



**YOUR FIRST 100 DAYS IN**

# **STUDENT MINISTRY**

**AND THE 40 YEARS THAT FOLLOW**

**JEFF BORTON**



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**JEFF BORTON**

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# ABOUT THE AUTHOR



**JEFF BORTON** Jeff has been in student ministry for over 20 years. He has served in both small and large church contexts and desires to see them all thrive. Jeff enjoys teaching, consulting, and seeing student ministry leaders develop. He's passionate about discipleship, missions, and seeing students be transformed by the gospel.

Jeff is also the co-author of the book, *Simple Student Ministry*.

Jeff is married to Jen, and they have three boys. They live outside of Nashville, and love the farm life. Together they enjoy football, hunting, fishing, and diving.

# INTRODUCTION

**HERE'S HOW IT ALL STARTED FOR ME.** Growing up, students at my church were “preached at” and sent on many guilt trips about the way we were living. Apart from a few events, we never really experienced intentional ministry. I attended church weekly, but my faith was non-existent. Still, I was convinced that I was good because I didn’t do some of the “big sins.”

God used the death of a friend and the examples of many authentic Christians to show me that my faith was misplaced and how desperately I needed Him. I gave my life to Christ as a freshman in college, and God called me into student ministry a few years later.

I believe the best days of student ministry are ahead. It’s my prayer that you get a front row seat to what God is doing in the lives of students across the world. I’ve spent more than 20 years of my life serving students, and Lord willing, I’ll be doing this until I’m 90.

I’ve seen God do things only He can do. Watching students’ lives change for His glory never gets old; it’s the fruit of our day to day labor. But I don’t have all the answers. I’ve been wrong more times than I care to admit. I’ve made terrible decisions and been unfair at times. I’m still learning every day what it means to be a better pastor, shepherd, leader, and friend. That being said, I hope you can glean some insight from my experience.

This book has been in my heart for a few years. I have a passion to see the spiritually dead come alive in Christ. I long to see the calloused and comfortable transformed into people who are passionate about and hungry for God. I truly believe student ministry is the best place to see this transformation. I’m excited to share what I’ve learned and to be an encouragement to you as you live out your calling.

# HOW TO USE

This book is broken into two sections. The first four chapters cover your first 100 days in student ministry. The focus is on developing your heart for God; becoming a shepherd and a leader. It's honest talk about your own depravity and developing boundaries and leadership skills that can guide you for years to come.

The 40 years that follow are explored in Chapters 5-11. These chapters walk through practical how-tos of building a sustainable ministry. For too long, student ministry has been playing the short game instead of developing consistent, long range goals of raising up disciples that will make disciples.

I know reading a book can feel like a one sided conversation. However, the tone of this book is conversational, more like, "Let's sit down and talk about life in ministry." I'm excited to go on this journey with you.

Let's get started.



# PART ONE

# 1

# EMBRACE THE CALL

“This is the way.”<sup>1</sup>

**THE MANDALORIAN**

THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC CHANGED ALL OF OUR LIVES FOREVER. First responders, nurses, doctors, and others have stood on the front lines, feeling the daily pain of dealing with this invisible threat. Keith Caldwell is a nurse practitioner in Nashville, Tennessee. He has experienced some crazy moments working in hospitals but nothing prepared him for a global pandemic.

Though Keith and his wife live miles away, during the early days of the pandemic, New York City felt significantly close. Each night his heartache compounded while watching the daily news and seeing scenes of bodies being added to the temporary morgue. As the situation became more dire, the governor of New York issued a request that medical professionals from other states come to help.

After prayer and fasting, it became clear to Keith that God was guiding him to leave his home in Tennessee and serve the people in New York City. The task was daunting. He would work in the Covid units of New York City area hospitals for 12 hours a day, 21 days in a row, with no time off. But as a “substitute” nurse, his presence would allow an already beleaguered staff to rest.

In preparation, God did some specific work in Keith’s heart. Not only did God call him, but God also gave him peace that if he were to lose his life, it would happen in the center of God’s plan. Keith reminded himself often of

John 15:13: the best way you can love someone is to lay down your life for them. Ultimately, Keith's weeks in New York City were successful. God used him to help patients medically and to pray for and encourage them spiritually.

There's a parallel with this story and your story. Like Keith, your desire to serve has you ready to run into the chaos of the lives of students who desperately need to hear the voice of God. Like other student ministry leaders, you refuse to sit on the sidelines as students destroy their lives living far from God.

Since you picked up this book, there's either a desire in your heart to invest in students or to figure out if this is what God is calling you to do. No matter the reason for reading, you are in good company. In your first 100 days in student ministry, one of the most important matters you must wrestle with is your calling. The rest of this chapter will explain why.

## WHY YOUR CALLING MATTERS

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Each person has a different calling. My friend Shane specifically remembers walking forward at a camp in sixth grade, knowing God was calling him to ministry. But not everyone has an experience like that—many people don't. Maybe you picked up this book to figure out if student ministry is for you, hoping to gain clarity in your calling. Maybe you aren't even in full-time ministry, and you answer the call by volunteering. Every person's story is different, but the passion to serve is the same.

Before we move forward, let's answer this key question: What is a calling? A calling is the belief that God has moved in your heart to serve in ministry. I admit, that's a broad definition, but the key is that you are certain God has given you the desire to serve others for His glory. I love how Howard Sugden and Warren Wiersbe describe it: "For most, there is simply that inescapable growing conviction that God has his hand upon us."<sup>2</sup>

There are many aspects to being called, but answering the questions of who and where is vital. For example, you might be called to a specific group of people, like students. God may call you to a church, or He may also choose to send you to serve an organization. Whatever your specific calling, it all begins with God moving within you to take a step of faith.

It feels like my initial sense of calling came just yesterday. I was a young believer studying business in college. My plan was to make tons of money and serve the Lord doing it. (Honestly, it sounded like a great plan!) I loved Jesus, but my experience with the church growing up wasn't great. I told the Lord I would do anything but serve in ministry.

Obviously, God other plans and I am in ministry today.

I was afraid God calling me to ministry would mean doing something I didn't like. But He changed my heart, and what I am passionate about intersected with my giftedness. Today, I can't wait to go to work.

Several factors led to my sense of calling. God used being a camp counselor, working with students, and genuinely wanting to see them walk closely with God to show me His plan for my life. Relationships with godly people also affirmed this new direction. Several people, at different times, talked with me about serving in ministry. God's Word came to life as I read, and He affirmed this new sense of calling in me. The most convincing proof was that the desires of my heart lined up with God's passion for people. I don't remember the exact date, but I knew without a doubt that God was calling me to student ministry. It took two years for me to finally surrender to Him. Eventually, I transferred to a different school so I could have a more ministry-focused education and discipleship. Changing schools and being disciplined have had a profound impact on my life.

God's calling isn't like a formula that allows you to predict the outcome. Sometimes God uses people to affirm in us what we don't see in ourselves. He uses experiences to open our eyes to see needs and find passions we didn't know we had. Other times we get "voluntold" by a leader that we need to serve and God grows the desire in us.

Andrew Bolton, a student pastor and friend, shared his journey with me saying,

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*"God made it clear I was supposed to be in ministry when I was 16 years old. My dad was so proud, but also made sure I knew that I would never make any money. I ran from God's call, eventually wrecking my life and experiencing an all time low. Some time later, I found myself back in church where a college pastor saw something in me that I didn't see in myself. I've been in student ministry now for eleven years."*

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Here's my point: you shouldn't compare yourself to anyone else. Don't discount your calling because your path doesn't fit a particular mold. You won't have all the answers, and that's okay. It may take years to figure out and respond to your calling. No matter where you are in ministry, strive to continue learning and be teachable.

Here are a few other thoughts on why your calling is important.

- 1. Clarity.** Knowing what God has called you to do is freeing. You don't wonder "what if" you could do something else because you know you are doing what you were made to do. Obedience to the call brings a clear conscience and narrows your focus. If you can envision yourself doing anything else, you should probably do that thing instead.
- 2. Power.** God always accomplishes His plan. This means He will give you all that you need to fulfill His plan for your life. The apostle Paul mentioned this specifically in 2 Corinthians 12:9-10. Take a look:

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*But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is perfected in weakness." Therefore, I will most gladly boast all the more about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may reside in me. So I take pleasure in weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and in difficulties, for the sake of Christ. For when I am weak, then I am strong.*

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- 3. Confidence.** You can run with confidence knowing the Lord has called you. You can move forward without fear because He is leading you. Remembering that God has placed a calling on your life can be encouraging on difficult days. Knowing that God has called you gives you confidence when you feel inadequate or like a failure. Truthfully, if you aren't called to ministry, there's very little chance that you will stay in it.

Embracing the call God has given you is far more than just acknowledgment. God's call on your life is more than a title or a place on an organizational chart. Every fiber of who you are matters and how you live this life will affect your ability to do ministry. Because this is true, we must pay special attention to our hearts. As Scripture says, our passions and desires come from our hearts, so we must protect it (Prov. 4:23).

## II PAUSE

*I know that as people in ministry we are supposed to have passion for God and the right intentions at all times. Realistically, we know there are times when our faith is stagnant and our hearts become callous. If we aren't careful, our relationship with God can just become part of the job.*

Jesus shared a powerful lesson on the condition of our hearts in Mathew 3. For many years, I thought the parable of the sower was only about people responding to the gospel. Now, I believe this passage is also teaching us how believers respond to the work of Christ in us. The soils represent the condition of the human heart and how we respond to what God is doing in us.

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*Then he told them many things in parables, saying, "Consider the sower who went out to sow. As he sowed, some seed fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured them. Other seed fell on rocky ground where it didn't have much soil, and it grew up quickly since the soil wasn't deep. But when the sun came up, it was scorched, and since it had no root, it withered away. Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns came up and choked it. Still other seed fell on good ground and produced fruit: some a hundred, some sixty, and some thirty times what was sown."*

**MATTHEW 13:3-8**

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Jesus is the Sower and the seed is the Word of God. The soils represent our hearts, their condition, and our response to Him.

Jesus' first illustration is the hardened heart. Because the ground is packed down so hard due to the trampling of footsteps, it is difficult to farm. The seed never breaks the surface to take root, so the birds come along and eat it. Hard hearts are much like this soil. Although God is at work in us, we aren't listening. Our pride keeps us from having a teachable spirit, and we rely on our skills and talents. Although we may be teaching from the Word each week, it's not having an impact on our lives.

Rocky ground is representative of a shallow heart. This heart is well meaning, probably even passionate, but the Word dissipates quickly when trials come. Put simply, when the believer faces difficult days, God's truth is abandoned. Difficulty doesn't kill our faith, it reveals it. The quickness with which we let our faith crumble is the litmus test for how we actually trust God.

Jesus' third example is thorny ground. Thorns show us a picture of a crowded heart. There's good soil, but too many other things in the dirt destroy the seed. John Calvin explained that our hearts are "a factory of idols," meaning we are quick to prioritize many things over God's role in our lives.<sup>3</sup>

We are at great risk because we serve in the church and allow even Christian or church things to take precedent over God’s work in us.

Jesus ended this parable by sharing what sensitive soil looks like. Good ground illustrates the responsive heart. Seed takes root and a plant begins to grow. The key thought here is that not only does a heart submitted to God receive the truth, but it also produces fruit as a result. A heart that is humble, teachable, repentant, and willing to obey will be usable by God. The condition of our hearts will dictate how we are used by the Lord.

Too often, we evaluate our hearts by our intentions and by what we are doing “for the Lord” but we rarely evaluate our hearts by who we are becoming. Scripture challenges us to look at our own hearts and to be certain we aren’t calloused, shallow, or too busy to grow in intimacy with Christ.

You’ve probably noticed that knowing a wealth of theology hasn’t been part of the conversation to this point. That was intentional. Theology is necessary, and we should continue to learn it. And as we learn, we should be in awe of God. Solid theology helps us know how to live out what’s true. But if what we believe doesn’t actually change how we live, then our pursuit of more information is meaningless. Our heads can be full of excellent theology while our hearts are far from God. Gathering information and facts about God does not place us in right relationship with Him.

We must remember that information and transformation are not the same. Theology, though practical and necessary, is information about God. I believe student ministry leaders and students should learn theology continually. However, transformation occurs when there is effective application of what we’ve learned. If you are learning much about God, but your life is not affected on a daily basis by what you are learning, then you are only retaining facts. You aren’t experiencing transformation, you’re just really good at gathering information.

Your walk with God will determine every facet of your ministry life. We can talk the latest strategies and ideas, but if your heart is distant or disconnected, you’ve missed the point. After 20 years in student ministry, I’ve learned that I have to evaluate some areas of my own heart often. I’ll share them with you in hopes that you can avoid some of my mistakes.

## I RELY ON MYSELF TOO MUCH

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I love being in student ministry, and I like to win. I get frustrated when things don’t go my way, and because I’ve been in ministry for awhile, I have a grasp on what works and what doesn’t. When things are going great, I

sometimes become less reliant on the power of the Holy Spirit and far more dependent on the practices that have brought success in the past. It's easy to trust in my experiences and skill set. The routine and comfort of what I know creep their way in, believing that if I accomplish X and Y, then Z will follow suit.

I've been guilty of planning strategies and details down to the smallest details for events and just asking God "to bless them." Wow! The pride in my heart can be awful. It's almost like I'm saying, "I've got this figured out God. If you'll just put some of your magic dust on here for kids to get saved and to grow this ministry, we will be all good."

Have you ever been guilty of this? Can you say you are truly prayerfully dependent on God for the outcomes in your ministry? I don't mean that you're lazy and ask God to simply make it happen without you having to lift a finger. But what's the condition of your heart? Do you believe that if God doesn't show up, then it's all in vain? Would you even know if God didn't show up?

Here's a thought that has plagued me: How much ministry have I done that is independent of the work of the Holy Spirit? How many times have I done things that were a success but there was no serious prayer or relying on God to move? Is it possible to pull off an event successfully without the help of the Holy Spirit? It's terrifying to think we could be trying to do this in our own strength and calling it fruitful.

I share these thoughts only because I've learned that they go against who God intended us to be. We were never called to shepherd, minister, and lead independent from Him. My prayer is that if I am transparent about these things, then maybe you can be also, rooting them out of your own ministries and hearts.

## I CAN MISPLACE MY AFFECTIONS

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Ministry has some pretty intense and busy seasons. Other student ministry friends and I often joke, "Things should slow down a bit after this season." They never do. I'm not complaining—that's just the nature of ministry. With its intensity, ministry demands much from us. Having a full schedule for a while isn't a bad thing, but if we misplace our affection toward our work, it becomes sinful. Maybe this has happened to you.

It doesn't take long for priorities to get out of place. Days and nights are spent praying for people, talking about God, teaching from the Word, and pouring ourselves out for the sake of others. The danger isn't in giving too much, but rather that we aren't experiencing God for ourselves. We become

experts at filling other people's spiritual buckets while our own well begins to dry out.

It's times like this when we confuse ministry (our work *for* God) with intimacy (growth in our own relationship *with* God). With His name on our lips, our very work is for the glory of God, so it feels like all we are doing is building intimacy with God. But preparing a sermon isn't always the same as spending time with God. As we prepare, our focus is often on who we are communicating to and not the condition of our own hearts

As strange as it sounds, it's possible to be passionate for ministry and not be passionate for Jesus. If we're not careful, it is possible that we can work in ministry but allow our time alone with God and our prayer life to suffer. We can be very busy "doing" while masquerading as if we are walking closely with God.

I believe this happens in part because we see tangible results from our work. We interact with students and their families, and we see God moving in their lives. Students are getting saved, lives are being changed, and spiritual growth is happening in front of us as a result of "our" work. If we aren't aware of who is really at work, we can start to believe our own hype.

Think about it this way. Working in ministry comes with acceptable behavioral parameters. There are things we can and can't do with our personal lives because of our occupation. And, depending on your particular church background, the "don't do it" list is probably longer than the "for sure do it" list. There are many clear—and often many unspoken—guidelines we live by. Don't smoke. Don't get drunk. Don't live promiscuously, and while you are at it, guard your eyes. These parameters, and others, are necessary for effective ministry. Since we have boundaries for our physical lives, why shouldn't we have markers for our spiritual lives? Shouldn't there be warning signs for the health of our spiritual hearts that drive all of our actions and behaviors?

This is why the soil of our heart matters. If it is not carefully tended, we can get caught up in the belief that our work for God is somehow the same thing as intimacy with God. It was never intended for our work to be the avenue into a close relationship with Him. A spiritually distant heart clearly affects how we live, but it also affects how we lead. It's not possible to lead others to a place we have not been. We can't simply explain the way for them.

I like to shop for groceries. If I'm honest, I usually have to ask a sales associate for help finding an item. I don't mind asking for help because it means I can find what I'm looking for faster. But I've noticed that there are two types of associates. There's the type who, although we are on aisle 14, says something like, "Um, yeah (pulls off headphones), I think that's on

aisle two by the Sunny D.” There’s a faint pointing in the general direction, but that’s where the item location assistance ends. Slight frustration ensues, and I quickly realize my time is better spent finding another associate to ask. The other type of employee engages in a completely different way. When asked about a particular item, they stop what they are doing immediately and lead me directly to the item I need. (Clearly, this employee is my favorite type.) They aren’t satisfied with simply telling me how to get there, they want to show me and walk with me so I don’t miss what I need.

You can’t just point, gesture, and talk about how others should walk in relationship with God if you aren’t doing it yourself. God has not called us to be distant and disengaged from Him simply because we’re too busy working for Him. He has called us to walk arm-in-arm with others, growing together in relationship with God. He has called us to lead others toward Him as we walk with Him ourselves.

If you are simply restating things you have learned in the past and sharing information you know, you aren’t really leading with power and authenticity. You are unable to impart what God is currently doing in your life because you haven’t been listening to Him. You can draw on things from years ago, but not from today. At best, you are passing off what God did in your past as His movement now. Regretfully, you speak with a passive confidence to others about what needs to happen to grow spiritually, but it isn’t taking root in your own life. This isn’t a sustainable way to lead or live out your calling.

Leading in student ministry requires us to have strong heart awareness. If our hearts are anything other than receptive and humble before God, we are in a dangerous position. We must be uncomfortable with the idea that we are what we do and reject the notion that success in ministry is a litmus test for our relationship with God. The apostle Paul illustrated what spiritual growth looks like in 2 Corinthians 3:18:

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*We all, with unveiled faces, are looking as in a mirror at the glory of the Lord and are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory; this is from the Lord who is the Spirit.*

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These verses show the importance of time in the Word. At my church, we often say, “We get into the Word, until the Word gets into us.” Nothing can replace our personal time with God. Walking closely with the Lord, especially

in ministry, requires consistency, self-discipline and a “whatever it takes” attitude. We must make sure that we don’t let our busyness for God, actually keep us from the presence of God. Dependence on the Holy Spirit, humility, and fostering a hunger for God help keep the right priority in our hearts.

## I CAN LOSE SIGHT OF THE BIG PICTURE

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My grandfather started taking me out on boats when I was five years old. My fascination with motorized water craft began then and is still one of my favorite activities today. Grandpa was always patient with me as I asked questions. He carefully took time to explain what he was doing and why it was being done. He shared much wisdom with me on those warm summer days. At eight years old, he started to let me steer the boat on open water. As I got older, I could take some of the smaller crafts out by myself. For me, an entire day on the water was never enough time to soak in all the fun. It still isn’t.

Navigation was very different in those early days. It was simplistic and rudimentary in comparison to what we have now. Today we use GPS screens mounted in the dashboard of the boat to point the way. Even if those fail, we have the same programs on our phones so we don’t get lost or run aground and get featured on a boating fail social media page. But, I learned at a young age how to navigate the waters without the fancy equipment. By picking out landmarks in the distance, I can direct the boat where it needs to go. For example, if we were headed back to the house, Grandpa would say, “See that large clump of trees on the right? Head directly to those. Slow down when you see the buoys.” The intent was to focus on what was in the distance so we could get where we intended to go.

Long range vision is good in boating, but much more so in ministry life. In ministry, we aren’t navigating around sandbars and reefs; we’re avoiding pitfalls and failures that can significantly hurt our ministry. Fame, platform, notoriety—whatever you want to call it—is something we must navigate carefully in order to achieve a successful, long-term ministry.

A mentor of mine said it this way, “Don’t look to be discovered, be disciplined.” That has always stood out to me, particularly when talking about the motivation of my heart. It’s not wrong to have a huge platform, and it’s certainly not wrong to have influence. Issues arise when attention, fame, and notoriety is what’s driving our motivation.

Author and counselor, Al Andrews said, “The human soul was not made for fame.”<sup>4</sup> This phrase has proven to be true particularly in the ministry world. Great ministry leaders have ended or squandered their ministries in pursuit of

building their own platforms. In effect, they lost sight of what they were called to do. Whenever we desire the applause of others as our motivating factor, we have missed the point. Our calling is never about our recognition, but rather making Christ famous. At a conference I attended a few years ago, activist, author, and speaker, Christine Caine said, “If the light on you is brighter than the light in you, that light will crush you.”<sup>5</sup> If you seek fame, find fame, and give your fame greater value than Jesus, then fame will destroy you.

Here’s another way to look at this issue. Your talent may get you a leadership position, but your character and integrity will keep you there. Walking humbly with Jesus can’t be outpaced by our skill set. I’ve witnessed first hand some incredibly talented leaders receive amazing roles in the church because of their giftedness, but fumble along the way. Serving God requires far more than talent, or even proficiency, in leadership. We must be careful never to confuse giftedness with godliness. Godliness is the ground where your gifts can take root and grow.

Consider David’s example. We learned about his heart for God even before we knew his name: “... The LORD has found a man after his own heart, and the LORD has appointed him as ruler over his people” (1 Sam. 13:14). God identified David for his heart, not his abilities or achievements. David revealed his faithfulness while in the fields as a teenager when no one was watching. He faced the lion, the bear, and other difficulties, and God used those difficulties to prepare David to face the giant when the time came. His devotion to God, even in the unnoticeable and mundane, sustained him when he faced Goliath.

David was after God’s heart. We are all “after” something. What are you going after? Are you a person after God’s own heart or have you lost sight of that? Are you pursuing Him or something else?

As you begin your time in ministry, be faithful in the small and mundane. Seek to grow spiritually, to be discipled, and then let God give you the platform He wants you to have. Ministry is a marathon, not a sprint. Understand that the decisions and systems you put in place now will affect you for your lifetime in ministry, so choose them well. Embrace the call God has given you. If God truly has given you a calling—and you earnestly seek Him—then you can’t fail to serve His people in the capacity He desires for you. Guard your heart, be honest about its condition, and trust the Holy Spirit for His work in you and in your ministry.

# » QUESTIONS

**1. Write out the call you feel God has placed on your life.**

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**2. Considering the four conditions of the soil, which would you say best represents your heart today? Why?**

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**3. What weakness of yours needs to be addressed? How has it affected your ministry?**

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**4. Have any distractions caused you to lose sight of what God has called you to do? How can you address them?**

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## IN IT FOR THE LONG HAUL...

Student ministry is one of the most challenging, frustrating, hilarious, wonderful, confusing, and beautiful places to serve in the church. Agreeing to jump in and minister to people at this vital time in their lives is both rewarding and scary. Jeff Borton has been serving in student ministry for 20 years, and in this book he will walk you through the process of becoming an effective student minister and building a sustainable ministry. Whether you're just getting started or have been discipling students for years, Jeff's insights and experience will guide you as you live the amazing thrill that is student ministry!

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