



*A call to show up*

THE

*stick with it*

THIRD

*and walk through*

VOICE

*life's hard stuff with students*

ASHTON PETERS

I wish I had this book when I started student ministry. Parents have the most powerful role in a student's discipleship outside of the Holy Spirit. That's a lot of pressure for parents, but what if a student doesn't have a good Christian voice speaking into his or her life? That's where *The Third Voice* makes the critical difference. God didn't intend for parents to disciple their kids by themselves. Discipleship was designed within a biblical community helping students become more like Jesus.

Ashton combines the head, heart, and hands of youth ministry in *The Third Voice*. He builds a foundation on a research-based approach. He illustrates his principles with powerful experiences from his life and ministry. He finishes with practical concepts everyone can adapt to fit their personality and setting. Ministry moves at the speed of relationships. *The Third Voice* provides the framework and the encouragement to help our voice echo the voice of Christ in the lives of students in our ministry.

**Steve Pulis, PhD**

*Vice President*

*Convoy of Hope Education*

As a leader deeply invested in shaping the next generation, I highly recommend Ashton Peters's *The Third Voice*. Ashton brings a unique and insightful approach to the crucial role mentors play in the lives of young people, especially when family or traditional church voices are absent. His personal stories and practical wisdom deeply resonate with my own experiences in ministry. *The Third Voice* powerfully captures the heart of youth discipleship, reminding us that investing in students' lives goes far beyond teaching—it's about showing up, sticking with them, and walking through the hard stuff together. This book is an essential guide for anyone passionate about empowering the next generation to grow in faith and purpose.

**Terry Parkman**

*Global Cochair for Empowered21NextGen*

*Global NextGen Ambassador for OneHope*

*NextGen Pastor*

*River Valley Church*

I travel and preach across the United States and see a lot of different churches, pastors, leaders and parents. Ashton Peters is one of the most outstanding leaders I know. Ashton doesn't just bring a wealth of wisdom and knowledge; I have watched Ashton become and embody what it means to be a third voice to the next generation. This book will be a beautiful resource for youth leaders, pastors, and parents as they learn how to better disciple and share their life with the next generation. When you read this book you will find yourself, laughing, crying, and being moved to practical action within your local context. Each chapter is a blend of theology, beautiful stories, and practical examples based on the proper theology. This book will be a blessing for the local church for years to come! A while back, a local youth pastor picked me up in New York, and I asked him why he was in youth ministry. He said, "A pastor named Ashton Peters invited me into his home and showed me how to follow Jesus." Ashton lives out what it meant to be a third voice and his impact is a beautiful summary found in this book.

**Micah MacDonald**

*Mac Ministries*

*The Third Voice* will stand as one of the top books on youth ministry in this decade. Through inspiring stories and practical coaching, Ashton calls us back to the primary focus of all youth ministries—godly adults building relationships with students for biblical discipleship. By adding the foundation of recent data on today's youth, Ashton has written not just another book on youth ministry but, more importantly, a training tool that youth pastors will use in youth ministries across our nation. After you read *The Third Voice*, you will want every adult who volunteers with students to have a copy. This book is a game changer!

**Eran Holt**

*Founder and Director  
Lead the Generation*

Ashton Peters takes readers on an exciting journey for all those interested in today's emergent generation. Youth culture constantly changes with societal influences and distractions, making reaching youth for Christ more challenging than ever. However, Ashton guides readers into reaching and discipling this generation with the contemporary, yet ancient practice, of the third voice. He brings an entourage of wisdom from his own youth ministry and insights from numerous experienced veterans. This is a must-read for the youth pastor or leader who knows they must find relevant, effective discipleship models. *The Third Voice* gives an exciting perspective on reaching today's youth and provides a thoughtful blend of biblical wisdom and contemporary understanding.

**Gary Grogan**

*aka "Papa G"  
Spiritual Father*



# THE THIRD VOICE

A Call to Show Up,  
Stick with It,  
and Walk Through Life's  
Hard Stuff with Students

**ASHTON PETERS**



Gospel Publishing House

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024310

978-1-60731-729-6

27 26 25 • 2 3 4

Printed in the United States of America

I have always appreciated the African proverb, "If you want to travel fast, travel alone. If you want to travel far, travel together." This book has been just that. I am so grateful for the people who have "traveled" along this journey with me.

***To my wife, Stephanie***

Thank you for your constant support and encouragement. There were many points in the process that you encouraged me to stick with it. Thank you for the time and financial sacrifices you helped to make so I could complete my schooling which was the launching pad for this book.

***To my two daughters***

You are such a gift to us, and we are so grateful for you! You bring so much life and energy to everything you do. I know God has big plans for you. Lots of people can preach on stages, but only I get to be your dad. I consider that one of my life's greatest honors.

To the friends who have walked this journey through encouragement, support, and reading the draft of this book

Thank you Austin Westlake, Steve Pulis, Terry Parkman, Eran Holt, and Micah Mac. You walking with me on this project means so much.

To the interns over the years and the students who have given us the huge privilege of investing in your lives

Thank you for trusting us to be the third voice in your life.

To the third voice in my life, thank you for being a reminder  
"My anchor holds" Hebrews 6:19





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# FOREWORD

His name was Josh, and by age fourteen, he had already endured more grief than any other student in our ministry—and likely more than most adults in our church. As his youth pastor, I knew his story, but on the day I ran into him in a hospital elevator, his story was unfolding into a new crisis no teenager should have to face.

I was on my way back to the twelfth floor, the maternity ward, to see my wife and our newborn daughter after running home to retrieve some items. Josh, however, was headed to the sixth floor—the cancer ward—to be with his mother, who was nearing the end of a long battle with this terrible disease.

The words had barely left my mouth, “Hey Josh, what are you doing here?” when I remembered exactly why he was there. Our entire youth group, and many in our church, knew Josh’s story. His mother’s cancer was only the latest tragedy; a few years earlier, his father had also passed away. When his mom got sick, our church stepped in to help however we could, paying some bills, providing meals, and offering other support.

For Josh, the youth group became a family. He was easy to love—a quiet kid with a sweet smile, humble and funny. He quickly became a regular and found a circle of friends who made sure he was always included, whether at youth events, all-night video game marathons, or in the small group that met to train in martial arts.

The day his mother died, he came to the church and made his way to my office to tell me the news. He shared that four different families had offered to “adopt” him as one of their own—mine included. As I comforted him, I made promises that I knew our church would keep.

“Josh, whatever family you choose, we will all be here for you. Jennifer and I will make room at our house if that’s what you want, or help you decide where you’d feel most at home. We’ll make sure you go to youth camp this summer. When you turn sixteen, we’ll see to it that you have a car. And when it’s time for college, we’ll help you make a plan.”

I meant every word. Over the years, our church became Josh’s family, and he had all those opportunities. He chose to live with a family who had three sons close to his age, and their mother soon made him one of her “boys.”

A memory our whole church will cherish happened two years later, during a Wednesday night outreach event. That night, we held a drawing for a fully customized car that local businesses had tricked out. They transformed an old, junky Chevy Cavalier, donating custom paint, wheels, tires, sound equipment, racing seats, specialty bodywork, and a spoiler. For weeks, our sermons compared God’s ability to restore lives with how we were restoring that car.

By now, you might have guessed what happened next. Out of five hundred high school students, Josh’s name was the first one drawn! When I announced his name, those who knew his story went wild. As he made his way to the front, I lost it—crying and laughing at the same time! He looked at

me with that humble smile, and as I handed him the keys, a group of his church family surrounded him with hugs and cheers, many of them in tears.

We were Josh's family. Losing his parents was still painful, and even now, it feels unfair. But witnessing our youth ministry surround Josh with love and support has brought a joy I'll carry forever. That moment remains one of the most meaningful of my career in youth ministry, ranking higher than any title, stage, or honor I've received. There's nothing more rewarding than leading a youth group to become family for a young person in need.

As you read this book, I hope you are inspired by Ashton's story of how his youth ministry became his family. More than that, I hope you're motivated to draw so close to the heart of our Heavenly Father that you, too, can become the faith family so many students desperately need. If you will commit to preparing your heart and mind to be the third voice in the lives of the next generation, God will create just the right moment to fulfill your calling. He will do more than that; God will multiply your calling over and over again as you walk in obedience to the Holy Spirit.

***Josh Wellborn***

National Director  
Assemblies of God Young Adult Ministries



# INTRODUCTION

I find kids' perspectives interesting. They explain things with a unique viewpoint that's both profound and significant. Kids are naturally intuitive. They can observe and state things in a way that makes sense to almost anyone. There's beauty in the simple way they see things. I've always believed that if you want to gain an accurate perspective about something, ask a kid.

I have two daughters, an eight-year-old and a nine-year-old. Recently, we had nonstop rolling laughter at our dinner table as my older daughter asked if we wanted to see impressions of the people I work with. She began to name individuals and act out her portrayal of everyone in the office, from my administrative assistant to the general superintendent of the Assemblies of God. Her impressions were highly hysterical and yet also shockingly accurate. It reminded us that kids see things and pick up on more than we think.

One of the most profound moments was when my younger daughter, Annalea, brought home a family portrait the first week of school. One would expect a stereotypical

crayon drawing of stick figures from someone her age. I saw the drawing and asked Anna about it. She said, “The assignment was to draw a family portrait to introduce our family to our class.” There was a bit of surprise as I looked down at the drawing.

See, we’re a family of four (my wife and I and our two daughters), but this family portrait included eight people. So, I asked Anna about the other people in the picture. Her answer was moving. For the four other people, she named students, now all young adults, who had been in our previous youth ministries. Though from different seasons of life, these students are all close to our hearts. They had become like adopted siblings to our kids and adopted kids to my wife and me. Several of them were from challenging home situations that left them without one of their parental figures. Though we could never replace that missing parent, the Lord graciously allowed us to be a part of a supplemental family of faith. We had become close to them—close enough that in our daughter’s eyes, they deserved a place in our family portrait. It was a reminder again of the investment we had made and how closely our own biological children watched as we mentored students in the youth ministry.

If you were to walk into our home, you would see a sign of 1 Thessalonians 2:8 (NLT) on the white shiplap wall in the entryway: “We loved you so much that we shared with you not only God’s Good News but our own lives, too.” Several years ago, my wife and I decided that this would be our family verse. We had seen many people eager to preach or teach (these are all great things), but noticed the lack of those who openly and cheerfully shared their lives, who not only preached the gospel but graciously gave themselves to love others. That verse continues to be a key anchor for our



family as we lead and minister. We want to be people who love deeply and care beyond what is required of us. We see this current generation of students surrounded by apathy and needing significant role models. We see a generation that needs individuals who will share their lives and point them to Jesus Christ.

Like the family photo story earlier, if you ask our older daughter, Haddassah, how many siblings she has, she'll often give a complicated answer that I typically must explain in detail based on the looks people give me when she begins to name them off. She includes various people who've entered her life. Some were students in our ministry. Don't even begin to ask her about extended family because she'll list off the adopted aunts, uncles, and nanas of the church who have filled her life with care and love. Even as a baby, her adopted Nana M would rock her to sleep on Wednesday nights while we led youth service. You see, the family of faith is a powerful thing. To a hurting generation that feels more lonely and isolated than ever, the family of faith is essential.

I'm passionate about this concept of investing in the next generation in intentional and significant ways. My goal in writing this book is to present it in a way that allows others to receive it and apply it. We could use a variety of terms to describe people who demonstrate this level of investment (some we'll explore later in the book). You could call them spiritual fathers, spiritual mothers, bonus moms, adopted aunts or uncles, godparents, Sunday School teachers, youth leaders, mentors, and so on. All share a common thread—they significantly impact the lives of students far beyond what is required by their title.

# A BACK PORCH CONVERSATION

The concept for this book came full circle during a conversation on the back porch of my spiritual mom's house. I was at a gathering with numerous leaders from across the nation in a small group of people to whom I am close. We shared stories of ministry and life in an environment where we could be authentic. I had recently completed my master's degree, the launching pad for this book. I shared how I had spent over two years researching the concept of mentorship and spiritual parents in the context of current youth culture. I unpacked that I knew what I wanted to say but struggled with how to say it. From this conversation came this book's title: *The Third Voice*.

I began to talk with my friends about the journey I had been on: an in-depth look at spiritual formation, especially in those lacking one or two parental figures or whose parents are not believers. I shared the idea of students from unchurched homes in our youth ministries needing a voice in their lives, a voice that understands their current family structure and life situations, and is an additional investment in their lives. I was struggling to land on the best term to describe this voice. I struck out "mentorship" and "spiritual parent," which didn't strike the right tone. I didn't want to use "youth pastor," because that would eliminate so many other people who speak into students' lives. After throwing out several alternate terms, someone suggested "third voice," and the title was born.

# THE THIRD VOICE EXPLAINED

My friend jumped into the conversation. She responded, “Yes, it's the third voice!” She shared similar experiences and was deeply grateful for the investment of leaders in her life in the church. We both saw ourselves as the byproduct of individuals who had taken a vested interest in our spiritual formation. These individuals held the place of the “third voice.” Let me explain.

The first voice continues to be God. He serves as the primary voice that leads and guides us. The Bible tells us His sheep know His voice and follow Him (John 10:4). His Word and His Spirit are essential to spiritual formation and should be the primary voice regarding our decisions. The voice of God must hold the highest importance in our lives and our student ministries. No person can or should take the place of God's voice in our lives.

The second voice is found in our biological family. Whether Christian or not, studies show that the biological parent of a student continues to be the most influential voice in their life. Throughout this book, we'll do a deep dive into what it looks like when the parent is a Christian or when the parent is not a Christian. Both scenarios have enormous ramifications for students' spiritual formation.

This brings us to the third voice. The third voice is a highly impactful leader, mentor, or role model in a student's life. This person holds a high level of influence. In fact, this person becomes extremely critical for those with either unchurched families or who are missing a parental figure. In those instances, the third voice can become as significant as their biological family.

While we agree with this when we see it outlined, we may struggle to see how to apply it in our lives and among our students. The goal of this book is to share ideas, stories, and practical tips about the third voice. I aim to introduce you to the concept and encourage you to consider what this may look like in your life and youth ministry. There's a desperate need for third voices in youth culture, and I look forward to unpacking ideas about this together.

## JAKE'S STORY

Our first full-time youth ministry position was in a small town in Oklahoma. It was an authentic rural stereotype with the local Walmart and Sonic being the epicenter of social activity. Our connection to the local school campus was a huge part of the youth ministry. Every Tuesday I would take pizza and be part of the local Youth Alive (campus outreach club) at our local middle school, and every Wednesday, I would go to the local high school. In this way I got to meet multiple students and have lots of conversations with them. Occasionally, they would make it to our Wednesday night youth service.

I met Jake on one of those Wednesdays in Youth Alive. The pale sixteen-year-old with short, curly red hair stood out in the crowd. He was kind and silent, but could easily portray a tough guy persona. As someone who did CrossFit competitions, his muscular appearance contributed to the tough guy vibe. His friend Jaimie was involved in our youth ministry and regularly attended Youth Alive each Wednesday. She invited him to come to Youth Alive on Wednesday, and we connected immediately. We had conversations back and forth about a variety of topics.

The way he approached each topic showed he was seeking answers. Finally, one week later, Jake walked through the doors of our youth ministry wearing the blue Affliction pearl snap shirt he typically wore to school.

Jake quickly connected to the youth ministry. He had multiple friends who attended and his charismatic personality allowed him to fit into most gatherings. He was always looking to crack jokes and, as a CrossFit athlete, he quickly caught the attention of almost every girl in the youth group. Jake became more involved and asked questions about faith in God and what it meant to be a Christ-follower. He showed up each week with a blue and black study Bible, ready to ask questions. He wasn't one for showing emotion, but you could see God working in his heart. He would often stand stoically in worship not sure how to respond to the Pentecostal expressions prevalent in the youth group. One night he decided to go all in on his faith and committed to serve Jesus wholeheartedly. He then became even more involved in the youth ministry and joined our student leadership team. He had a bass guitar and was interested in learning to play. Though his skill set was limited (as was almost the entire youth worship team at the time), he eagerly joined the Wednesday night worship team.

Jake was my first awareness of the "third voice" concept. His parents weren't believers; in fact, they were rather coarse (based on interactions with them), and based on Jake's descriptions, his sister wasn't living a Christ-honoring lifestyle. He talked with me about faith, decisions for the future, and ministry. He heard me tell stories about my spiritual mother and her impact on my life and ministry. One night after youth service, he told me, "You know, Ashton, you aren't old enough to be my spiritual dad, but you're definitely my spiritual big brother." He shared that with a

broken family structure, he had no relationships within his family that would allow him to have sincere conversations about faith. I realized that there were students in our youth ministry who needed individuals to take on a formative role in their lives. I committed to Jake that I wouldn't be perfect, nor could I promise never to let him down, but I wanted to be a part of his walk with Christ.

I was committed to helping Jake be a part of the spiritual formation events we had throughout the year. We had been promoting church camp for a while and he shared that he had never been to church camp. This threw fuel on the fire of my idea: Somehow, we would get Jake to church camp that year. He shared that he didn't have the money for camp, not because his parents couldn't afford it, but they didn't see the value in the amount of money or time that camp would cost. I had the idea to cover the cost of Jake's camp, so we made a personal contribution to help with that.

About a week later, the church receptionist called to say that Jake's mom was at the church and wanted to speak to me. I thought this was the moment I had been waiting for. I expected her to show up full of gratitude or even to start attending church herself after observing the care the church had given her son. But things played out quite differently. I invited her to have a seat in my office, but she stood across from me with bright red curly hair and eyes almost piercing me through her oval, rimmed glasses. She said she didn't want to sit and simply wanted to return the money for Jake's camp expenses. I explained that the funds had been given so Jake could go to camp. Unmoved, she laid a personal check on my desk, said she didn't want Jake to take the generosity of anyone in the church, and immediately left. Talk about a deflating moment!

I remember putting my head down on the desk, discouraged and disillusioned. I had done all the right things on the “be a good youth pastor” list, and instead of gratitude, Jake’s parents were mad at me and he wasn’t going to camp. We went to camp that year without him.

When Jake turned eighteen, he decided to leave home and move in with his girlfriend. After that and a variety of other situations, he distanced himself from the church and from me. This was painful. There were moments when I knew I had to trust the Lord with Jake and his Christian walk. I would continue to pray for Jake and occasionally text him with no reply. This went on for a good while, and I remember the day it changed. I had run to the local farm supply store (in a rural community that became one of the prime places to buy event supplies). My phone was lying on the conveyor belt when I saw Jake’s name come up on the text message. “Hey, big bro. I’ve been thinking and praying. I know I’m not as close as I was to God. I want to really put effort into my relationship with God again.”

Not long after this, we transitioned to another ministry role. It was a bittersweet time as we left so many of the students in the youth group we cared for, including Jake. By this point, he had graduated from high school and was navigating where life would take him. On the day we packed the moving truck, he told us to be sure to let him know so he could say goodbye one last time. Just as we were about to leave, Jake pulled into the parking lot of the church in his beat-up yellow pickup truck. We got to talk one more time. He thanked me for being the best big brother he had and gave me a silver keychain with a Batman emblem on it. Jake eventually got involved in another church in the area, and we continued to stay connected.

Jake's story picks up the November of the year we moved. I had preached at our annual youth retreat and was wrapping up the night. Suddenly, one of our leaders came up to me and said my wife had called and asked for me to call her as soon as I got into the car. As I headed for the car on the brisk winter night, I pulled my cell phone out of my bag, noticing not only multiple missed calls from Stephanie but also missed calls from leaders and students at our previous church.

I quickly clicked on Stephanie's name, and she said she wanted to tell me the news before I heard it from anyone else. Jake had drowned. I felt like everything stopped while sitting in that old, brown Buick. This wasn't possible. The healthy nineteen-year-old Jake surely couldn't have drowned. Stephanie said she would tell me the whole story when I got home. Jake had been at the local lake with a few of his friends. They kept daring him to jump in, and he wouldn't admit that he didn't know how to swim. Finally, influenced by peer pressure, he jumped into the lake. A strong current quickly swept him under, and none of his friends were able to save him. The waves pulled him under the surface. They searched most of the night and finally found his lifeless body the next morning.

We headed back to that small rural town for Jake's funeral. As we walked into the church, we were greeted by familiar and tear-filled faces of students and leaders. The pastor of the church Jake was now attending performed the service. He shared about the recent months of Jake's walk with the Lord and said he was going to share from Jake's journal with permission from his parents. After the service wrapped up, Jake's parents came to find me. Unlike the not-so-pleasant exchanges of the past, this time was different. Jake's dad, a rather large and burly man, hugged me and



thanked me for all I had done for his boy. I embraced him and told him how grateful I was to have been a part of Jake's life.

I share Jake's story for a few reasons. First, I think in youth ministry, we must consistently preach Jesus. Jake's passing reminded me that eternity is real and we must share the gospel with students who need to hear it. We must point them toward Jesus. I also share it as a powerful reminder of the need for the third voice in students' lives. I'm so grateful for the opportunity to be a part of Jake's life—to be his “big bro.” I believe the investment was a significant part of his walk with the Lord. Every time I think about him I feel waves of emotion for the loss, but also a renewed passion to reach the next generation.

As we dive into this conversation about the third voice, I hope you'll approach the idea with an open heart and mind. Whatever term you may use for it, I believe the Lord is looking for youth leaders who will be courageous enough to care for a broken and hurting generation. In a generation that feels the deep void of any type of stable or meaningful relationship, may we leaders share not only the gospel but also our lives. I'm reminded of what noted preacher Charles Spurgeon once said: “Carve your name on hearts, not on marble.”

## THE THIRD VOICE ECHOES



- Reread 1 Thessalonians 2:8 and write it out in your own words.
- In what ways might God be calling you to share your life with others?
- Is there a “Jake” that God has placed in your life for you to be the third voice to? What steps can you take to reach out to that person?

# A VOICE IN THE VOID

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We don't have to look far to realize there's a void of godly voices in modern youth culture. When we look around and see students struggling with self-harm, gender identity, as well as depression and anxiety, to name a few, we can see the void of godly voices. Youth are part of the "most connected generation," yet a generation of young people who feel alone and, for many, abandoned. There's a void of Christ-honoring love, biblical discipleship, and authentic mentorship. There's a void of spiritual mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters, who deeply love a generation and want them to be all that God calls them to be. There's a void of third voices.

## A LOT OF NOISE, BUT FEW VOICES

I believe that students' lives today are filled with more noise than ever but few voices. The reality is that we live in a generation inundated with noise. OneHope recently released some interesting information about Gen Alpha/Gen Z:

- 57 percent own a tablet and 43 percent a smartphone—this is even higher among teens.<sup>1</sup>
- The average screen time is 2.24 hours a day for kids under eight<sup>2</sup> (Imagine what it is for teens!)
- 25 percent use Alexa or another smart speaker every day.<sup>3</sup> This means that children now speak to Alexa more than to their grandparents.
- Dr. Shell Melia describes Gen Alpha by saying, “Everything is coming at them all the time.”<sup>4</sup>
- They find AI to be friendly, trustworthy, and smarter than they are.<sup>5</sup>
- 46 percent of seven-to-twelve-year olds have an active social media account.<sup>6</sup>
- 64 percent of Gen Alpha said they would rather be a YouTube/social media influencer than the president.<sup>7</sup> (This one is wild to me!)

These statistics confirm my point: There’s a lot of “noise” in students’ lives, but very few voices. Students are surrounded by people who entertain them, market to them, distract them, and even disciple them with a specific (detrimental) brand of cultural values. No wonder we need people who will emerge as a godly influence and be the third voice in students’ lives! Young people today are constantly surrounded by information, and their minds are filled with narratives. The modern youth ministry must be committed to being more than a social gathering that happens midweek, but instead be a place of discipleship and spiritual formation.

OneHope also identified that only 46 percent of children in the United States live with both parents who are in their first

marriage, which means 54 percent of those under the age of eighteen live in some form of a nontraditional family unit.<sup>8</sup> In those cases, the need for youth ministry to be a powerful third voice is even greater since the parent's influential "second voice" is often missing.

there's a lot of "noise" in students' lives, but very few voices.

When there are no Christian parents, the third voice becomes even more crucial. In their American Worldview Inventory, the Cultural Research Center at Arizona Christian University discovered that 67 percent of parents of preteens identify as Christian, but only 2 percent possess a biblical worldview.<sup>9</sup> Even if that number is exaggerated—which some think it is—it still shows a staggering chasm. It demonstrates a powerful need for youth ministries to partner with parents and be fully present as a supplemental voice in students' lives. (Later in the book, we'll take a deeper look at the need for youth ministry to come alongside the family with a strong voice of influence.)

## THE THIRD VOICE: THE ANTI-ALGORITHM

The concept of algorithm has taken on a new meaning in the last few years. The Oxford English Dictionary defines an *algorithm* as "a procedure or set of rules used in calculation and problem-solving operations, especially by a computer."<sup>10</sup> For years, *algorithm* was more of a calculation or computing term, but it has entered into modern slang.

Most often, the term is now used in the context of social media, referencing the social media algorithm that provides the information or entertainment you want.

Recently a popular cookie franchise came to our town. A large portion of my social media activity during the weeks prior to its opening revolved around this cookie franchise. (I know . . . I have a problem.) My social media feed was filled with videos about the cookies, advertisements, reviews, recipes to make imitation versions, you name it—everything was about those yummy cookies that, with one cookie, will meet your recommended entire calorie intake for the day. That’s how the algorithm works—it finds your interest and feeds you pertinent information and content. Your interests or clicks are almost weaponized against you. Whatever catches your eye is the tunnel you go down.

I think of the third voice as the “anti-algorithm.” As we take time to get to know students and invest in their lives, we don’t give them the information they *want* to hear but instead, the information they *need* to hear. Unlike groups that market to students or distract them, we challenge students to become more like Jesus. Hear me out on this. I’m not saying social media is bad. It can be good entertainment, but it’s an awful discipleship strategy. It can be great for cookie and movie reviews, but when it comes to spiritual formation, students need individuals who know and love them to walk them through the discipleship process. Algorithms can answer the question about where to find the best pizza (or the best cookie), but they can’t answer questions about depression or sexuality. Though YouTube can provide some fantastic guitar tutorials, young worship leaders need to be mentored by people who see their life and character and challenge them to be more like Jesus. It’s a reminder of 2 Timothy 3:2–5 (AMP):

For people will be lovers of self [narcissistic, self-focused], lovers of money [impelled by greed], boastful, arrogant, revilers, disobedient to parents, ungrateful, unholy and profane, [and they will be] unloving [devoid of natural human affection, calloused and inhumane], irreconcilable, malicious gossips, devoid of self-control [intemperate, immoral], brutal, haters of good, traitors, reckless, conceited, lovers of [sensual] pleasure rather than lovers of God, holding to a form of [outward] godliness (religion), although they have denied its power [for their conduct nullifies their claim of faith].

Whatever catches your eye is the  
tunnel you go down.

Even Christian influencers within the social media world can have a mixed effect on students. You see, I'm grateful for sermon clips. My feed is often filled with a lot of them, but those sermon clips and theology sound bites can't disciple anyone. I recently increased my respect for one Christian influencer. During an interview on a variety of topics, he was asked how many people message him theology questions and discipleship-oriented questions. His response was interesting: "I DM them back and say you need to connect with your youth pastor about this." He emphasized that preaching and sharing the gospel online is extremely valuable, but when it comes to spiritual formation, students need someone consistently in their lives to answer their questions. They need someone they see each week. (We'll consider influence and voice in more detail a little later in the book.)

We Need Voices.

Voices that are targeted intentionally—full of truth and seasoned with grace.

Voices that desire transformation more than platforms.

Voices that desire to be faithful rather than famous.

Voices that speak in the void.

Voices that will not preach to people but sit among people.

Voices that are committed to seeking out those without a godly influence and speaking to the void.

Voices that will speak to a generation that is hurting and searching for identity and point them to the Creator.

Voices that will say to the fatherless and broken, “Though you feel like you have no home—you have a place among us.”

Voices that will nurture rather than entertain.

Voices that not only speak about love but show love.

Voices that will step among the abandoned and the orphaned.

We need . . . *THIRD VOICES.*

## JULIAN'S STORY

I met Julian the night of our annual Fall Outreach (Battle of the Schools). One of the students from our leadership team



invited him to participate. Since it was one of our more significant events, we encouraged students to show up early for activities and a cookout before service. Since lots of students came right from school, a good chunk of them dropped their backpacks near the front entrance. As the pile of bags crowded in front of the door, I started to move the bags to the side. Julian, whom I had never met before, hopped right in to help. I quickly greeted the seventeen-year-old. He had straight black hair with a unique cowlick in his bangs that most people have at the crown of their heads. His slightly crooked teeth formed a quick smile. I was intrigued (and grateful) for someone who would so eagerly step up to help.

Julian quickly became a big part of the youth ministry. Getting involved with the production team and putting the “pro” in ProPresenter, he was a significant part of the student leadership team. He would show up early and stay late. I would stop by the campus club and connect. Through the process, I learned that Julian had never met his biological father and I was pretty sure his mom wasn’t married to the man she was living with. I endeavored to be a consistent third voice in his life, encouraging him to pursue Jesus and answering questions he had about faith and following God. Julian was the first person to give me a Father’s Day card (this was before we had kids of our own). I still have the card to this day:

*Happy Fathers Day! You are the best father-youth pastor ever. I am so glad you are in my life. I don’t know what I would do without you! Thank you!*

— Julian

Our family shared many special moments with Julian. Though he came from an extremely poor family, he was always generous with everything he had. He had pulled together what little money he had to pay for his senior photos and wanted us to be there for them. Since he only had a few changes of clothes, he asked if he could borrow some of my clothes to use for his senior photos. When I responded with an “absolutely,” he worked through the closet and decided what he would like to use. He also invited me to go with him on the day of his senior photos, and I did. I attended his graduation to cheer him on.

As time passed, he felt called to pursue youth ministry. He went on to intern at our church and became my right hand. We sponsored him through Global University to receive his ministerial credentials.

During that season, Julian shared a lot of significant life events with us. I have a photo of him sitting with a few other people and my older daughter as we waited for my younger daughter to be born. Julian didn’t just feel like family, he was family. When my younger daughter was born, we were already in the middle of our ministry transition to Illinois, and he was prepping to take a youth pastor role in Florida.

About a year after we left our ministry assignment in Oklahoma, I woke up to multiple voicemails. It was from the amazing youth leader who had followed us as youth pastor. She asked me to call her as soon as I got the voicemail. News had made it to her that Julian was found dead at his apartment from an aneurysm. Our shock and grief were huge. Bear in mind, this was within a year of Jake’s passing, the story I shared in the introduction. This was grief piled upon grief. I had barely worked through Jake’s passing and was now caught off guard by Julian’s passing.

Don't worry—not all my stories end in death! But I start this book with Jake and Julian's stories for a few reasons. First, they were two of the best young men we ever encountered in youth ministry, and I'm deeply grateful for having been a part of their lives. Second, these stories remind us that eternity is real. Yes, we all know that, but when we minister to students, it can be easy to lose sight of eternity because we tend to operate on the notion that they have a full life in front of them. Third, it speaks to how deeply I believe in being the third voice.

There was immense grief and even discouragement with the loss of these two students in my first five years of full-time youth ministry. It would have been easy to wonder why I should continue to make the investment. It might have been natural to shy away from youth ministry for fear of the pain it could bring. Instead, it helped me decide that I would continue to speak deeply into students' lives with passion and tenacity regardless of the risks.

About a year after Julian's passing, I received this message:

*Ashton,*

God has recently called my husband and me to help with a new church, Impulse, in Santa Rosa Beach, Florida. It's crazy how small the world can be in God's big hands. I know one of your spiritual sons, Julian, was a huge part in building this church.

Sadly, we didn't start attending Impulse until opening Sunday, and since the Lord took Julian home so quickly after that, we never got to meet him. Yet, I feel I'm getting to know him through testimony after testimony of people who came to our church because of Julian.

Last night, I was with another young man who had been touched by him. Dominic is one of my son's friends and is part of a leadership program at another church. He still has the card Julian gave him, and he remembers their brief encounter.

Our young church is growing. We have an average of 150 people showing up for our Sunday services and many new believers! Our youth ministry started up in December with a core of twelve young people. Last month at the first event, thirty-eight students showed up. I feel this is part of Julian's legacy.

Though I never met him, I know Julian was one of those special people who wholeheartedly loved God and loved people. He continues to touch many hearts here.

*Thank you for your investment in his life.*

This message reminded me that the investments we make in students' lives continue; the third voice echoes. Though at times I've wondered if mentorship, discipleship, and investment made any form of eternal impact, I know they did in Julian's life. Matthew 13:8 reminds us, "Other seeds fell on good soil and produced grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty." When we invest in students for the sake of God's kingdom, we can be sure of a bountiful harvest.

*The investments we make in students' lives continue; the third voice echoes.*

## THE THIRD VOICE ECHOES



- What are some of the “noises” you see that fill students’ lives?
- Go back and reread the “We Need Voices” statements. Let them be the rallying cry for you today.
- Ask the Lord how He might want to use you as a voice in the lives of some of the students in your youth ministry.



# A CALL TO SHOW UP, STICK WITH IT, AND WALK THROUGH LIFE'S HARD STUFF WITH STUDENTS

In a world filled with noise, students hear countless voices—entertaining them, distracting them, and shaping their beliefs in ways that pull them further from the truth. They are the most connected generation in history, yet they feel more alone than ever. Anxiety, self-harm, identity struggles, and hopelessness are becoming the norm. But there is one thing missing—a **third voice**.

The **third voice** is the mentor, the guide, the spiritual leader who speaks life, truth, and biblical wisdom into the next generation. Whether you're a youth pastor, small group leader, mentor, or simply someone who cares deeply about today's students, *The Third Voice* is a guide to stepping into that gap.

Through research, practical insights, and real-world application, this book empowers youth leaders to show up, stay consistent, and walk with students through the challenges of life. It's not just about teaching—it's about **investing, discipling, and loving in a way that transforms lives for eternity.**



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ashton Peters is a graduate of the Assemblies of God Theological Seminary with a master's in Ministry and Leadership. He and his wife, Stephanie, have two daughters and reside in Springfield, Missouri.

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