

Re-Launching Youth Ministry after COVID

Great Plains Conference

This document provides guidelines for re-launching Youth Ministry programming after extended periods of social distancing. It is a supplemental document to be implemented along with the Great Plains Conference's Best Practices for Returning to our Houses of Worship.

To Gather, or Not To Gather?

- What are your State Guidelines?
- What are your Local Guidelines?
- What is your School District doing?
- Has your church re-opened for worship yet?
- Many churches cease regular youth programming over the summer. If that has been the tradition, please do not try to add something this summer.
- We advise against large group in-person events and trips, including but not limited to, overnight mission trips.

It Won't Look the Same

“Look! I’m doing a new thing; now it sprouts up; don’t you recognize it? I’m making a way in the desert, paths in the wilderness.” – Isaiah 43:19 (CEB Version)

After spending so much time isolated and under lockdown, it is understandable that kids and their families are excited about returning to normalcy. The reality is, though, things will not and cannot look the same in Youth Ministry. Much of what we do includes engaging in activities like crafts, games, singing, and snacks within close proximity of one another. Youth Ministry – and really, all ministry – must adapt to a new way of being. As a ministry leader, we encourage you to allow time and space for people to grieve this loss, while also pointing to Jesus, who is called the trailblazer of our faith. Now is the time for innovation and creativity! Take this time to audit your Youth Ministry. What was working, and what wasn't? What will need to change, and what could you afford to prune completely? What new thing might emerge? Spend time in prayer and conversation with others to discern. Consider the following:

- Crafts
 - Communal bins for crayons and other craft supplies should be removed.
 - Provide craft supplies for each individual youth that they may use. Place what will be needed in a ziplock bag for each youth.
 - Consider simpler crafts that require fewer supplies.
 - Consider how you will disinfect the supplies that are left at church.

- Provide a small box of some type for each child to leave their crayons, and other supplies in from week to week.
- Games and Singing
 - Many Youth Ministry games intentionally move people closer. These should not be played during this time. Games include, but are not limited to: Ninja, Duck Duck Goose, Tag, Sardines, Hide and Seek, Gaga Ball, Hungry Hungry Hippos, any Hand Clapping Games, Thumb Wars, Rock Paper Scissors.
 - Note that congregational singing is discouraged in the original Best Practices document. Please apply this to YouthMin also.
- Refreshments
 - Suspend snacks or meals during YouthMin programming.

Phases of Relaunching Kids Ministry Programming

No matter the size of your church or Youth Ministry, we advise against relaunching Youth Ministry immediately. Please consider your relaunch as phasing into a new way of doing ministry together, over four phases. There is no definitive timeline on these phases. Rather, be in communication with your pastor, volunteers, and families. Make decisions for the good of the whole, based on accurate data provided by your state and county.

Phase One – Intergenerational Worship and Strategic Preparation

This is the time to fully embrace intergenerational ministry! Our goal as youth ministry leaders is to equip young people to take ownership of their own faith formation outside of the church building, so let's lean into this model. Here are some ideas to do this:

- When your local church begins reopening for in-person worship, do not add age-level programming yet. Continue doing the things you've been doing virtually.
- Provide Youth Activities that can be taken home.
 - Think creatively here! How might you turn an activity bag into another resource for youth to do discipleship throughout the week at home? Talk with your pastor about their sermons – what are some ways to reinforce the scripture for the week?
- Incorporate youth into worship – scripture reading, liturgy, greeters, even pre-recorded announcements or giving moments.

While youth worship with families and continue faith formation at the home, think strategically about the next phase. Use this time to prepare your space for phase two. Here are some guidelines:

- Deep clean and disinfect entire YouthMin wing
- Declutter. Secure all loose items in bins, cabinets, and other storage containers, inaccessible to youth.

- Remove all items that cannot be cleaned or disinfected well (including, but not limited to, couches, recliners, bean bags, chairs with cushions, anything plush)
- Determine how many people can be seated with a minimum of 6 feet between persons (side to side and front to back) in each room. Consider a pre-register or RSVP strategy to ensure compliance with capacity and social distancing guidelines.
- Designate sitting spaces with painter's tape to comply with social distancing.
- Stock each room with adequate disinfectant, hand sanitizer, and other essential cleaning products.

Part of thinking strategically includes reviewing and updating all policies and procedures. If you do not have set policies, now is the time to adopt them! Here's a list of some policies to review:

- Registration Policy (including an RSVP protocol if you must limit the number of youth that can come)
- Sick Youth Policy (fever-free without medication for at least 24 hours)
- Youth Hygiene Policy (handwashing, etc.)
- Special Needs Policies (how will this affect families with special needs for accommodation?)
- Check In/Out Protocol (we cannot have youth running throughout the building)
- Communications Protocol (how will all this be shared with families?)
- Volunteer Training (All volunteers must comply with the new policies and procedures at all times)
- Volunteer Retention
 - Contact all volunteers and gauge their interest in serving during this transitional time
 - Many volunteers in YouthMin are part of vulnerable populations, so have a plan in place for fewer volunteers, while maintaining Safe Gatherings policies.

Phase Two – Small Groups

Continue to emphasize and celebrate Intergenerational Worship as primary faith formation for youth. During this phase, organize your youth into small groups that meet with an adult volunteer outside of the church building. They may continue to meet virtually or in homes, as long as the groups socially distance and stay under. Here are some guidelines for transitional YouthMin programming:

- Contact every parent/guardian of youth to gauge interest, fears, and concerns. Be ready to answer difficult questions.
- Before and after each gathering, sanitize all surfaces that have been touched.
- No hugs, handshakes, or high fives – air fives and friendly waves are great!
- Take temperature as folks come in
- Encourage youth and volunteers wear masks.

Phase Three – Monitored Small Gatherings

Please keep in mind that there is no definitive timeline for these phases. As state, local, and school district guidelines relax, it is possible that we may see a second “wave” that may require further social distancing. For that reason, please practice shrewdness while moving into Phase Three, which includes monitoring smaller group gatherings at the church.

- Contact every parent/guardian of youth to gauge interest, fears, and concerns. Be ready to answer difficult questions.
- Before and after each gathering, sanitize all surfaces that have been touched.
- Disinfect all doorknobs and bathrooms, microphones, remote controls, etc.
- Restrict access to water fountain usage by covering it completely with a sturdy plastic bag and taping it securely at the bottom.
- Indoor doors propped open
- No hugs, handshakes, or high fives – air fives and friendly waves are great!
- Take temperature as folks come in
- Encourage youth and volunteers wear masks.

Phase Four – Relaxing Precautions

This phase should only be implemented when local guidelines have relaxed enough that social distancing is lifted.

- Contact every parent/guardian of youth to gauge interest, fears, and concerns. Be ready to answer difficult questions.
- Continue to stay away from communal storage of all items.
- Remain in contact with pastor and other ministry leaders. Follow the church’s lead as social distancing and other precautions are loosened.