

## The Youth Worker as Explorer

A New Way of Looking at Youth Ministry

These days in ministry we are called to be explorers, which requires us to be brave, wonder, and try new things. As we discern how best to minister to and with our youth today, we find some things will work and others will not. So before going straight into the programming piece, it may be helpful to ask yourself these questions:

- What do our young people need?
- Where is their suffering?
- What is the Good News our youth need to hear and experience?
- What do they need from the church?
- What do they NOT need?

Some answers might include:

- **NEED:** Love, support, mentors, healthy relationships with peers, belonging, sleep, physical activity, routines, space to shape values and identity, and life skills.
- **SUFFERING:** Mental health conditions in themselves and friends like anxiety, depression, and self-harm. The pandemic disrupting their childhood milestones and sense of security. Their families experiencing loss and suffering because of the pandemic like financial strain, substance abuse, divorce, and death of loved ones. Youth may be in pain from the drive for perfection which includes busyness, the illusions of social media, and pressure from adults, teams, and schools.
- **GOOD NEWS:** God loves them. Jesus is with them in the suffering. God has a steadfast presence in our lives despite what is going on in the world. A broken and suffering world is not a punishment from God. In God, we find our belonging. Even in the darkest days of life, our faith offers us hope.
- **CHURCH:** Caring adults who invest in knowing them, a safe place to practice their values, a place to belong just as they are, and a place to try out adult roles and leadership.
- **DO NOT NEED:** Shame, guilt, busyness, sleep disruption, or placating answers.

With all this in mind, how do we offer meaningful ministry to our youth? They still need enough quality and quantity of time together to build relationships with each other, youth leaders, and with God. Time nurturing these relationships establishes trust, honesty, respect, and belonging. Yet, the models of weekly youth group - Wednesday night bible study, lock-ins, and retreats - might just be too much for today's over-programmed and over-pressured young people.

Here are some adjustments to consider to your youth ministry where you **do less** and still **minister fully**.

- Meet less often and take weeks off.
- Meet in short series around a topic.
- Shorten meeting lengths.
- Meet after worship when they might already be there.
- Play more – it is healing!
- Offer mental health coping activities like journaling, praying, meditation, breathing.
- Integrate youth into the larger church.
- Look at patterns of your youth. When is it hardest for them to make time for youth group? Cancel it during those times.

- Instead of having youth group at church year-round, go to them. Cancel youth group for a period of time and show up at games, recitals, plays, and performances instead. Invite other youth to join your youth leadership team in this practice.

Here is one example of what this new model of youth ministry could look like:

- **August / September**
  - o 1 fun event that lasts a couple of hours to build community, play, provide service, and have fun together.
- **Fall**
  - o 5-6 youth group gatherings for 1 hour.
  - o Youth Retreat – 1 night, with the opportunity to sleep in, play, learn, and build relationships.
- **December**
  - o NOTHING. They have exams, parties, travel, and so on.
- **Winter**
  - o 2-4 youth group gatherings for 1 hour.
  - o 1 fun event that lasts a couple of hours.
- **Spring**
  - o Spring is so busy with sports, spring break, end-of-year events, exams and more. This is a good time for youth leaders and other youth to show up to support youth outside the church at games, recitals, plays, and so on. This is in place of youth group at church. It is on-the-road support. You also get time with parents in the stands and youth feel valued, supported, and loved.
- **Summer**
  - o A mission trip or youth conference is a great way to build community, get deeper in faith, and prepare your youth for the school year ahead.
- **Year Round**
  - o Find ways to integrate youth into the ministry and leadership of the larger church.

These days it is good and faithful work to do less programming for our young people. It is good and faithful ministry to cancel youth group and make space to get out of the building to where our youth are. Ministering to young people today is a “less is more” strategy and God is showing up in all these places.

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