

Youth Ministry Proposal

Background

Families are busier than ever. Most days have multiple choices of activities. We have Google calendars and other apps to try to keep track of everyone's schedules. School, work, afterschool jobs, bands, choirs, sports, arts, book clubs, and when there's time, friends, dates and maybe some family. Church is also part of the busyness of our lives – Sunday school, worship, committees, youth group, retreats, mission trips, volunteering. When you put it all together, I'm not sure how parents know where to be and when – honestly, many of them don't!

Everyone and everything is pulling for your time. Coaches insist players be at every practice. Directors insist actors be at every rehearsal. Teachers insist students complete every homework assignment. At church, however, we don't insist – at least not at North. Because it's not required or insisted upon, church often gets put on the back burner. "I'll go when school settles down." "I'll come back when baseball season is over." "I can come once a month for now." It's easy to set church aside because it's free and it isn't a requirement to get into college.

Other leaders can guilt parents and teens into committing to their program. Churches can too, but I don't think that's the way the church needs to work. I know some families do feel guilty for not attending more often or making their kids commit to church activities. Some teens get out of the habit and then struggle coming back because they aren't sure they'll fit in anymore. Showing up once or twice a month makes consistency in relationships and programming hard for everyone. So, I have an idea that came up for me during my sabbatical.

New Format

Instead of overbooking families' schedules, instead of families feeling guilty for not attending as much, let's make our programs work FOR families, not AGAINST them. To begin with, Sunday night youth group will meet twice a month. We'll go back to the longer format of 2.5 hours. Each gathering will be it's own, independent program. These will consist of dinner, games, interactive conversations, music and prayer. Because we will meet twice a month, there are less meals to coordinate, less volunteers to recruit, and less strain on families' calendars.

Sunday night youth group is just the entry point to a deeper connection with the church. The next step is small groups – interest and conversation groups. First, interest groups: We have adults in the church who love to cook, so why not gather a group of youth in their home for cooking lessons once a month? The youth learn a new skill and new relationships are built. We have adults in the church who like to play sports, so why not organize a pick up game once a month? The youth engage in an activity they love and build new friendships. We have adults in the church who love to watch movies, so why not start a monthly movie club? Select a movie, watch it together then talk about it.

It's not hard. This isn't rocket science. This is about gathering people together who like the same thing. Once the people are gathered, conversations start, friendships grow, and connections are made.

Second, conversations groups: Some youth want to have deep conversations about faith, culture and politics. I've seen these passions come out in Sunday school and youth group. They enjoy talking about topics that really matter to them. So, let's gather those youth together with an adult that knows how to lead a small group. Let's encourage them to meet a few times a month and just see where it goes. Some groups may fizzle, and that's okay. Other groups, however, may find just what they've been looking for and want to stay together.

Now we have Sunday school weekly, youth group twice a month and small groups happening all the time. In addition to this, we'll continue our bigger monthly events, like retreats, day outings, and service projects.

Logistics

Some adults really enjoy the large group setting and do well leading games and conversations. Other adults prefer small groups, getting to know a few people on a smaller scale. With this new format, there's something for everyone. In fact, I think we'll be able to reach a larger scale of members because they can pick what style of ministry works for them.

I will continue to oversee and organize Sunday night youth group and Sunday school. I will recruit volunteers, select or write the curriculum, organize meals, etc. I will also recruit and train adult small group leaders. Using the member interest surveys, I will pinpoint adults who I think have the gifts needed to lead a small group and discover their passions. Once the groups are created, it will be up to the leader, parents and youth to organize and set their meeting times. I will check in with the leaders monthly to see how the groups are going, who is involved and provide any additional resources they may need.

I will also oversee and organize all the larger monthly activities. These will include ice skating, service projects, Lenten retreat, high school retreat, mission trips, middle school overnight and hayride.

Sunday night youth group will meet on the 2nd and 4th Sunday of each month from 5:00-7:30 pm. We'll play games from 5:00-5:30. Dinner will be at the usual time of 5:30-6:00. From 6:00-7:00 we'll have guest speakers, Bible study and interactive conversations. We'll conclude with music and prayer from 7:00-7:30.

Further Notes

I understand that for some this new format may be disappointing. Some youth and families really enjoy having youth group every Sunday evening. For others, this new format will be a relief. Their calendars will ease up a bit and they won't feel guilty for not attending every time. I think this "less is more" approach to youth ministry will actually create more

commitment. Youth will want to be at every youth group gathering because it's not there every week.

For those that are disappointed, I hope they will take seriously the importance of the small groups. These can be what you make them to be – gather your church friends (include friends from school too) and come up with a small group idea that you all are interested in. We'll find an adult to join you! The small groups provide a way for youth to make church what they want it to be. Also, since this time on Sunday nights was already set-aside on the calendar, perhaps they can use this time to be together as a family, to reconnect and focus on each other.

In regards to the small groups, although they may not appear overtly "religious" to start, I know faith formation will be taking place. First, small group leaders will be trained in incorporating faith into everyday conversation. Second, small group leaders will be resourced with materials that relate to their small group topic and it's connection to faith. Finally, God is present in all of it. Jesus didn't overload conversations with scripture and theology. He just showed up and was present. In the end, that's all I'm asking of our small group leaders – be present. Show up for the youth. Be present for them. Be one more adult connection in their lives – someone they can turn to in times of celebration and concern.

Final Thoughts

North UMC youth ministry has conducted programming in virtually the same way for over 20 years. I was a senior in high school 20 years ago – we didn't have cell phones, the term "social media" or cyber bullying. We still had pen pals. Sure, we were busy then, but it didn't feel quite the same as today's busyness. With all that has changed in our culture in 20 years, I think it's time we recognize the need to make changes within our church culture as well. Most of the larger churches in our area no longer meet as a large group on a weekly basis. Churches like St. Luke's UMC and Second Presbyterian have moved on to new models that reflect the needs of parents and youth today. I don't think it's necessary to always follow in their footsteps, however, I do think it's important to pay attention to the trends and acknowledge what works. I believe this format does that.

In order to reach the youth we're losing, we have to make some changes. We have to recognize that what we're currently doing isn't meeting the needs of many of our youth. They have drifted for a variety of reasons. I believe that these changes and new opportunities will give the church a way to reach out to them in new and fresh ways – ways they can and want to relate to. I hope the church will give me a chance to try it. At this point, I don't think we have anything to lose and have much to gain. We'll try it for the spring semester (2017) then evaluate in early June.

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December 2016