting priorities, 3) being real.

LIVE IN COMMUNITY

You must be active in a community of believers. Your group with your few doesn't count. That is for them, and you need a community with peers that you live in for you.

Is this mandatory? Kind of. I won't kick you out from leading your few, but I will not rest until you are living in community. Leading in Venture means you are constantly growing.

SET PRIORITIES

One of the best things you can do for your few - and yourself - is to make your priorities clear. They need to see what you value.

The only way you will be able to model authentic faith for your few, is by experiencing authentic faith in your own life.

BE REAL

Be real. Find ways to relate to your few without compromising who you really are. Because it's more important for them to see a real, live person that is still growing, learning, and trying to live out authentic faith, than it is for them to have another friend.

MOVE THEM OUT

Engage their faith in a bigger story

When you chose to lead, we must choose to move them out by 1) move them to someone else, 2) Move them to be the church, 3) Move them to what's next.

MOVE THEM TO SOMEONE ELSE

You will not be their small group leader forever. So, your few will need other adults in their life. But the truth is that today as they are still in your group, they need other positive adult influences in their life.

MOVE THEM TO BE THE CHURCH

This is about connecting and engaging your few with a bigger story - encouraging them not just to attend, but to participate in the mission of the church.

MOVE THEM TO WHAT'S NEXT

No matter what is next for your few, it is your responsibility to do everything you can to set them up for that transition and make sure it goes as smoothly as possible

SAFETY PRACTICES

WE KEEP STUDENTS SAFE PHYSICALLY, EMOTIONALLY, MENTALLY AND SPIRITUALLY. WE SHOULD NOT RECEIVE STUDENTS UNLESS WE ARE COMMITTED TO SAFETY FIRST. SAFETY MUST BE THE CHURCHES HIGHEST PRIORITY. EVEN THOUGH IT IS CHURCH, TERRIBLE THINGS CAN HAPPEN IF CHURCHES DON'T PUT IN POLICIES AND PRACTICES TO GUARD THEMSELVES FROM IT.

Safety practices are put in place for two reasons. First to protect students from harmful situations, and second to protect leaders from untrue accusations.

If you follow these practices, not only will you make students feel safe but also you will never allow you to be accused of something you didn't do.

- **A youth leader/volunteer may not date a student ... ever.**
- If you ever find yourself in a situation alone with a student, do anything you can to change that situation. Possible ideas are to get another person involved or call the parent. Always report this to your staff leader.

- **You must never be alone with a student of the opposite sex.**
- **You must never be alone in a building with a minor.**
- **Volunteers at Hudsonville Reformed Church are mandated reporters.**

Anyone who suspects child abuse or neglect should contact his or her Student Pastor immediately. This must be reported to Child Protective Services.

- To report suspected abuse always notify staff leader.
- If you have any question or suspicion about this always talk it over with your staff leader
- Never say a conversation is "confidential." Let the student know that you will respect their privacy, but you are required to report to your pastor if they are endangering themselves or another person.
- Be ready to inform parents. If there is a serious situation happening, parents need to be aware. Be up front with students and let them know that their parents will need to be involved.
- **Convicted sex offenders will not be volunteers in any student ministry.**

SHOWING PHYSICAL ATTENTION

Be cautious when showing physical affection to your few. We definitely encourage a healthy level of affection with your few. Here are some things to think about.

- Be careful when hugging students. Be quick to throw out a handshake or a high five instead. Try giving a "side hug."
- Be careful when "rough housing." Everyone acts tough until someone gets hurt. Leaders should not "rough house" with members of the opposite sex.

PHOTO GUIDELINES

- Make sure photos are taken in a public setting, not a place where people could expect privacy.
- Ask permission to post photos of your students. Don't post pictures that some would feel are embarrassing, etc.
- Expect students to follow the same guidelines at events, etc.

DEVELOP DETAILED PLANS

Times, places, and activities must all be planned in advanced. Planning helps us consider the appropriateness of activities ahead of time, and keeps us from doing less wise things on the spur of the moment. Try to avoid spontaneous decisions when spending time with students outside of your group time. Communicate all plans to Mitchell.

BE ALL BUSINESS WHEN IT COMES TO TRANSPORTATION

Given the risks and liability involved, we basically should be all business in this area. Keeping speeds down, follow all normal traffic laws. Also, please bring your medical release forms anytime you transport a student anywhere.

SOCIAL MEDIA

As leaders we need to use our personal social media accounts in a way that promotes and doesn't subtract from the gospel. While we serve as a small group leaders in Venture, we need to hold ourselves to a higher standard beyond the norm for a Christian, because of the leadership role we have been called into. The goal is in both in persons and online must be above reproach. So, here are some ways that - as leaders - we can model good social media behavior, and keep the focus on the gospel.

- Don't post pictures, videos, or any other content that subverts, undermines, or goes against Hudsonville Reformed Church, or Venture.
- Don't post content that promotes false doctrine.
- Don't post content where someone could reasonably imply that I have been drinking beyond what a Christian ought to.
- Refrain from posting about all things political.
- Post pictures, and videos that are modest.
- Post content that promote the gospel of Jesus Christ.
- Keep my students and fellow leaders accountable to appropriate behavior on social media.
- Refrain from entering into arguments on social media, but rather I will encourage healthy debate in person, or on a private platform.

Generally, use sensibility while posting, or interacting on social media. It should be our desire that the actions we commit – especially digitally – will be God honoring, while at the same time wouldn't cause others to stumble.

BENCHMARKS

	Preschool THINKS LIKE AN ARTIST MOTIVATED BY SAFETY		Elementary THINKS LIKE A SCIENTIST MOTIVATED BY FUN		
	0-2	3-4	K-1st	2nd & 3rd	4th & 5th
Spiritual Benchmarks	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Baptism• Know about God	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Knows some bible stories• Leading prayer	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Applying biblical principles in everyday life	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Reading Scripture stories on their own• Lord's prayer	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Develops personal prayer life• 10 commandments• Seeing the Bible as one big story• Knows Reformation history
	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Intro to Trinity• Understanding some of God's character		<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Trust God's character• Participates in the church• Develops a Biblical Theology that points to Christ.• Understanding biblical manhood and womanhood		
Small Group Time	No small group need	1 hour per week		1 hour per week 2 events per year	
Parents	Pray for them Sing with them Decide how you will talk about Santa, Easter bunny, etc.	Has a great children's story bible Repeat basic truths Repeat simple Bible verses Model forgiveness when you sin against your child	Family devotions Has a children's bible Help them see that they can trust God	Share how you came to know God Encourage them with scriptural insights Relate scripture to their present circumstances.	Has a student study bible Share personal faith stories
Sexual Integrity	Say things like: "God made you." Define privacy Name God given body parts	Talking about male and female anatomy Affirm a positive view of their growing body Introduce the concept of marriage.	Talk about boundaries Say thing like: "Your body belongs to you." Give simple answers to biological questions	Talking about sexuality Begin a conversation about body changes Improve relational skills Work on things like kindness and respect.	Caution sexual activity and porn Redefine beauty and modesty Support finding and keeping a "best friend"
Technology	Model good technological habits Limit your own "tech" time Take pictures Just make sure you don't miss a real moment to capture a digital one. Limit their screen time	Play online games together And occasionally use technology for learning. Talk about technology as you use it Or they might assume, "Mom's just playing a game."	Establish boundaries Say things like: "Don't google, YouTube, or talk to Siri unless I am with you." Use technology to share things you enjoy Share things like old-school music videos.	Establish rules for online sharing Say things like: "Don't post your home address." Ask 3 questions about online games: What is the content? What is the commitment? What is the connection?	Follow recommended age limits Know guidelines for apps, networks, and games. Talk about 4 online dangers: Porn Violence Bullying Contact with strangers/sex trafficking

Jr. High THINKS LIKE AN ENGINEER MOTIVATED BY ACCEPTANCE		Sr. High THINKS LIKE A PHILOSOPHER MOTIVATED BY FREEDOM			
6th	7th & 8th	9th	10th	11th	12th
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Awareness of spiritual gifting Assisting to lead others who are younger 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Commitment to a scripture reading plan Using spiritual gifting Knows the 5 solas 			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Makes profession of faith Finds identity in Christ Values faith community Understanding biblical sexuality Understand inerrancy 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Tithing personal money Understanding scripture for themselves Evangelism Discipling others who are younger Knows the Doctrines of Grace Pursuing Godly relationships outside family Expresses doubts about faith Understands some heresy Self starting spiritual practices Finds calling Planning for faith in the future 			
2 hour per week 2-3 multi- day events per year Social media time		2+ hour per week 2-3 multi- day events per year Social media time			
Talking about drugs, tobacco, and alcohol	Help them personalize their faith Ask things like: "What do you think?"	Encourage devotional habits Help them discover when and how they connect with God best.	Be transparent Talk about the ups and downs of your own faith journey	Encourage participation in a mission trip	Has an adult study bible
Answer questions about sex in detail If you don't, the internet will.	Take what they say and how they feel seriously Agree on boundaries Help them script responses to difficult situations. Stay curious about what is happening in their world Ask things like: "When Jon commented on your post, what did he mean by . . . ?"	Continue to discuss dating values Say things like: "Don't give someone control of your life." Clarify your views about contraception Affirm wise choices and healthy friendships	Script a response for when you find out something you weren't expecting Utilize other adult influences Who can they talk to about the things they won't talk about with you? Ask questions to help them clarify boundaries	Stay actively aware of what is happening with their relationships	Have conversations Listen to their perspectives and their hopes for the future. Don't make future breakups harder Consider boundaries like: "No boyfriends on the family vacation."
Have clear limits and expectations for mobile devices Leverage bigger cause technology for your relationship They may say more in a text than in person. Make sure their devices are connected to your accounts. Consider using an accountability software Especially for boys at this age.	Script a response for when you find out something you weren't expecting Consider start social media accounts together Follow them (online) respectfully Ask things like: "Am I commenting on your posts too often?"	Rediscover what platforms and apps they are using This can change weekly	Consider sharing the bill Set clear limits for mobile devices while driving.	Familiarize yourself with online education options Outlaw all dating apps Share an online calendar	Discuss digital content's effect on college and job applications. Say things like: "So, about that picture you posted . . ."

