

Keeping Youth Engaged in Mission during COVID-19

Encourage Youth to Love Thy Neighbor, Even While They Are at Home

Youth across the nation are stuck at home while we continue to mitigate the outbreak of COVID-19. Yet, this shouldn't be a time for young people to become inwardly focused and detached from the needs of the world around them. On the contrary! This is a time when we should be encouraging youth to look beyond themselves and consider how to love their neighbors, even while they are at home. Here are some ideas on how to empower young people to get involved while staying sequestered.

Chatting with Older Church Members

Every congregation has a list of members that need checking in on from time to time. Typically, this kind of responsibility lands on the pastor or a care committee of the congregation. In such a time as this, those usual caregivers can become quite overwhelmed with the growing needs of their church. Who might be able to step in during these weeks and months to help cover the bases? Perhaps youth who suddenly aren't in school and aren't able to continue their typical extra-curricular activities.

This kind of plan can be as simple or involved as you like. It all starts with talking to the pastor, elder, or deacon in your congregation who coordinates the care of those in the church who are in need. Who could use a phone call during this period of being stuck at home? Ask that leader to send you a list with names, phone numbers and, where appropriate, a brief description of their situation.

For example: Dottie Stanley, 555-1234, she lives alone in her home and has a son who visits her when he can. She sometimes has trouble hearing well, so speak loudly.

Then distribute the names on the list to members of the youth group. You can do this by email, text, or whatever method works best with your youth. Give your young people some simple talking points for their conversations.

- Introduce yourself and let them know that you are a youth from their church
- Explain that the youth are calling people in the church to check on them during this time
- Ask them how they are doing, how they are feeling and if they have other people also checking in on them.
- Do they need anything that the church could help them with? For example, food or errands?
- From there, see where the conversation goes. What do you have in common with them? Where did they live when they were teenagers and what was their childhood like?
- Finish up the call by letting them know that their church loves them. If you feel comfortable, offer a prayer for them before saying goodbye.

Give the youth a deadline to make these phone calls. Encourage them to share the results of their conversations with you or with the youth group at your next zoom call meeting. Make sure to ask the youth to share with you any needs that the person they called may have expressed. Pass on those things to your pastor or other ministry leader.

Who knows where this kind of connection could lead! It's a great opportunity to help our youth get to know church members of other generations and for the congregation to see the value and compassion of the church's young people.

Learning an Art or Craft that Lifts Others

Young people love to keep their hands busy. What a better time than this to encourage youth to learn how to do something that can help lift the spirits of others during a difficult time.

Some ideas include:

- Learning to cook/bake, then sending those meals or goodies to the doorstep of people who could use and enjoy them.
- Learning how to knit scarves from YouTube videos or by using FaceTime with someone older who knows how, with the plan of sharing their work with others. Does your church already have a knitting or prayer shawl ministry? Try getting a zoom tutorial going between some church knitters and the youth group.
- Do any of your youth play an instrument or sing? Invite them to record themselves performing a song that your congregation is already familiar with & then post it on your church's social media sites. Perhaps it could even be used in your congregation's next online service!
- Do you have any poets in the group? Invite them to write a poem specifically geared as a message of hope to share with the congregation. They can record themselves reading or performing it and send it to you to post on the church's social media sites. (Raps count too!)

Prayer Marathon

Do youth in your church often squirm when asked to offer grace before youth group dinners? Prayer is something that takes practice, just like anything else. This period of social distancing is a perfect time to give youth the opportunity to practice praying for others through a group-wide "prayer marathon." Youth ministry leaders can organize and structure the event with 30-minute time slots. Then, ask the youth to sign up through a google spreadsheet or through platforms like Sign Up Genius. You can even give various topics of prayer for them during their time slot that include:

- Members of the congregation in need of prayer
- Community members in higher risk for infection during this time
- Local agencies and ministries who are trying to keep going with higher needs and less volunteers
- First responders, nurses, doctors and other health care personnel, particularly those who are working with the infected
- Family members of those who are in quarantine or have tested positive

Youth who have less experience and comfort with praying can even be given some structure to guide their prayers.

- Praise God with thanksgiving for God's power, might, strength, love, and actions in history
- Remember those who are in special need of God's help right now
- Ask God for things they might need, like support, guidance, peace, etc.
- Your own needs are also appropriate to pray for, with humility and openness to God

Share the news of this prayer vigil program with your congregation. It can be a way to inspire the entire congregation to have a more active prayer life during this pandemic and well beyond!

Lawn Care Love

As the weather warms up in this most unusual of springs, there are many ways to help neighbors who are sick or otherwise unable to get outside, even while we keep that important six feet of distance from each other. Many churches are currently taking extra measures to check on their members who are living alone or have limited ability to take care of their yards and gardens like they used to. As needs are identified by the pastor or a layperson in charge of caring ministries in your church, youth could be called who are willing to go mow their lawn or do other simple landscaping tasks. Not only would this be a great way to empower youth to help others, it's also a great way for a young person to get out some energy and enjoy a little fresh air. If there aren't any church members with this kind of need, a phone call to your local "Meals on Wheels" program could probably connect you with more people in the community that need some help with their lawns.

Social Distance-Friendly Local Agencies

While many non-profit agencies tend to be “person to person” oriented (interfacing directly with the public) there are plenty more that lend themselves to social distancing. Check with your local food bank to see what options are available for youth to volunteer while keeping them spread out and using appropriate germ-killing measures. Community gardens are getting started this time of year and they often have plenty of room for everyone. Maybe there is an agency that needs some painting done and this low-traffic time is the perfect time for a few youth to do it.

Remember that even with cities, counties, and states enacting “shelter in place” rules and orders to “stay home and stay safe,” there are typically exceptions for folks going out to do acts of service that are for the benefit of other people. When planning these kinds of opportunities, be sure to do them in ways that avoid gathering people in large groups and even with small groups, keep folks spread out. Check with your local agencies regarding specific rules they have in place regarding ages and group numbers during these weeks and months. All of these options should be discussed with the parents of your youth beforehand and set up in ways with which those parents feel comfortable letting their children participate.

Writer: Bill Buchanan, Youth Mission Co

Office of Christian Formation: <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/formation/>

Presbyterian Youth Workers Association: <https://www.pywa.org>



Office of Christian
Formation

