

Small Church Youth Ministry Workshops celebrate 10th anniversary

*By Lindsey Williams
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WIGGINS, Miss. – On Oct. 24, the Mississippi Baptist Convention Board's (MBCB) Small Church Youth Ministry Workshops celebrated its 10th anniversary and 100th training at First Church, Wiggins. Facilitated by Gary Permenter of Gary Permenter Ministries and Ken Hall, student ministry consultant for the MBCB, these trainings, geared toward rural churches, have equipped more than 1,700 youth workers from 670 Mississippi Baptist churches.

Hall and Permenter have known each other for years, having served as youth ministers at two different churches in Columbus simultaneously. Permenter's vocation centers around speaking, particularly to small churches, while Hall leverages his connections through the MBCB. Their shared passion for supporting youth ministry volunteers has provided resources and encouragement to many struggling ministries.

A Vision for Volunteers

"When I first began traveling and speaking, I set a policy that I would accept any invitations, regardless of their ability to pay," said Permenter. "I grew up in a small church in West Point, and I know that the majority of churches in our state tend to be smaller. I wanted to be available for those churches, to serve any event they would allow me to speak in."



Youth ministry staff and volunteers gather for the 100th Small Church Youth Ministry Workshop held Oct. 24 at First Church, Wiggins. (Photo credit: Tanner Cade)

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Permenter approached Hall with the idea of offering specialized training. “I give all the credit for these workshops to Ken because he saw the need and championed them,” said Permenter. “He went to bat to do something brand new at the Baptist building and got the funding. We started by scheduling three workshops as an experiment, unsure if daytime workers would drive out of their way for a two-hour evening training.”

Humble Beginnings

“In the fall of 2014, our very first workshop was held at First Church, Vardaman,” said Hall. “I asked the church to provide drinks and a meeting space, and we brought dinner. We didn’t have a registration, so we had no idea how many people would attend. Well, at that first one, only two people showed up besides me and Gary. But we knew these workshops were going to be good because Gary had prepared some directions if there wasn’t much discussion.

“He started by asking, ‘What is one topic you hoped we’d talk about tonight?’ The evening became a valuable, ministry-centered discussion between the two guests and us. On the way home, Gary and I called each other and knew we had hit on something big.”

As attendance increased, the workshops evolved. “We invited churches to bring their youth Sunday school teachers, small group leaders, and trip chaperones – anyone involved in youth ministry,” said Hall. “Each workshop has been discussion-based. Gary always opens the floor for others to provide input, which fosters a great exchange of ideas.”

A Format That Works

“We structure these meetings so attendees can share input and feel confident that their needs will be addressed,” explained Permenter. “The support among attendees has been amazing. At a recent workshop in Kosciusko, we ended at 8:15, but people were still talking and exchanging contacts when I left at 9. These workshops are more than just trainings – they’re building partnerships.

“One of the greatest aspects of these workshops is that each one is unique. Sometimes the attendees are Sunday school teachers seeking curriculum advice. Other times, pastors come looking for youth ministers. We’ve discussed mental health issues among teenagers and heard student ministers open up about personal struggles.

“The most inspiring part for me,” continued Permenter, “is seeing how caring and committed these volunteers are. Many juggle other jobs and personal responsibilities but still invest in their church’s youth. I always leave these events inspired by the dedication of these volunteers.”

A Legacy of Service

“For me, this is the most fulfilling thing we do in student ministry,” said Hall. “Whether we have two or 40 attendees, the fellowship and encouragement are incredible. I’m excited about the future of these workshops and grateful for the Cooperative Program funds that make them possible. The program allows us to offer these workshops at no cost to attendees or host churches, and we even provide dinner.”

“I am grateful for Mississippi Baptists, and especially for Ken’s advocacy,” said Permenter. “These workshops started as an idea, but they couldn’t have succeeded without Ken’s support and the MBCB’s affirmation. It’s wonderful to see how God works through our collaborative efforts.”

Impact for Generations

Shawn Parker, executive director-treasurer of the MBCB, underscored the importance of ministering to small churches. "These workshops are critical because most of our churches are smaller in size," said Parker. "This is a vital way we can encourage and invest in some of the most effective churches in one of the most strategic areas of ministry. I'm genuinely thankful for Ken Hall and Gary Permenter for their faithful service through these 100 training events. Their influence will be felt for generations."

Upcoming Workshops

- **Nov. 7:** Antioch Baptist Church, Bay Springs
- **Nov. 14:** Seminary Baptist Church, Seminary
- **Jan. 16:** New Zion Baptist Church, Crystal Springs
- **Feb. 6:** Liberty Baptist Church, Waynesboro
- **Feb. 27:** Forest Baptist Church, Forest
- **March 20:** Ingomar Baptist Church, New Albany

Details:

- **Time:** 6–8:15 p.m.
- **Dinner:** Provided to those who pre-register three days before the event
- **Register:** Visit tinyurl.com/smallchurchms