

Bend Youth Collective

Coming Together to Cultivate Belonging for Youth

Why this, Why now?

We all yearn for our young people to experience belonging. Our young people yearn to be taken seriously and feel like they matter, in spaces where they can be themselves and know they are not alone.

The pressures of an increasingly isolated society threaten this sense of belonging - a growing youth mental health crisis, systems that pit people of different backgrounds against one another rather than toward one another, less in-person gathering spaces and more screen time. The need for an inclusive space where all young people can experience belonging - LGBTQ youth, immigrants, Black and brown youth, neurodivergent youth - and connect with something greater than themselves is more urgent than ever.



How we meet this moment through the Bend Youth Collective

Six congregations have come together to revitalize and expand Bend Youth Collective (BYC), in a unique collaboration with our ecumenical innovation ministry partner Together Lab. The Bend Youth Collective brings together: Bend Church United Methodist Church, First Presbyterian Church in Bend, Nativity Lutheran Church, Storydwelling, Trinity Episcopal Church in Bend, and Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Central Oregon. Together as a collective of local communities of faith and fierce love, we seek to create sacred space for all students to be seen, known and loved, just as they are; learn more deeply about themselves and the world; and cultivate a commitment to love of self, neighbor, and that which surpasses all understanding.

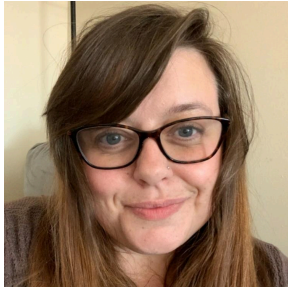
What is possible through coming together

Through this partnership, Together Lab is hiring a full-time staff organizer for BYC. This brings the capacity and intentionality toward BYC and belonging for youth that we have needed. The organizer will lead in sustaining and growing the gatherings of Bend Youth Collective. They will also have the capacity to activate a wider circle of adult leaders, ensuring that the work is shared, sustainable, and rooted in relationship. We see opportunity in moving away from a siloed youth program contained in a siloed congregation dependent on one youth pastor, and in addition research also shows that the most influential space for faith formation is in the home. This collaborative approach speaks to activating a wider web of support and accompaniment for teens.

Our goal is a Bend Youth Collective of play and purpose for teens, where young people can be noticed, named, known, and needed in community. The Organizer will be able to create space for youth-centered design of gatherings based on on-the-ground listening from youth and families. Through BYC, we can also invite youth into care for neighbors, community outreach, and leadership, inviting young people to see what faith looks like in action.

Together Lab also connects BYC to the wider Youth Solidarity Movement across Oregon, which includes retreats - including one this coming November! - training for volunteers, and being part of a larger movement of youth and leaders and other Youth Collectives rooted in belonging.

Who is the new staff Organizer?



Please welcome **Stef Jenkinson**, who starts September 15! Stef brings a rich blend of ministry experience, community engagement, and pastoral presence. With UUFCO, Stef guided large stewardship campaigns, cultivated LGBTQ+ support circles, and co-led environmental justice initiatives as well as children and youth ministries on Sundays. With a background in program coordination and management at multiple nature and wildlife centers, as well as founding a nonprofit for educating youth on conservation, Stef excels in educational programming, leadership training, community partnerships, and translating complex ideas into accessible, engaging teaching. She approaches her work with creativity and radical welcome.

What will their first 90 days look like?

- 1) Maintain and Strengthen the BYC Regular Gatherings** - Stef will be able to jump right in, coordinating the Sunday night gatherings, lead the team of volunteers, and co-design and co-facilitate meaningful and fun experiences for youth, and build relationships with youth and families.
- 2) A Listening Campaign to deepen the web of BYC** - Stef will do many relational meetings with leaders in congregations and in the community, potential new volunteers, youth and families. Widening the web means a wider circle of leaders (less volunteer burnout!) and deepen BYC's reach of youth, families and in the community.

We all want to set up Stef for success. It is easy to have many expectations, especially for someone who is bringing a lot of talent and excitement. We ask that we collectively try not to overwhelm her, but give her support and encouragement in these initial goals, especially in connecting her with people for the listening campaign and deepening the BYC network.

How does BYC accompany and strengthen our individual congregations and communities, as well as parents and any adults who want to support young people?

Having our congregations involved with a vibrant youth collective brings hope, energy and spirit to all of us, knowing we are impacting future generations. In addition, TL and the BYC organizer are committed to working on congregation-specific initiatives and strategies supporting youth to be noticed, named and known in your community, including Belonging Workshops in each congregation. When grandparents, coaches, aunts and uncles are equipped to build trusting relationships with young people in their lives, we start to awaken whole communities to their calling to be a village surrounding young people and sharing and embodying God's expansive love in word and deed. We are also going to help create community and support for parents and caregivers parallel to the youth collective, as well as host parent-specific workshops that speak to the challenges of raising teens in faith today.

How do Stef's gifts & experience help build bridges and support our young people's journey in faith?

This is a unique space where United Methodists, Presbyterians, Unitarian Universalists, Episcopalians, and Lutherans have committed to walk with one another. Without watering down what makes each of these traditions unique, we lift up the shared deep commitment to Love, Justice, and Mercy that connects us all with God/Spirit/Divinity. Stef's background in ministry, education, and nonprofit leadership equips her to build bridges and bring out the uniqueness amid difference. Service, play, and leadership, in a space of belonging, makes room for deep conversation. Youth will have concrete tangible experiences to make meaning out of their individual faith journeys, while parents, caregivers, and local congregations are more equipped to accompany teens in faith formation.

Thank you!

We want to thank the hiring team - Rev. Jen Stuart, Stephanie Senner, and Amy Brock, alongside Rev. Chris Dela Cruz with Together Lab - as well as clergy - Rev. Chris Kramer, Rev. Dr. Steven Koski, Rev. Scott Rudolph, Rev. Erika Spaet, Rev. Stuart, and The Rev. Elizabeth Wheatley-Jones. They have brought deep care, curiosity, and heart, tending to both present needs and future possibilities. What a gift!

