



# Missouri District

THE LUTHERAN CHURCH — MISSOURI SYNOD

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## Youth Ministry Resource

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*Go and make disciples... And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age." Matt. 28:20*

Youth ministry faces challenges to both programming (the ability to have events) and relationships (being together, in-person) as a community in Christ.

As of this moment I have not talked to a church worker who has gone back to a "normal" youth ministry schedule with Youth Group or Bible Class happening on campus in a youth room. As we look forward to being able to gather together, we face restrictions due to safety. Keep in mind that all of these ideas assume that you are wearing the proper face coverings or masks, keeping 6 ft. social distancing whenever possible, and proper sanitary practice like washing hands and using hand sanitizer. Here are some of the ways youth ministries have adjusted:

- **Outdoor Social Distancing Gatherings** (e.g. Ice Cream Socials, Fire Pits, etc. ) - any of these can be done either outdoors or in a large space (e.g. field or gym).
- **Social Distanced Service Projects within the Local Community** (e.g. local parks, camps and other ministries that can be served) - these have taken the place of out-of-state servant events that have been cancelled. Staying local reduces the time spent in cars or being together in confined spaces, and also places restrictions on groups (keeping them the same to reduce exposure and allow for contact tracing).
- **A game of social distancing "hide and seek" or a scavenger hunt** - the leader(s) set up in locations that allow for social distancing (parks, ice cream shops, etc.) and allow youth to come and find them.
- **Incorporating spiritual disciplines with activities** - being proactive about mental health is important. Depression and anxiety levels can increase as students are isolated. Exercise is one way to promote physical and mental health. One idea is to incorporate exercise and spiritual disciplines, like organizing a Prayer Walk, in order to promote spiritual, physical, and mental health.

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### Being Fishers of People

*Luke 5:5-11* <sup>5</sup> And Simon answered, "Master, we toiled all night and took nothing! But at your word I will let down the nets." <sup>6</sup> And when they had done this, they enclosed a large number of fish, and their nets were breaking. <sup>7</sup> They signaled to their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and



*filled both the boats, so that they began to sink...And Jesus said to Simon, "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching men." <sup>11</sup> And when they had brought their boats to land, they left everything and followed him.*

In this story we find Jesus giving the disciples their mission – to catch people rather than fish. We certainly know Jesus isn't talking about using nets, bait, and hooks in this process, but rather to follow His example of bringing the Gospel to all people. The disciples had a close relationship with Jesus, walking daily with Him, and we are called to do the same. No matter what kind of event or programming we have in our youth ministries, our ministry is about building relationships with Jesus and each other. In a world where we are dealing with COVID-19 and many physical restrictions our relationships might look a little different and methods may change but the mission is still at the forefront: we fish for people – especially those who are suffering.

One of the ways we have seen suffering increase is in growing mental health concerns for teenagers. Youth are experiencing different types of loss and isolation due to COVID-19 and it is important that we are aware of symptoms and encourage healthy mental health practices. We want to be vigilant in our interactions with you to take notice of symptoms of depression and anxiety. *(Please see the resources on depression and anxiety in teenagers at the end of the article)*

1. With the limited ability to have programming for some time (and maybe even continuing forward), how has your ministry focused more on relationships?
2. If you are reading this then there is a good chance you are the leader of youth ministry in your church. It does not fall on you to do all of the fishing! How can you encourage and then equip volunteers to use technology and other methods to reach students in youth ministry?

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## Safe Relationships

This phrase probably had a different connotation before COVID-19, but at this point physical safety from an invisible foe is paramount when having any ministry in person. However, you can't simply put youth ministry in a box and send it home. Relationships in youth ministry are fostered and built with individuals, and it is hard to do that without being present (or at least able to see one another). Oftentimes what one youth is comfortable with another is not, and what one parent is willing to allow their youth to attend another is not. This is going to be a difficult tension to manage for the foreseeable future, and we should consider others in our responses to the challenges we face.

Striving in less than ideal circumstances is nothing new for the church, though. One example of this is the early church, which faced many challenges, especially in Corinth. Paul is writing about whether it is permissible to eat food that was dedicated to idols. Now, we aren't talking about common foods found at a youth ministry lock-in, but rather the spirit of Paul's response to the Corinthian church. 1 Cor. 10:23-24 *"All things are lawful," but not all things are helpful. "All things are lawful," but not all things build up.* <sup>24</sup> *Let no one seek his own good, but the good of his neighbor.*

We may be perfectly within the law on certain guidelines set by our local governments, and yet, it might still make people uncomfortable. Families of those who suffer from autoimmune diseases, or perhaps have relatives in the medical field or who are essential will be more sensitive to restrictions or a lack thereof, and we should not simply brush off these concerns just because we can. In fact, Paul's response had nuance to it. A quick explanation is that if it (eating food offered idols, not wearing a mask, etc.)



offends those around you, then don't do it. If, however, you are in the comfort of your own home and family or a community, then go ahead. We cannot give a blanket "yes" or "no" answer because every church has a different context, just as every church Paul wrote had different issues that they faced.

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## Questions to Ask

1. Are there sensitive safety issues that your church has been faced with in the recent weeks as you have had discussions on opening up different ministries? Are there any safety issues that pertain to youth specifically that you should discuss with your ministry teams?
2. When it comes to safety, what concerns do you need to be more aware of when using technology frequently?
3. As you evaluate your current youth ministry plans and practices, are you identifying any Unnecessary Risks (e.g. meeting in a small youth room when you have outdoor space or gym to spread out)?

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## Casting a Wider Net

Continuing with the book of Luke we see how the disciples became fishers of men. Did people come from miles around to hear Peter's legendary wit or perhaps to see the Sons of Thunder (ok, maybe I would, it sounds awesome)? No, it was Jesus who brought people to Him. Jesus didn't just hang out at the synagogue waiting for people to come see Him, He moved to the people. In Luke 9 Jesus sends His disciples out to "proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal." The disciples may have felt unprepared and at times felt like they were fishing in uncharted waters when they were sent out in pairs. I think we can sympathize with them because in the past few months most of us have had to utilize technology more than ever before. It may have allowed for youth ministries to connect with students in ways they never have before, and in some cases more frequently than before. It is also true that we have experienced some Zoom fatigue, though it is still a tool we have in a larger tackle box for fishing! Perhaps second only to "unprecedented" is the phrase "a new normal" indicating that things will not go back to the way they were. We have an opportunity to explore new ways to engage our youth communities by heading into these uncharted seas of Zoom, Google hangouts, and other unknowns, rather than waiting for the fish to come into our boat (building). It is a time for innovation, and there will be trial and error in the process.

1. Are there areas where you can fish that you had previously not seen anything caught?
2. In what events or programs do you need to consider using new tools and methods in order to fish effectively?

We encourage you to develop your plan for your own community. Everyone is going to have a different setting and context they are working in. As much as we might love to have someone make the decision for us, an outside entity will not have the insight that your ministry teams have in your congregation.

Communication between staff is extremely important, especially with churches that have multiple ministry spaces, staff, or sites. We encourage frequent, honest communication among your ministry leaders using whatever leadership structures you have in place – pastor(s), other commissioned staff, school staff, boards, etc.

It would be best practices to make sure that your communication comes from a place of unity – whether it be a church and school, or simply different ministries with different leaders in your church.



## **SAFETY**

### **Screening for Symptoms –**

What protocol do you have for screening participants (both children and adults), staff, and volunteers?

Some things to consider:

- Temperature checks
- Self-Report Questionnaire

What do you do if someone in your ministry displays symptoms of being sick during a program? (fever, cough, shortness of breath, sore throat, runny nose, nasal congestion, headache, feeling unwell, unexplained rashes, vomiting or diarrhea within past 24 hours, skin or eye infections, chicken pox, mumps, measles, etc.)

- Is there a place for them to go to avoid exposing others?
- Will there be adequate staffing to handle a sickness?

### **Sanitation**

Do you have a plan to address...

- Sanitation of space, toys, and equipment?
- Use of shared spaces (e.g. Sunday school classes sharing rooms with a school)
- How is it best to handle drop off and pick up procedures?
- How frequently will common spaces be sanitized, and by who?

### **Physical/Social Distance and Contact Tracing**

- How will physical distancing be encouraged?
- Will there be a single-door entry method or staggered arrival times?
- What kind of attendance records will you keep in case anyone finds out they have contracted symptoms after an event?
- Are there shared supplies, or is there a need to provide individual supplies for certain activities to have proper sanitation procedures?
- What attempts are you making to keep groups at a gathering size recommended by local governmental guidelines?
- While grouped in smaller clusters, students will generally be expected to stay together with their small group and not mingle with other students. How will this be encouraged?

## **COMMUNICATION WITH FAMILIES**

- How is it best to encourage open communication with families, youth, leaders, and staff?
- How will helpful reminders be displayed on our campus so everyone understands that wellness and safety is the ultimate goal?

## **TIMING**

- When is the right time to begin meeting in person? There is not a simple answer to that question, so what factors are you considering?
- Please also consider that as the church we are setting a moral example for our people in how we respond to authority.

## **RISK MANAGEMENT**

- Are there less risky ways to implement the event? (e.g. outdoors as opposed to inside a smaller room)
- Are there restrictions being imposed by local government and/or the CDC?



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## References and Resources

- **COVID KIDS & YOUTH MINISTRY POLICIES (DCE Cassie Moore)**
    - <http://mo.lcms.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/COVID-KIDS-YOUTH-MINISTRY-POLICIES-Moore.pdf>
  - **In-Person Youth Night - Sample Form**
    - <http://mo.lcms.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/In-Person-Youth-Nights-Sample.pdf>
  - **Mental Health Information: Teen Depression**
    - <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/teen-depression/index.shtml#pub3>
  - **7 New Disruptive Church Trends Every Leader Should Watch**
    - [https://careynieuwhof.com/the-original-2020-is-history-7-new-disruptive-church-trends-every-church-leader-should-watch/?fbclid=IwAR2gBvZiwRLC0xKnPQ2fzyxRV1ThoE8xm\\_R3ZFbL6r2S70m-pHkAwiy1YeE](https://careynieuwhof.com/the-original-2020-is-history-7-new-disruptive-church-trends-every-church-leader-should-watch/?fbclid=IwAR2gBvZiwRLC0xKnPQ2fzyxRV1ThoE8xm_R3ZFbL6r2S70m-pHkAwiy1YeE)
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