



UNITED CHURCH
OF CHRIST



a just world for all

Reimagining Youth Ministry

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FAITH INFO
FAITH EDUCATION, INNOVATION & FORMATION

Reimagining for Tomorrow's Youth Conference Report

DENOMINATIONAL SURVEY

In the Fall of 2021, a denominational survey was mailed to approximately 750 churches that have a "youth minister" listed on the database. From that, 122 individuals completed the survey to help gather vital information on the state of youth ministry in the United Church of Christ. 66% of respondents have been in their current role for a minimum of four years, which means they began before the rise of the Covid-19 pandemic and have noticed trends and patterns that are both positive and negative within the Church that impacts their work. Additionally, 47% of congregations represented have youth groups that regularly have at least 10 youth present for youth group or faith formation activities. All youth groups have been negatively impacted by the pandemic and respondents frequently listed the challenge of getting youth back into the church for gatherings as a top concern.

For full survey results, [CLICK HERE](#).

EVENT

During the early onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, Faith INFO offered the first gathering of youth ministers and workers in over ten years. Many learnings came from the event and the desire for connection was strongly recommended as a way to facilitate professional development and offer resources. Entering the third year of the pandemic and having to cancel two iterations of the National Youth Event, the Minister for Youth and Young Adult Engagement felt the call to again gather youth ministers, volunteers, and faith formation leaders to seriously engage the topic of innovation and reimagining the future of youth ministry. Our goal was to gather 100 individuals for two days for workshops, visioning and gathering information for large denominational events geared towards youth to come up with ideas that are relevant for youth moving forward.

Rev. Jill Olds, UCC Local Church Pastor and Director of the Yale Youth Ministry Institute, served as the conference facilitator and offered plenary sessions focusing on Ezekiel 37 and the valley of dry bones. Many parts of youth ministry can feel dry and lifeless, but there is hope that there will still be life for our local youth ministries, conferences and national setting as we build a just world for future generations.

In addition to Rev. Olds' leadership, several workshops were offered by people engaged in youth ministry from both the United Church of Christ and the Presbyterian Church, USA as well as several members of national staff. Additionally, the three executive ministers brought greetings and encouragement to participants at various times throughout the conference.

Through several small group sessions and the world café model, important conversations took place that highlighted some of the challenges facing youth ministers, the mission priorities of today's youth, hopes for regional and national youth events, and what is needed from

conference and national staff to faithfully engage those doing ministry in the local church. Many of these learnings and desires are addressed below.

STATISTICS

- 205 Registered Participants
- 5 Denominations and 2 Organizations
 - United Church of Christ
 - United Methodist Church
 - Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
 - Presbyterian Church, USA
 - Nondenominational
 - Sacred Design Lab
 - Practical Resources for Churches
- Largest UCC Conference Representation
 - Southern New England 26
 - Illinois 18
 - Wisconsin 16
- Ministry Settings
 - 83.4% local church/youth minister
 - 6.3% Other
 - 3.4% UCC National Staff
 - 2.4% Network of Wider Church Youth Ministry (NOWCYM)
 - 2.4% Outdoor Ministries Association
 - 2% Presenter

TESTIMONY & REFLECTIONS

As a follow-up to the event, all participants received a link to complete an event summary about what worked well, what didn't and to gauge what follow-up steps would be useful.

One question that was asked of participants was "what moved you throughout this conference?".

- "I appreciated the worship, the videos, and the speakers. It was a great conference, and worth the time"
- "Full of compassion and affirmation"

Another question was "what was your favorite part?".

- "The theme of offering a prophetic word to dry bones, trusting that will breathe new life into them in God's own time, was comforting and inspiring."
- "Connecting and reconnecting with people but it wouldn't have happened without good programming and workshops."

The event was a major success. Areas for improvement were focused more on the communication and timing of the event. People continued to register throughout the event because someone who was attending shared the information with them. People would like more timely information when events are being hosted by the national setting and that there would be options for individuals who are not in full-time ministry/volunteers who do not have the flexibility to attend conferences during the day.

LEARNINGS

Curricula

Several years ago, the United Church of Christ decided to give up writing its own curricula for a variety of reasons. Those gathered for the conference feel there has never been a clear reason as to why the decision has been made nor offered an alternative way to resource congregations for the needs they now have.

From the survey, we were able to gather the social justice priorities that are most important to young people at this time. The topics that were most mentioned, in no particular order, include:

- Refugees and resettlement work
- LGBTIQ+ rights
- Black Lives Matter/racial justice
- Homelessness
- Mental health
- Environmental justice

- Gun safety (especially in schools)
- Covid

As congregations attempt to educate their youth, there has either been no denominational resources on these topics OR they have not been effectively shared where people know they exist. Additionally, with the rise of the Ukraine-Russia conflict, there have been two youth ministers who have reached out to ask what resources the United Church of Christ was prepared to share.

Confirmation

The last confirmation curriculum written by the United Church of Christ was published in by Rev. Thomas Dipko more than 15 years ago. In the absence of an updated curriculum, congregations have been left to either use resources from another and less progressive denomination, piece together their own from several resources or forego the confirmation process entirely. Over the last three years, churches have continually voiced their frustration with the denomination exiting the curriculum process and how that has negatively impacted ministry at the local church level. This sentiment was again expressed by participants at the Reimagining Youth Ministry Conference and in the youth ministry survey. One respondent was very direct in their feedback and said "Provide resources for local churches for great youth Bible Study and mission. I would LOVE to see our church return to creating curricula that work in the local church, starting with Confirmation. Because there is nothing offered now, congregations are going with Awana and very conservative options for Sunday school. Families want their children to learn the stories of faith, and these conservative options are the only ones being published." Another wrote "Confirmation materials published in this century would be appreciated, but materials need to be grounded in life in the local church. Dribble and babble, or materials written at the college reading level won't sell."

Confirmation is central to the faith formation of young people is used by the majority of our local churches (95.76% of survey respondents responded that they still offer confirmation in some form).

Ideas and needs for confirmation curriculum not only include an updated and revised program, but also current culturally relevancy and adding theologically rooted service options that speak to the true mission of the church. The new curriculum could contain supporting materials to accompany text; including multimedia supports (short videos- think of Rob Bell's Nooma videos), challenges that incorporate youth's desire to use social media, a process to develop life-long mentors to aid in the transition from child to youth to young adult and beyond and overviews of the growing movements within the United Church of Christ (ie: Just Peace, Our Whole Lives, etc.). Along with the traditional elements of a confirmation program, others added that its purpose needs to include elements of deeper spirituality (spiritual disciples and groundings that can withstand faith crises). While it is important to identify what we as a denomination believe, there

is also the reality that each individual goes through their own spiritual journey that waxes and wanes between deep commitment and periods (or settling on) atheistic in nature. The United Church of Christ is made up of individuals at different places on the faith continuum and confirmation could address this as well.

Events

Currently, outside of the yearly opportunities offered through the Outdoor Ministries Association of the United Church of Christ, there are three other large youth gatherings offered: National Youth Event, Regional Youth Events and Youth@Synod. If no changes are made to the frequency of gatherings or other impacts due to the ongoing pandemic, the next time each of these would be offered would be 2026 (NYE), 2024 (RYE) and 2023 (Y@S). This means an entire 10 year period will have passed since the last National Youth Event. Knowing that youth are not returning to local churches in the ways initially thought and hoped, there is serious exploration that needs to happen to determine the importance of large denominational gatherings, especially in the ways they have been historically organized.

During the conference, a poll was taken to ask participants simply "is National Youth Event relevant to the youth you currently serve?" 51% of respondents said yes, while 49% said no. Further discussion revealed challenges of which the denomination has long been aware: poor communication about the event to allow groups to fundraise, the high cost associated with the event including registration and travel and the timing interferes with other activities including camp, high school summer sports camps, family obligations. Surprisingly, other feedback included the frustration that NYE does not do a good job of training youth to be justice workers, worshippers or to take practical learnings back to the local church or conference. Similar statements were made about the Youth@Synod program.

A few individuals who mentioned a desire to serve on a smaller team in conjunction with the Minister for Youth & Young Adult Engagement to plan the next national events for youth.

Networking & Collaboration

Deepening connection is an ongoing desire for youth ministers and volunteers. A great strength of the online conferences is bringing together a diverse group of individuals with a shared calling to share best practices, identify common needs and exchange ideas and resources. Two conferences were recently held, yet there is a desire for more and at different times. Several conference attendees mentioned having had to take off from their full-time professional jobs to attend the conference but felt the need to because of the topics offered. There is a desire for more frequent gatherings throughout the year.

For the remainder of 2022, the Minister for Youth and Young Adult Engagement will work with the Network of Wider Church Youth Ministries to offer monthly virtual gatherings beginning in March. Times will alternate between afternoons and evenings. Gatherings will be focused on innovative models of ministry and various topics. At the time of this report, the tentative schedule is

April 2022 Innovation Gathering

May 2022 Topic-Based Gathering: Mental Health

June 2022 Innovation Gathering

July 2022 Break

August 2022 Break

September 2022 Topic-Based Gathering: Confirmation

October 2022 Innovation Gathering

November 2022 Topic-Based Gathering: Racial Justice

December 2022 Break

Topic-based gatherings will be offered on the 4th Saturday of each month at 3:00 pm EST, while the innovation gatherings will be offered on the 4th Monday of each month at 2:00 pm EST.

Final Thoughts

I am proud of the team that worked together to successfully host the Reimagining Conference. It brought together nearly 200 people who are, in various ways, committed to the faithful development of youth into their young adult years. This is the first time in my tenure that I have been able to clearly hear what youth ministers want and need. This brings clarity around my role and what will be needed moving forward.

The national setting is called to strengthen and equip the local church and the role of Minister for Youth and Young Adult Engagement is to equip, network and resource those who do youth and young adult ministry in any context of the church. This includes, but is not limited to, working in partnership with the Network of Wider Church Youth Ministry to help youth ministers learn to engage themselves and their churches in justice work and the priorities of the national setting, offer training and innovative models of ministry that provide hopeful ideas for the future and curating gatherings that reflect the diverse nature of the church for leadership development, worship, best practices and resourcing.

On the heels of a global pandemic that has lasted two years and listening to the conversations of this event, it is clear that the support needed for youth and those who work with them will only increase. With multiple ministries falling under the Minister for Youth and Young Adult

Engagement there will need to be some shifts in workload to accommodate this new reality we find ourselves living in to best facilitate the resourcing and support that are needed.