

AYME Conference 2021

Dallas Texas

Engaging Students in Disciple-Making Youth Ministry in a Post-Covid-19 World

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Abstract

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As I worked on turning my doctoral thesis into a book it became apparent that any book on engaging in global youth ministry would now not be complete without a conversation about the effect Covid-19 has had on disciple-making youth ministry.

I have been interviewing Canadian youth pastors to discover lessons learned amid Covid-19 and how they imagine youth ministry looking post-pandemic.

This presentation will explore and address significant findings thus far.

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Engaging Students in Disciple-Making Youth Ministry in a Post-Covid-19 World

The COVID-19 pandemic is changing life as we know it, with scholars predicting that it will have lasting long-term impact on many aspects of our daily lives on a global scale. Government, health, economy, social interactions, employment, leisure, education, religious practices, and family values are only some areas of our lives that have been impacted by the unique days of the pandemic. As youth ministry educators and practitioners, it would be prudent to realize that tomorrow's youth will be living in a drastically different world post-Covid-19 than yesterday's young people. I believe that the research data used as the basis for this paper will contribute a Canadian perspective to other research currently being done worldwide and will better equip those in the youth ministry field to serve the youth under their care and influence.

Background to Study

Several years ago, as a component of my doctoral degree I was required to do a thesis/project. To fulfill this requirement, I engaged in qualitative action research with the purpose of determining principles and praxis of disciple-making global youth ministry. More specifically, I sought to research and discover what character traits, competencies, and areas of knowledge, would be most useful as content in a college level course. I received data from my target group of 153 youth leaders serving in 37 countries throughout Asia, Africa, Europe, North America, and South America. The research culminated in developing and implementing a college level course that has subsequently been taught in a variety of settings to motivate, educate, and prepare young North American adults to engage in disciple-making youth ministry in a global context.

In early 2020, I took a 3-month sabbatical with the goal of turning my thesis/project into book form so that the findings of the research could reach a wider audience. Concurrently the world was beginning to experience the Covid-19 pandemic. This pandemic was not only a world-wide physical health issue, but also resulted in closed borders, shutdowns at schools, loss of jobs, permanently closed businesses, restrictions to church attendance, and thus affected almost every area of our collective lives worldwide.

As I worked on writing the book, it became apparent that any book on engaging in global youth ministry would now not be complete without a conversation about the effect Covid-19 has had on disciple-making youth ministry. How could I make a case for global engagement when some of the rules of engagement have changed even within our own churches? How could I challenge Canadian youth leaders to engage with youth cross-culturally, when depending on the ever-changing Covid restrictions of the day, these same leaders couldn't meet with students in their own neighborhoods? Some were restricted by mandates that didn't allow them to meet in local cafes, other public meeting places, and in some cases, not even in their homes. Realizing that some of these restrictions will only be temporary inconveniences, while others could be long term, made me wonder what kind of lasting impact this pandemic might have on the field of youth ministry. With limited resources and time restrictions, I decided that the place to begin looking for answers would be with youth leaders from within Canada, the country I presently reside in. My method would be informal interviews via the online conferencing platform, Zoom.

Sampling Group

I began this qualitative research by collecting contact information for 100 random youth leaders in churches across Canada. I chose a joint resource pool of 3 Evangelical denominations that are well represented throughout Canada and used their online church directories to locate church websites. The three denominations I focused on were: The Fellowship of Evangelical Baptist Churches of Canada, The Christian and Missionary Alliance Church in Canada (C&MA), and The Canadian Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches (CCMBC). These were chosen based on my basic knowledge and familiarity with each of them. The next step was to explore these websites to ascertain which churches had youth pastors and gather email addresses for each of them. I chose contact information for just over 30 youth pastors from each denomination. Once I had a random list of 100 youth pastors and their contact information, I sent out individual emails introducing myself and requesting a half-hour interview via Zoom. The only prerequisites were that these youth leaders served in Canadian Evangelical churches. The list was made up of youth pastors serving in churches from each of the Canadian provinces. This led to informal interviews. Each youth leader was given a half hour to answer questions concerning what they have learned

about disciple-making youth ministry in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic and how they imagine youth ministry looking as they move forward over the next few years. More specifically I asked the following questions:

1. What does disciple-making look like in your ministry context during this season of Covid-19 and what do you imagine it looking like post-Covid?
2. What does your cross-cultural missions emphasis look like during Covid-19 and what do you imagine it looking like post-covid?

Many other questions came up during the interviews that assisted in drawing a general picture of Covid-19's impact on Canadian church youth ministry from the youth leaders' perspective.

Response to Invitation to Participate

Up to the point of writing this paper I have requested interviews with 65 youth leaders from the original list. If they did not respond to the invitation email within two weeks, I sent a follow-up email. If there was no response to the second email, I did not follow up any further. Out of the 65 requests I have had 53 interviews. This is an over 80% rate of positive response.

Disciple-Making Youth Ministry Post Covid-19 Pandemic

As a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, it can be argued that we are living in an unprecedented time in history here in North America. This pandemic and responses to it have virtually affected all areas of our lives, including disrupting church life. Just two years ago it would have been unthinkable that churches across Canada could have their doors closed to Sunday worship services and other gatherings such as Bible studies, prayer meetings, and youth activities. Now, 18 months since this virus appeared, some restrictions and guidelines for living during a pandemic have remained and some have loosened depending where in Canada you reside. As I write this paper, some Canadian churches have begun to move back toward pre-Covid normalcy (although protective masks can be seen scattered throughout most congregations on any given Sunday), while at the same time there will be a new normal in other areas. As we consider what disciple-making youth ministry could look like moving forward it was eye-opening to interview youth

leaders who have continued to be engaged with students throughout these pandemic days and to hear their observations and lessons learned during these unprecedented times.

This paper will begin with 7 general observations based on the process of collecting the data along with some observations concerning the findings. It will be followed by 10 more specific thoughts on the direction of disciple-making youth ministry in Canada post-Covid-19 based on analysis of the data collected from the interviews.

7 General Observations

1. Many Canadian churches have an online presence. One of my initial observations made while in the process of gathering contact data was that at least 80% of churches within the 3 denominations that I chose to be the resource pool were connected to the internet and had a website. The size of the church or where in Canada it was located didn't seem to matter. Not all the websites were attractive, well designed, or user-friendly, but 8 out of 10 churches had some level of internet presence. Many of these websites were reaching out to their congregants on a regular basis by providing livestreamed services, weekly community announcements, and/or recorded sermons that can be listened to at any time. Although some of these churches, especially those with adequate resources, were already using the internet before the pandemic made it essential, it was the mandating of Covid-19 church gathering restrictions that forced many churches to make a shift to being online. In talking with youth pastors across the country, it is their opinion that it's the youth ministry in these churches that are often leading the way when it comes to using technology and online tools.

"It makes sense that our youth ministry was way ahead of the rest of the church with our online presence. Since the church doesn't really have much of a tech team, I was asked to help with setting up our online Sunday services."

I've also noticed that more churches have been looking to hire skilled tech people for their communication teams. Employment opportunities for online pastors, communication directors, skilled videographers, and the like, are now posted on church job sites. Many of these church ministry positions were unheard of just a few years ago, especially in small to mid-size churches. Churches across Canada seem more equipped and more comfortable using technology for ministry purposes than ever before. As a result, churches and ministry organizations have been

creating innovative church and cross-cultural ministries. This shift causes me to wonder what online ministry initiatives that began out of necessity during Covid restrictions will continue and even thrive post-pandemic.

2. Canadian youth pastors have a Canadian education. At the beginning of each interview, I asked to hear a bit of the leader's story, who they were and how they ended up in the youth ministry that they were in. Most of the youth pastors I met with were educated in Canadian colleges or universities. And most of them received post-graduate education with the purpose of getting into full-time church youth ministry. Many had attended a youth group while in high school and expressed how it had a significant impact on their lives.

3. Canadian youth leaders welcome the opportunity to give input as evidenced by 8 out of 10 of those I contacted agreeing to meet on Zoom. In the original email request, following an introduction paragraph I wrote:

"Specifically, I'm completing writing a book on Engaging in Global Youth Ministry based on my doctoral thesis research from a number of years ago. I'm wondering if you'd be willing to have a half hour Zoom call sometime next Tuesday or Wednesday to answer a few basic questions on disciple-making during this season of Covid. I won't be recording the call, just wanting to get a feel for where things are at in the Canadian Youth Ministry world.

Let me know a time on Tuesday or Wednesday (I'm on BC time and mornings work best for me) that could work for you, and I'll send you a Zoom code."

An 80% positive response rate seemed to be very high, especially considering that I was unknown to these youth pastors and that my request went out at a time when many in church ministry were saying they were "Zoomed out" referring to being exhausted by the increased number of online meetings they were involved in.

"Thank you for your message and the invite to contribute to your research! "

"I'd be more than happy to chat."

"It's good to hear from you, I'd love to answer any questions you have!"

"I would be honored to sit down for a zoom call or a trip out to BC either one works for me haha."

They were more interested in giving their input and participating in this research than I had expected.

4. A fourth observation is that youth pastors have used these days of Covid to take time to reflect and evaluate both the youth ministries they are engaged in and their role or call to serving in youth ministry.

“When it comes to youth ministry in our church, everything is up for grabs. I’m taking this time to evaluate every area including my role as Pastor of Student Ministries.”

For many it has been a reset. For some a time of transition. A time to reflect on what has been and dream of what could be. For some it meant transitioning into another church, for some into another ministry role, and for others transitioning out of full-time ministry. For many of these leaders Covid was seen as a crisis that caused them to take a deep look inside their lives and ministry and examine all aspects of their lives, as is often the case during times of crisis. For others, it seems that this pandemic freed up time to reflect on the state of the youth ministry in their church and reimagine what it could look like moving forward.

5. Covid has often sped up change. Many youth pastors I interviewed that were previously considering making changes to their programming or changing the youth ministry’s direction/focus have seen the process move forward quicker than they believe it would have under normal conditions. One youth leader spoke of how he had always depended on their big weekend activity-based ministry but desired to be less ***“flashy program oriented”*** putting more emphasis on the basics of Bible study and prayer. Now that they were not meeting as often, he was able to put more time and energy focusing on preparing quality Biblical content. The pandemic has helped him to take the youth ministry in the direction that he always thought it should go. And it moved in that direction much faster than he expected. One student ministries pastor had always felt like he should be spending more time and effort equipping his leadership team to do ministry and has been excited to see that during this time of Covid he has been able to spend more devoted time with his leaders. Another mentioned how creating small groups was something they began discussing and praying about before Covid, but once restrictions on how many students could gather in one place were mandated, small groups were initiated and

implemented within a couple weeks. The pandemic had sped up the process. Many of these youth leaders desire for these changes to be long lasting well past the end of the pandemic.

6. Most of the youth pastors spoke of seeing varied attendance at different times and in specific aspects of their ministries during the pandemic. Some mentioned that it was interesting and surprising to see which students were more likely to engage in the online programs and which ones were more attracted to the in-person, individual or small group aspects of the ministry. It was somewhat unexpected to hear that most youth pastors did not see a significant decrease in the number of young people that they were able to engage with over the last year and a half.

“We lost about 50% of our students within the first month but once we got everything up and running most of them came back. We’ve even seen some new kids recently.”

“We have quite a large group of high school students and I’ve been surprised that somehow we’ve been able to stay engaged in their lives. We’ve lost some of our older students but the younger ones have stayed involved and some have invited friends.”

Even some of the youth pastors were surprised that they didn’t see a greater drop in the number of students that participated in some way. In those groups that did experience a drop in students’ engagement it was almost without exception the older students. In most cases the number of younger students either stayed the same or grew.

7. Many youth leaders are seeing the need for mentoring. A final, general observation is based on some of the comments made by the youth leaders near the end of the interviews.

“I’d love to get together for coffee next time you’re visiting my area.”

“It would be good to hear what you’ve been finding out from other youth leaders!”

“Hey, would you have time to get together like this on a regular basis? I’d appreciate being able to bounce some ideas off you.”

These were just some of the comments and questions following the calls that made it clear to me that these youth leaders were feeling both the need and desire to have experienced ministers either coach or mentor them in life and ministry. In most of the cases, these youth leaders didn’t know me and yet following a half-hour Zoom call were showing evidence of their desire to receive input into their lives from someone with experience. Often, they extended the length of the call

to ask my input on some of the issues they were facing. Some followed up with emails, either to further discuss issues or asking for my prayers and input concerning their lives and ministry.

One leader took mentoring a step further and used the days of pandemic to initiate a mentoring program for those students in the youth group who desired to have an adult mentor in their lives.

“We didn’t have as many leaders as we needed so I began a mentoring ministry where we connected any of the youth who wanted a mentor with a willing adult. All we’ve asked of the mentors so far during this pandemic is that they check in with their student every two weeks. So far I’m only seeing positive results.”

Direction Disciple-Making Youth Ministry Could be Moving Post-Covid

1. A Move Toward Unhurried Leadership

“Unhurried leadership operates from a peaceful confidence that God is remaking me, and that God has invited me to live a life of influence from that very place and as that very person.”ⁱ

One of the more encouraging aspects of these informal interviews is that in most cases I left the interview feeling confident that the youth pastor I spoke with was competent, compassionate and capable. They cared deeply for the spiritual lives of the young people under their leadership. They acknowledged a calling to the ministry that they were engaged in and had a heart for loving Christ and loving the youth that they served. Concurrently, if I were to generally describe the state of Canadian youth pastors based on these same interviews, some of the adjectives that I would use to characterize them would be tired, worn, hurried, discouraged. Many, understandably, spoke of being tired and how much energy it took for them to pivot and continually be changing their ministry plans especially in the first weeks of pandemic restrictions.

“Although Covid has put everything on hold, I’m more exhausted than ever.”

“I was on the edge of burnout before the pandemic. The church is giving me two months off to deal with it. My leadership team has been stepping up and doing a phenomenal job.”

“Pivoting from in-person to online programming has been fun but draining.”

In the initial first months of uncertainty as to how to best deal with the pandemic on a short-term basis these leaders were dealing with practical day to day issues such as: What do I need to be able to do my work from home? How can I switch to online ministry? What exactly are the new

rules for engagement mandated by church leadership, the provincial medical officers, and the Canadian government?

“Every aspect of ministry shut down for the first few weeks as we were just trying to figure things out.”

“I very quickly found a loophole that actually allowed youth to meet in the church. I sent it to our denominational leaders and discussed it with our executive pastor. So actually, we never did stop meeting at the church although some parents weren’t comfortable with it so we had a much smaller group.”

These youth leaders were needing to respond to the expectations of health officials, church leadership, their students, and their students’ parents. However, following these first months of navigating uncharted territory, many of them found that by working from home they spent less time commuting, they attended less meetings and often the meetings were shorter and to the point, and they enjoyed much more time alone or with their family.

“I’m home every night of the week and once the kids are in bed, I have more time for myself and my wife than any time in the last 6 years.”

“With nothing to do and nowhere to go once I’m finished working, I have hours of free time. It’s the best!”

For most of them, the pandemic gave a taste of a less hectic, unhurried life. It gave them time to reflect not only on the state of their ministries but also on the state of their own lives. They had more time to examine their own spiritual lives and realize the need for caring for their own souls. Some of them were spending more time praying, listening, reading, resting, and were less hurried and harried.

“Over the last year I’ve spent a lot more time praying. It changes everything!”

When asked what they imagined youth ministry looking like post-pandemic they couldn’t make any confident predictions but many of them demonstrated a clear desire to slow down the pace of their lives and ministry. They had experienced what it could look like to serve out of the “overflow” of their lives instead of having a ministry characterized by anxious busy activity. One leader summed it up well:

“My plan is to never go back to being as busy as I was pre-Covid.”

Some Key Questions:

1. How can youth ministry educators communicate the importance of students making sure their own souls are cared for while at the same time communicating that there is a time and place for sacrificial service?
2. In a hurried activity driven culture where busyness is still considered an honorable virtue by many, what can be done to assist youth leaders in fighting against the lie that busy equals effective?
3. What can be done for youth leaders that can assist them in teaching and modelling the importance of self-care in a way that their students don't grow up becoming part of a burnt-out generation?

2. A Move Toward Everyday Relational Ministry

One of the topics that came up most often during these conversations was regarding style of ministry and the move from centralized youth ministry toward decentralized. The realization that became quite clear for each of the youth pastors during the height of the pandemic, was that there would need to be a shift from larger whole youth group events and gatherings to either one-on-one meetings or at the least small groups. One youth pastor said it well when he explained:

"Our youth ministry went from Thursday and Sunday evening meetings to any day of the week and anytime of the day. Whatever worked for the student and the leader. It became kind of a 24/7 thing."

Another said:

"I would never have imagined that going for a walk with one or two students around their neighborhood...just walking and talking...could be such meaningful ministry."

He went on to explain how his desire is to never go back to the way they did ministry previously. Both the leaders and the students were responding well to the more relational ministry. Another leader said the churches youth ministry had become more "relational and every day oriented."

"Zoom is a cheap imitation for community. Even one on one in-person or small group activities has meant a lot to the students. Long-boarding, walks, coke or coffee have become what we do."

He acknowledged there is a place for bigger events and gatherings yet added that they would be integrating more one-on-one and small group experiences into their over-all strategy.

“We’ve always said it’s all about relationship. Now I believe that more than ever. We’ve taken a giant leap in that direction.”

A move toward relational youth ministry has been happening for decades and yet for the youth leaders I interviewed the pandemic has significantly nudged it further down the relational road.

Some Key Questions:

1. How do we convince church leadership to understand and accept smaller, informal, relational activities as legitimate ministry?
2. How do we help our church youth leaders to understand the importance of relational youth ministry?
3. Are there any inter-personal relationship type courses that need to be created and developed as part of Youth Ministry Programs in our schools that are not available at this time?”

3. A Move Toward De-Centralized Leadership

“Churches have historically been very centralized in their approach to organization, primarily because it helps keep control, authority, and decision-making to stay in the hands of a few people. This also prevents churches from adapting quickly to cultural changes going on around them. An alternative approach is to move more in the direction of a decentralized style.”ⁱⁱⁱ

With this move toward a more decentralized relational ministry style in its programming youth pastors are realizing the practical need for decentralized leadership. For many this meant an intentional decision to give more responsibility to their volunteer leadership team. Because the ministry could no longer be centered around one or two large gatherings it also could no longer be dependent on the paid professional youth leader.

“We couldn’t have youth group meetings like we were used to. Covid restrictions didn’t allow us to meet as an entire group. So, we needed to use our volunteer leaders in a much bigger way to meet with smaller groups and individual students.”

“My leaders are stepping up. I’m counting on them more and more. We couldn’t make it through this time without them.”

“My ministry team have been rock stars. They’ve been doing so much more than I ever expected. Most of our students are being contacted weekly. That wasn’t happening before Covid.”

If there was sufficient time near the end of the interview, I would ask the leader what they most needed in order to support them and their youth ministry? Not surprisingly the answer that came up most often was that they needed help with choosing, building, and training/equipping their leadership team.

“I’m just not sure what to do with my leaders now that we are using them more. If you can point me to anything at all that will help me to train and equip my leadership team to actually do ministry, I’d appreciate it.”

“The leadership of our small groups makes all the difference. The groups that are led well are doing well. I’m asking God for more good leaders.”

As already noted, many churches have moved toward de-centralizing their youth ministries over the last couple years. This has been a necessity during the pandemic. A natural consequence is that volunteer leaders and ministry teams would also be utilized in a more substantial way.

Some Key Questions:

1. What can be done to help youth pastors train and equip their leadership teams?
2. What resources are needed to assist leaders in equipping their leadership teams?
3. How can we help church leadership and search committees to value the importance of building a youth ministry leadership team and not to over emphasize the need for a super gifted professional youth pastor?

4. A Move Toward Hybrid Programming

“I’m pretty sure that on-line events and activities will never replace in-person ones. But in our ministry, I can see us doing more of a hybrid kinda thing where we do both in-person and online. Once the pandemic is over, I think the new normal will definitely include more online activities now that we’re set-up for it.”

According to these youth leaders, the use of technology in their ministries has increased and will continue to be utilized in a much greater way than it was pre-pandemic. All the youth pastors

that I interviewed, without exception, shifted to using some form of online ministry for the first time or added to and improved their online platforms, using them more frequently.

“My thought process has been ‘How can we recalibrate what we’ve been doing-what works better online-and what does it take to make that happen?’”

As “digital natives” these youth leaders were already poised to make the move from in-person to online ministry and once Covid arrived almost all of them did it seamlessly. Pivoting to using social media, audio and video technology, and other online communication tools in their ministries could have under normal conditions taken months to years to implement. During the pandemic this advancement of technology happened over several weeks.

During these interviews it became obvious that these leaders and their teams had come up with many innovative and creative ways to adopt technology and incorporate it into their ministry.

One of these leaders transformed his office into a small studio and his passion and enthusiasm for online ministry was admirable.

“At the beginning of Covid when it didn’t look like we’d be meeting as a group any time soon, I spent a chunk of our youth budget on quality sound and video equipment and turned my office into a mini-studio. I’m using it daily.”

The first time I met him via Zoom he was wearing a large headset with a good size professional looking microphone sitting in front of him. From the enhanced lighting and professional looking backdrop, it was obvious that he had invested some significant resources in order to communicate well with his students. As a result, during this pandemic he’s been having more interaction with his students and leaders than ever before.

“Technology offers more opportunities for engagement than ever before.”

Others reported how they created weekly podcasts. Some are gaming regularly as another way to spend time with their students. I’ve heard of one youth pastor teaming up with the missions director in his church and creating a virtual missions trip for students and their families. Some started book clubs, movie discussions and reviews, online mini concerts, online Bible studies, leadership training sessions, prayer meetings, and late-night talk shows.

“I created an online talk show. I’m interviewing people from the community that I’d never get to come into church and talk with our students. They have so much to offer. Our students are loving it!”

These are only some of the creative, online initiatives that have been popping up in youth ministries across Canada that are sure to become a significant part of the new normal in youth ministry.

Some Key Questions:

1. How can youth ministry educators teach discernment in such a way that youth leaders can know how to discern the use of technology in their ministries?
2. How do we help youth leaders to find the balance between online and in-person ministry?
3. Are there any online programs and/or tools that could be used to not just reach tens and hundreds, but thousands of young people with the Gospel? Who are we encouraging to create more and better online resources for youth ministry?

5. A Move Toward Rebuilding Trust

“Trust is the glue of life. It’s the most essential ingredient in effective communication. It’s the foundational principal that holds all relationships.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Stephen Covey

Before this pandemic lack of trust in institutions and authority figures has been a stereotypical characteristic among North American young people. Who and what is worthy of their trust, has been an issue for youth for decades. Trust in leaders in governments, educational and medical institutions, media, and religious leaders and institutions, have been on a steady decline.

Not surprising, according to the youth leaders that were interviewed they believe that this lack of trust has declined at an even greater pace during this pandemic, both in their own lives and among the youth that they serve.

“I’m not sure where to turn to get trustworthy information. So many contradictions. I often can’t tell if I’m hearing the truth or if it’s just someone’s opinion”

“Some of my young people just don’t know who they can trust. These are crazy days. Some aren’t even sure they can trust their parents anymore.”

The mixed messages surrounding this pandemic have grown to pandemic proportions. Our youth are being bombarded with mixed messages from so called medical experts, politicians,

professors, church leaders, and even family members. Add to this the partisan politicization by the media and it is understandable that even many of the youth leaders themselves are not sure what is true anymore. But trust is not only an issue when it comes to what is true concerning the pandemic. Knowing truth and who or what can be trusted encompasses all areas of life. It is understood that trust is a significant component in any youth ministry if leaders are going to be able to build disciple-making relationships with students. Relationships that will direct their students to the One who is good, loving, and always trustworthy.

“For the Lord is good, His mercy is everlasting, and His truth endures to all generations.”

Psalms 100:5

Trust is a foundational component of all healthy relationships. Without trust the essential foundation of healthy relationships between individuals, between people and institutions, and between people and God, would be non-existent. As we move beyond the pandemic into post-Covid years building trust will be more important than ever.

- Professors earning the trust of their students will be more important than ever.
- Church leadership earning and keeping the trust of their youth leaders will be more important than ever.
- Youth pastors earning the trust of their leadership team will be more important than ever.
- Youth leaders earning the trust of the youth that they serve and their parents will be more important than ever.
- Youth leaders deepening their trust in God will be more important than ever.
- Youth leaders walking alongside young people and helping them to trust God will be more important than ever.

Some Key Questions:

1. How can youth ministry educators build trust with their students?
2. What resources are available or needs to be developed to assist youth leaders in building trust with the youth that they serve?
3. What resources are available that youth leaders can use to teach their students how to grow in trust?

6. A Move Toward Christian Basics and Contemplative Style Ministry

“What does a contemplative approach to youth ministry look like? It looks like youth engaged in centering prayer as well as body surfing. It looks like kids doing lectio divina as well as critical study of the Bible. It looks like solitude as well as service projects, contemplative worship as well as disco-karaoke. As Jesus points out again and again, it’s not the method but the Spirit, the love and awareness behind our activities--- that make them Christian.”^{iv}

Mark Yaconelli

When asked what disciple-making youth ministry looked like in their context I found it interesting that these leaders described their previous year of ministry with words such as more chilled, slowed down, cut back, less complicated, less programmed, less activity. They mentioned such things as: more emphasis on prayer, Bible study, small group or one on one discussions.

“Most of our fun stuff is gone but we’re having some intense small group Bible Studies and times of prayer. The students are responding surprisingly well.”

“Some of our leaders have been doing prayer walks with their small groups. One of them had to cancel last week and the students went ahead and did it on their own!”

“As a leadership team we’re spending a lot more time praying together.”

“I’ve never been big on the spiritual disciplines but now we’re planning to go through a spiritual disciplines study with our leadership team.”

Prayer has become a priority. They have found more time and space to listen to and discern God’s voice. Research has shown that since the beginning of the pandemic there has been a huge increase in both the number of people who are praying and the regularity of their prayers. In a 10-minute Google search I was able to find many articles with headings such as:

“In Crisis We Pray. Religiosity and the Global Pandemic”

“Prayer and Faith is Helping People During Pandemic”

“Corona Virus Causing People to Pray More, New Study Says”

“Study Shows Even Non-Religious Americans Are Turning to Prayer”

“Googling ‘Prayer’ Has Skyrocketed with Corona Virus Spread, Expert Says”

Obviously much of the interest in prayer that these articles are referring to is specifically concerned with praying for protection from the virus or an end to this pandemic and these

unusual days. My informed guess is that much of it is coming from a heart of fear. At the same time, as stated earlier this pandemic has brought about a less hurried and less busy lifestyle. These youth leaders are finding themselves with more time, less places to go, things to do, and people to see. They have had more time for contemplative prayer than ever before. They spoke of how much of the *“less important aspects of our ministry have been taken away”* and they had gotten *“back to the basics.”*

Some Key Questions:

1. What would a more contemplative style of youth ministry look like?
2. How can we help church leadership see the good in the contemplative approach to youth ministry?
3. Would it be helpful to redefine what “fruitful” ministry looks like?

7. A Move Toward Local Engagement

The book I am in the midst of writing is on engaging in global youth ministry based on God’s heart for the world and his global mission. This is the reason one of the key questions I asked during the interviews was:

“What does your cross-cultural missions emphasis look like during Covid-19 and what do you imagine it looking like post-Covid?”

This is a significant question since statistics show that 96% of the world’s youth (10-30 year old’s) live outside of North America and many of them have never heard the good news of Christ. At the same time most of the worlds trained youth leaders are serving the 4% of young people who are located in Canada and the United States. It is my conviction that as North American youth leaders it is our responsibility to not only be engaged in our local church ministries but in some way, even from a distance, join God and his heart for the youth of the world.

The responses to this question are evidence that many of these youth leaders have put very little, if any thought and effort into how to integrate God’s heart for the nations into their church’s youth ministry and those who have thought about it have never succeeded in going further with it.

“I realize I need to concentrate on mission’s awareness in the future. Really haven’t done much with that.”

“I’ve never really thought of integrating missions with youth ministry. I didn’t take any missions courses at school.”

“Our emphasis has been on local and not global. If we all serve locally where God has put us, we’ll reach the world. Won’t we?”

“In my church there is not a humongous focus on missions.”

“As far as I know our church has never done international missions trips. Definitely something we’ve considered but it’s never been a priority I guess.”

Some Key Questions:

1. Can we have God’s heart for the ‘Nations’ by only serving locally?
2. How can youth ministry educators communicate God’s heart for the world to their students?
3. What are the consequences of our churches focusing on local ministry and ignoring the global aspect?

8. A Move Toward Family Based Youth Ministry

Almost 20 years ago Mark Devries wrote a book on Family Based Youth Ministry^v and since that time it has been a philosophy of youth ministry that many churches have tried to implement but not always successfully. As a result of Covid, specifically the closing down of schools, part time jobs, sports, movie theatres, and church youth group events, young people have spent more time in their homes with their families. Some of the youth leaders reported that several of their students were dealing with domestic abuse issues since being isolated at home in extremely dysfunctional families. However, for many of the leaders they were encouraged to see parents and their teens experiencing more quality and overall healthy time together in the homes. By default, many parents have become more relationally engaged with their young adult children. One student ministries pastor spoke of how he was encouraged that some parents were coming to him for ideas on how to relate to their teen since they were having so much time together at

home. Another spoke of how he was committed to having his leadership team contact the parents of the students once a month since the pandemic began and that he didn't want this practice to end post-pandemic.

"It was something we always wanted to do and just never got around to it."

As a result of being more intimately engaged in their teens everyday life it is predictable that parents will desire to receive more communication and information on what is happening in the youth ministry. For example, many parents will most likely expect more detailed communication when it comes to retreats, camps, mission trips, service projects, and large gatherings.

"We are pushing toward a multigenerational ministry emphasis."

"I'm really interested in hearing more about 'family on mission'. I think our church leadership is wanting us to head in that direction when it comes to our youth ministry."

Some Key Questions:

1. How can youth ministry educators emphasize the importance of working with parents as they minister to their students?
2. What are the biggest issues in raising young people today that youth leaders could assist parents with?
3. What about parental advisory groups for youth ministry?

9. A Move Toward Compassionate Concern

Although it is too early to discover or discern all the ways that the Covid-19 pandemic and the restrictive responses to it will affect Canadian society, it's negative impact on our young people could be its most devastating legacy. Mental health, disruption to education, loss of jobs and income, lack of opportunities to engage in team sports and other group activities, relational isolation, addictions, suicide, increased family conflict are only some of the negative issues facing our youth as a result of the pandemic.

Many of the youth leaders I spoke with showed an increased compassionate concern for the students they serve and some spoke of how this compassion has grown more intense during Covid.

“I’ve definitely seen a change in the personalities of some of my students. More subdued, down, depressed. It’s killing me.”

“My heart breaks like never before to see what many of the youth in our church are dealing with.”

“Although not as fearful as their parents I still think fear has invaded every area of life for some of my students. I’m not sure how to deal with it.”

“I tear up just thinking of what some of my students are going through being stuck at home.”

When pushed to explain what contributed to this growing compassionate concern, they noted how the long-term physical isolation from friends resulted in more intense loneliness, despair, depression, anxiety, and fear. This observation is supported by the many statistics found in recent studies on the increase of mental illness among youth in North America.

Some Key Questions:

1. How can we best help youth leaders to be aware of and deal with some of these significant mental health issues that youth are facing today more than ever?
2. How can youth leaders assist parents in walking alongside their teens and young adults?
3. How can we best assist these youth leaders who are also dealing with significant issues and point them to Christ as they in turn point their students to Christ?

10. A Move Toward Those Students Who Were Previously Unseen and Unheard.

“The Geeks and Gamers have become the experts.”

One of the most interesting findings was summed up best by a youth pastor who expressed his surprise in discovering that some of the youth who he categorized as being on the fringe of the ministry began to be more engaged and some of the students he thought of as core members of the group became less involved. I heard the similar observations from others. One of the veteran Youth Pastors told me that during the pandemic ***“the Geeks and Gamers have become the experts”***. This same leader said that his most significant take-away from this season of pandemic is that he and his leadership team need to be more inclusive and not so quick to write off those

students who are less noticeable, quieter, have different learning styles or who have fewer social skills and interests that are outside the box.

“Many of my students are better at communicating on-line than in person. They are less intimidated and more vulnerable. I’ve been surprised to find that some of the disinterested kids are now much more engaged.”

“Our online small groups are the real deal. I’m finding that with some of these students we are now beginning to speak their language.”

“It seems like Covid has levelled the playing field. Except for the few who have totally dropped out of everything the rest of us are all in this together. It has definitely been unifying.”

It’s a good reminder when it comes to disciple-making that Christ’s 12 closest followers were not the best or most well-behaved students and they were not men with exceptional skills, giftings, or even likable personalities. These were not men who stood as the top in their class or were voted most likely to succeed. It’s difficult to predict if this Covid induced lesson will make any significant difference post-covid but it is encouraging to see that the eyes of some of these youth leaders were opened to see students who were previously unseen and that their desire is to continue to plan for ministry that will be inclusive.

Some Key Questions:

1. How can youth leaders find and use those who seem to be on the “fringe”?
2. How can youth leaders reprogram the way they view those who don’t fit into the category of ‘golden student’?
3. What was Christ’s pre-requisite for choosing disciples? How can Christ’s model be integrated into how youth leaders engage in making disciples?
4. How can youth leaders make sure that as they plan and program their ministries that they somehow include all students?

Summary:

In summary, the Covid-19 pandemic has impacted church youth ministry in Canada in many ways. It is difficult to predict or even imagine what kind of lasting impact it will have post-pandemic. However, it has been eye-opening to speak with and hear from Canadian youth leaders concerning their experience engaging with students during this unusual season of ministry. Based on the data collected during the interviews with these leaders over the last few months it seems that we can discern the trajectory Canadian youth ministry could be headed.

1. A Move Toward Unhurried Leadership
2. A Move Toward Everyday Relational Ministry
3. A Move Toward De-Centralized Leadership
4. A Move Toward Hybrid Programming
5. A Move Toward Rebuilding Trust
6. A Move Toward Christian Basics and Contemplative Style Ministry
7. A Move Toward Local Engagement
8. A Move Toward Family Based Youth Ministry
9. A Move Toward Compassionate Concern
10. A Move Toward Those Students Who Were Previously Unseen and Unheard

It would seem wise as youth ministry educators and practitioners to discern and prayerfully prepare for the direction youth ministry in Canada could be moving post-pandemic for the sake of our youth and the Kingdom.

Endnotes

ⁱ Fadling, Alan. *An Unhurried Leader: The Lasting Fruit of Daily Influence*. IVP Books, 2017.

ⁱⁱ Nieuwhof, Carey. *At Your Best*. Waterbrook, 2021.

ⁱⁱⁱ Covey, Stephen R. *The Speed of Trust: The One Thing That Changes Everything*. Free Press, 2008.

^{iv} Yaconelli, Mark. *Contemplative Youth Ministry: Practicing the Presence of Jesus with Young People*. SPCK Publishing, 2006.

All other quotes in this document are directly from the interviews with Canadian youth pastors.