



## **2023 Reset for Renewal: Wrestling with Purpose Report**

**MARCH 2023**

**WRITTEN BY REV. TRAYCE L. POTTER, MINISTER FOR CHILDREN & YOUTH ENGAGEMENT**

In 2019 a small group of youth ministers from across the country began meeting to plan an in-person conference for those serving local churches as youth ministers and leaders in the United Church of Christ. A location had been set, a budget approved, registration created, and news was ready to be released in early 2020. We now know that those plans would be indefinitely suspended as originally envisioned because of the pandemic turned endemic of Covid-19. However, being true to the ethos of youth ministry, we pivoted and launched what is now in its fourth year: a virtual conference called Reset for Renewal. Each year the planning team selects a theme that is relevant to those in youth ministry as a point of connection and to foster the understanding that we are all in this work together. We have experienced these gatherings breaking down the sense of isolation many have in their ministry and foster a spirit of collegiality and support while equipping youth ministers with tools to continue to serve in congregational ministry with young people.

### **2023 Event**

With so much happening in the final quarter of 2022 and the early parts of 2023 there was some uncertainty over the ability to offer this year's conference. However, with strong support from the Network of Wider Church Youth Ministries Executive Team, the decision was made to scale down programming to fit a zoom fatigued society, while still offering the support and empowerment that are central to Reset for Renewal.

During the 2023 Reset for Renewal: Wrestling with Purpose, we were able to bring in a diverse group of presenters and facilitators that provided very hands on ways to engage in ministry with young people around relevant and pressing topics that impact their life.

In the opening plenary we had Dr. Erik Carter present on the topic of From Barriers to Belonging: Serving Youth with and Without Disabilities Well Together, where we were challenged to think about how youth who are disabled or are not included and valued in their settings and how the church can make adjustments toward immersive experiences.

We then had Ms. Amy McNicholas and Ms. Felicia Houston share about Trauma and Resiliency for Young People. Participants learned that nearly 35 million youth (birth through the age of 17) have experienced some traumatic event that impacts them in physically, mentally, and socially. As we engage in youth ministry, we must see young people and ask the question "what has happened to this child?" instead of the default "what is wrong with them?"

The final plenary session was focused on the work of youth ministers and congregations to engage in antiracism work by Rev. Zuniga from Crossroads who shared around the theme of: Dissatisfied with the Status Quo: Antiracism is Liberation.

We also offered two workshops around the new antiracism curriculum being designed by Crossroads through a partnership with the Network of Wider Church Youth Ministry and Faith INFO, and a second workshop led by Rev. Dr. Sarah Lund on Trauma and Spirituality.

Bookending our beginning and ending each day, we participated in worship led by The Many.

### **Statistics**

- 47 Registered Participants
- 4 Denominations & 2 organizations
  - United Church of Christ
  - Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
  - American Baptist
  - Nondenominational
  - Baylor University
  - Crossroads
- Largest UCC Conference Representation
  - Minnesota
  - Wisconsin
  - Southern New England
- Ministry Settings
  - 77% local church/youth minister
  - 4% UCC National Staff
  - 11% Network of Wider Church Youth Ministry (NOWCYM)
  - 8% Presenter

### **Testimony & Reflections**

At the conclusion of the event, we offered a survey to gauge the relevancy of the conference, presenters and to note if expectations were met that participants had. Comments from participants supported the idea that we exceed those expectations and respondents walked away feeling that they gained something from the two days they gathered.

One participant highlighted relationship building as the best part of the conference, saying it was “Seeing so many other people. Sometimes this work can feel really isolating, at least in relation to other adults doing the same work. It was lovely to know that there are lots of other people doing this work across the country as well.”

Another highlighted the theme as a central reason for registering and attending, saying “I came into this conference to remember why I'm doing this work. And to be reminded that the work that I'm doing is impactful. It really was. I really-really enjoyed being part of this conference.”.

For expectations, one participant noted “That I would take "nuggets" of information that I would use immediately in my interactions with youth, that I would be presented with new thoughts to consider when planning for future youth programming, that I would feel supported, nourished, and inspired by being with others that are doing this work. And yes, these hopes were met in unexpected and incredible ways.”.

## **Learnings**

Based upon a pre-event survey and reflections during and post event, there are four key themes that youth leaders are struggling with.

- **Innovative Ideas for Today's Youth**
  - Innovative ideas that are needed range from how to get youth back to church, to moving beyond the traditional games and pizza that were offered pre-pandemic.
- **Connecting with Parents**
  - For youth that are involved in the church, there seems to be a disconnect with the parents finding a place within the church also. Parents are simply dropping youth off for events and then leaving to do other things. This can lead to a disconnect in information sharing, create problems with finding volunteers and a lack of relationships that can benefit the youth.
- **Teaching Sacred Truths and Our Faith**
  - This year's conference again highlighted the struggle of finding resources, especially those that reflect the ideas and commitments of the United Church of Christ. Last year, after the Reset for Renewal Conference, I wrote a multi-day curriculum for youth leaders around service projects which generated more than 280 downloads. The need is there, and we have a commitment to resource those serving our young people.
- **Offering Hope & Healing**
  - The last several years have been trying from social justice issues surrounding people of color, women's/reproductive rights, environmental justice concerns and the Covid-19 pandemic. All these issues piled on top of puberty and the normal stressors of school, relationships and belonging have led youth looking for hope and joy wherever possible. Statistics reveal how dire the situation is with the alarming rates of suicide (and attempts) and increased drug use. Youth leaders are struggling to find meaningful ways to offer support and healing for those they serve.

## **Networking & Collaboration**

Of the 47 registered participants, 17 have previously attended Reset for Renewal. This means nearly 64% of our attendees are new this year which shows the monthly virtual youth ministry gatherings and regular social media (Facebook) posts are reaching more people than before.

Additionally, because of our small group/breakout sessions there were some powerful connections around the topics, specifically antiracism, several youth ministers were able to connect about partnering together to enhance their work.

## **Final Thoughts**

After the 2022 Reset for Renewal conference there was a strong push to highlight innovative practices and ministries around youth. We were able to bring in speakers who took a little and created something new and powerful for the church and the communities in which they are each located. While these sessions were able to spark new possibilities for many of our attendees, this year's conference highlighted the juxtaposition of that movement. A lot of our local churches are not ready for the innovative ministry conversations and are craving the nuts and bolts of youth ministry. Because youth groups were one of the hardest hit in the pandemic, many are struggling with how to bring youth back to church and then how to create safe spaces for them to just breathe. There is a deep wrestling over the true purpose of youth ministry (and even the church) that need to be answered, or at least thoughtfully engaged and leaders resourced.

As we walk away from this event, I am encouraged knowing that our goals were met, youth ministers were encouraged and there is great promise for the 2024 event, which may be in person.