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**Redefining Effective Ministry with Young People**

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## **Abstract**

This exploratory and in-progress study investigates ministries and leaders who utilize non-traditional approaches to effectively disciple youth and young adults. It highlights exemplary ministries that have holistically impacted their constituencies, often through innovative approaches to ministry, specifically elevating ministry with young people of color. This paper highlights the common practices and leadership postures these organizations used to create integrated, holistic ministries that have impacted young people long-term. It also discusses implications for other more traditional youth ministries as they seek to more effectively form lasting faith in young people.

## Introduction

In the mainstream U.S. context, *traditional* youth ministry is often synonymous with *White middle-class suburban* ministry. However, with the increase of diversity in the U.S., there exists a need to expand ministry approaches to accommodate young people of color and others on the margins. There is a plethora of research that highlights traditional approaches to youth ministry. However, there are far fewer studies that herald the practices of exemplary ministries that exist beyond the four walls of the church and primarily among young people of color.

At the Fuller Youth Institute, we transform relevant research into meaningful resources to help make the church the best place for young people to grow. In an effort to highlight ministries that are making tremendous strides and impact in the lives of young people, this research challenges the historical understanding of what it means to do youth ministry by identifying and learning from creative and faithful ministries on the margins of mainstream youth ministry culture.

After a thorough literature review, we interviewed leaders and young adults involved in ten exemplary ministries often overlooked by the more traditional youth ministry ecosystem in order to answer these two questions:

1. What practices lead to integrated, holistic ministries to and with young people?
2. What leadership postures lead to integrated, holistic ministries to and with young people?

As youth exit the church and leave their faith in increasing numbers, innovative approaches are necessary to re-engage and retain young people not only in our churches, but also in their personal faith in God. Youth ministry and congregational leaders must deepen their

commitment to learn from those whose approaches have historically been marginalized in order to holistically engage young people in a lasting faith.

This paper will explore stories from three ministries that have holistically impacted the lives of young adults in order to galvanize change within the broader youth ministry world. Our hope is to encourage youth workers to adopt effective leadership postures and use innovative approaches to ministry in order to more effectively disciple teenagers in their unique contexts.

## **Method**

Our methodology includes a thorough literature review of scholarly work, a piloting phase of the research, as well as additional interviews with both leaders and young adults from the exemplary sites studied. The following section describes all three approaches.

### **Literature Review**

Well-established youth ministry models have historically centered White, middle-class, suburban (and often megachurch) models that often include a Sunday or Wednesday night in-person gathering at the local church led by a paid youth leader or pastor. Yet the reality is that this typical youth ministry model is actually failing to form a lasting, consequential faith in young people.

While spiritual and religious activity under age eighteen seems to slightly increase the odds of faith lasting after youth group, “a compilation of studies indicate that about 40 to 50 percent of youth group kids drift from God and the faith community after graduation.”<sup>1</sup> This number comes from a compilation of data from various projects, dating back to several studies

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<sup>1</sup> Powell, Kara, Bradbury, Jen, and Brad M. Griffin. 2023. *Faith Beyond Youth Group*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books.

with Millennial young people—most notably detailed in the 2011 book by David Kinnaman and Aly Hawkins, *You Lost Me*,<sup>2</sup> as well as *Souls in Transition: The Religious & Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults*, the 2009 book by Christian Smith with Patrica Snell that explores findings from the National Study of Youth and Religion.<sup>3</sup>

A more recent body of research compiled by the Pinetops Foundation reports that 42 million young people are expected to leave the Christian church (across Roman Catholic, mainline, and evangelical traditions) between 2020 and 2050.<sup>4</sup> Two-thirds of those who regularly attended church for at least a year as teens admit that they also stopped going for at least a year as young adults.<sup>5</sup>

While young people's drift away from church and faith has been heavily recorded over the course of the last two decades, the pandemic has likely exacerbated it. While David Kinnaman noted in 2016's *The State of Youth Ministry* that “for the most part, youth ministry in the U.S. is stable and functioning effectively,” more recently he wrote, “The pandemic and other disruptions have reminded us that many of the people we thought of as loyal churchgoers were just not that into the church.”<sup>6</sup> Another recent study from the Hartford Institute for Religion Research confirms the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on young people in the U.S. According to it, the percentage of church attendees under the age of 35 decreased from 37 percent in 2020 to 35 percent in 2021 and to 32 percent in 2023.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Kinnaman, David. 2011. *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians Are Leaving Church and Rethinking Faith*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books.

<sup>3</sup> Smith, Christian, and Melissa Lundquist Denton. 2005. *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*. New York: Oxford University Press.

<sup>4</sup> Pinetops Foundation. 2018. *The Great Opportunity: The American Church in 2050*. [www.greatopportunity.org](http://www.greatopportunity.org).

<sup>5</sup> LifeWay Research. 2019. “Most Teenagers Drop Out of Church When They Become Young Adults.”

<sup>6</sup> Barna Group. 2022. *The State of Your Church: Measuring What Matters in Ministry*.

<sup>7</sup> Hartford Institute for Religion Research. 2023. *Back to Normal? The Mixed Messages of Congregational Recovery Coming Out of the Pandemic*.

The pandemic's impact on youth ministry combined with young people's drift away from church and faith has made both academics and youth leaders reexamine what constitutes effective youth ministry. Since belonging is an innate need experienced by everyone—especially as the individual progresses through adolescence—current literature suggests that effective youth ministry must be relational.<sup>8</sup> Relational ministry focuses on building relationships between young people and God, young people and their peers, as well as young people and adults, including parents.

The positive impact of trusted adults on adolescents extends beyond church. A 2020 study by Springtide Research Institute reports that as the number of trusted adults in students' lives increases, stress, isolation and social loneliness decrease. 73 percent of young people who reported having no trusted adults in their lives felt stressed and overwhelmed. 70 percent of them felt as if no one understood them and 62 percent felt completely alone. In contrast, those with 5 or more trusted adults fared much better. Only 39 percent of them felt stressed and overwhelmed. 24 percent of them felt as if no one understood them. And only 9 percent felt completely alone.<sup>9</sup>

For relationships to be effective, they must be rooted in trust. According to Powell, Bradbury, and Griffin, the proximity and consistency of youth ministry leaders aid in the cultivation of trust.<sup>10</sup> Interestingly, cultivating trust benefits not only young people, but youth leaders as well. Anderson and Frazier found that youth ministers who are committed to practices involving high levels of trust, such as accountability, often experience long ministry tenures.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>Powell, Kara, and Brad M. Griffin. 2021. *3 Big Questions That Change Every Teenager: Making the Most of Your Conversations and Connections*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books.

<sup>9</sup> Springtide Report. 2020. *The State of Religion & Young People*.

<sup>10</sup> Powell, Kara, Bradbury, Jen, and Brad M. Griffin. 2023. *Faith Beyond Youth Group*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books.

<sup>11</sup> Anderson, Gregory N., and Lani Fraizer. (Spring 2018). "Leadership Strategies and Practices of Long-Tenured Youth Ministers in Churches of Christ." *Journal of Youth Ministry* 16, no. 2.

In addition to youth leaders and pastors, parents are particularly important in discipling young people. In 2010, the National Study of Youth and Religion found that “parent religiosity during the teenage years was an even stronger predictor of young people’s faith in emerging adulthood,” an understanding perhaps summed up by saying when it comes to faith, parents “get what we are”.<sup>12</sup> More recently, Goodman and Dyer found that if parents are engaged in the life of the church, their child is more likely to be engaged during that point in their lives and on into adulthood.<sup>13</sup>

As diversity increases in the United States, effective relational youth ministries must grow increasingly attentive to helping diverse young people find their place within their ministries. While about two-thirds of all U.S. residents are White today, that percentage drops to half for those under eighteen.<sup>14</sup> Currently about 98 percent of Americans live in a county with a growing Latina/o population, and 95 percent live in a county where the Asian population is on the rise. Overall, ethnic diversity is rising in nineteen out of every twenty US counties.<sup>15</sup>

The review of literature that centers on the impact of leaders of color and their transformative approaches has consistently highlighted the need to consider the *whole* child.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Dean, Kenda Creasy. 2010. *Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers Is Telling the American Church*. New York City: Oxford University Press.

<sup>13</sup> Goodman, Michael A, and W Justin Dyer. 2020. “From Parent to Child: Family Factors That Influence Faith Transmission.” *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* 12, no. 2: 178–90.

<sup>14</sup> Nicholas Jones et al., “2020 Census Illuminates Racial and Ethnic Composition of the Country” U.S. Census Bureau, August 12, 2021, <https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2021/08/improved-race-ethnicity-measures-reveal-united-states-population-much-more-multiracial.html>.

<sup>15</sup> Sabrina Tavernise and Robert Gebeloff, “Census Shows Sharply Growing Numbers of Hispanic, Asian and Multiracial Americans,” *New York Times*, August 12, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/12/us/us-census-population-growth-diversity.html>.

<sup>16</sup> Brown, K. M. 2004. Leadership for social justice and equity: Weaving a transformative framework and pedagogy. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 40(1), 77–108.

Dantley, M. 2003. Critical spirituality: Enhancing transformative leadership through critical theory and African American prophetic spirituality. *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, 6(1), 3–17.

Freire, P. 1970. *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Herder & Herder.

Freire, P. 1998. *Pedagogy of freedom: Ethics, democracy, and civic courage*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.



This holistic ministry approach has proven effective in understanding the identity and purpose of young people, leading to an increased sense of belonging for young people of color.

Intentionally creating space for diversity and making room for all voices to be heard is one way to accomplish this and help ensure diverse young people belong in our ministries. Since the goal of effective youth ministry is to serve the *whole* person and help young people form “Jesus-centered narratives” around identity, belonging, and purpose, effective youth ministries must engage in crucial conversations about topics like *race* and *ethnicity*.<sup>17</sup> Montague Williams, a youth ministry scholar, suggests that rather than downplaying race and racial injustice this involves trusting the Spirit to form loving communities that take seriously the experiences and stories of marginalized people.<sup>18</sup> He goes further:

... and the path to seeing this life realized is practicing it in community. It requires honesty and substantive hope, not ignorance and forgetfulness regarding the realities of race-ism.<sup>19</sup> If congregations can commit to reframing youth and young adult ministry..., participants can begin seeing church in color and cultivate the sensibilities needed to resist the tendency to underestimate, forget, and dismiss young people’s experiences with and wonders about race, racism, and racial identity. If pastors and youth workers can join [Martin Luther] King in accepting that Christian faith lived well is a daily embodied protest against injustice, then congregations can better connect with young people’s longing to live lives of meaningful purpose and identity.<sup>20</sup>

Put simply, when youth leaders create the space and opportunity for young people to share their story and bring their *full* selves, they create a platform that allows students to

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<sup>17</sup> Powell, Kara, and Brad M. Griffin. 2021. 3 Big Questions That Change Every Teenager: Making the Most of Your Conversations and Connections. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books.

<sup>18</sup> Williams, Montague R.. 2020. Church in Color : Youth Ministry, Race, and the Theology of Martin Luther King Jr, Baylor University Press.

<sup>19</sup> Williams offers a new term— race-ism. He uses “...this term to display the interconnections of racial classification, racial violence, and racial identifications.” (Williams, Montague R. 2020. Church in Color : Youth Ministry, Race, and the Theology of Martin Luther King Jr, Baylor University Press.)

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

celebrate their community cultural wealth. With intentionality, testimony<sup>21</sup> becomes a vehicle for including more voices and experiences and highlighting how diversity more fully enables communities of faith to reflect the image of God.

### **Piloting phase**

Given that well-established youth ministry models have historically centered on White, middle-class, suburban models, this research intentionally centered exemplary ministries that sit outside the norm. Many of these are minority led and focus on marginalized communities. Many sit outside of or adjacent to churches. All offer holistic models for ministry that have proven effective—creating an oasis for belonging, relational connections between those involved, safe spaces for diverse young people to gather, and a long-lasting impact.

In the pilot phase of the research, 100 participants were identified from among the network relationships of Fuller Youth Institute (participants in past cohort-based training and informal engagements.) Participants were selected based on diversity of organizational type and diversity of those they served. The interview teams then narrowed the list down to 34 and ultimately to ten select ministries. In this process, preference was given to leaders of color and lesser-known organizations in order to try to highlight less traditional forms of youth ministry.

Interviews with a pilot group sought to determine answers to two related questions: *What practices lead to integrated, holistic ministries to and with young people?* and *What leadership postures lead to integrated, holistic ministries to and with young people?*

Researchers and research assistants used inductive coding to conduct a thematic analysis on interview transcripts. Codes were then triangulated to ensure accuracy.

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<sup>21</sup> Drury, Amanda. 2015. *Saying Is Believing: The Necessity of Testimony in Adolescent Spiritual Development*. Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic.

Preliminary findings from the pilot phase of the study suggested that practices that lead to integrated, holistic ministries to and with young people include an unapologetic focus on God and an embodied gospel; the inclusion of social service components considered atypical in many other ministries; success metrics that go beyond numbers; an emphasis on relationships and a focus on mentoring; an investment in developing leaders; a commitment to diversity; an emphasis and awareness of assets; intentional, strategic and collaborative partnerships; the creation of safe space; the identification of needs of individuals and communities and the ability to leverage their resources to meet them; and the empowerment of those they served.

The pilot phase also revealed that postures that lead to integrated, holistic ministries to and with young people include availability, consistency, and presence; flexibility and adaptation based on a posture of observation and commitment to diversity; a willingness to collaborate; self-awareness; the cultivation of trust.

## **Interviews**

From the initial list of potential participants of this study, ten ministries were selected in order to further investigate the answers to two questions:

1. What **practices** lead to integrated, holistic ministries to and with young people?
2. What **leadership postures** lead to integrated, holistic ministries to and with young people?

In order to offer counternarratives to those that typically dominate the youth ministry space, leaders of color and lesser known organizations doing effective, holistic ministry with marginalized communities were prioritized from the original list of fifty potential participants.

Emails were sent to the list of ten organizations inviting them to participate in this study and once accepted, asking them to identify and provide contact information (including name,

email address, and phone number) of one young adult over age 18 impacted by their ministry. One-on-one 60-minute virtual interviews with leaders as well as the young adults they nominated were conducted between June and September, 2023 and recorded on the Zoom platform.

Audio interview recordings were transcribed via Descript software. Once transcribed, researchers and research assistants conducted thematic analyses. Each researcher and research assistant reviewed the audio recording to ensure accuracy of transcription. An inductive coding approach was taken by each coder. Inter-rater reliability between youth leaders and their young adult as well as between coders was more than 90 percent.

Because this study is still in progress, this paper's analysis focuses on three noteworthy organizations, which represent approximately 30 percent of the study's participants:

- Center for Faith Justice (CFJ): Located in New Jersey, CFJ develops initiatives to assist those in need and promote justice in the Catholic faith in order to inspire the next generation of leaders. It has provided intense retreat-style service immersion programs to more than 6,000 young adults, several of whom now sit on CFJ's Board of Trustees. Stephanie Peddicord is a White woman who leads CFJ. While her resume does not include a theology degree, her heart for serving young people is undeniable.<sup>22</sup>
- Rosebud Coffee—Coffee with a Cause: What began as a coffee cart that traveled around the Los Angeles area empowering formerly-unhoused young people now serves predominantly Black and Latino young people who are from the Pasadena, CA area. Young people receive two weeks of soft skills training and then three months of a paid internship at the Rosebud Café. After completing their internship, they are welcome to attend any workshop the organization offers beyond their program completion times. This

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<sup>22</sup> Center for Faith Justice: <https://faithjustice.org/>

is one way program graduates are supported until they get a job outside of Rosebud (~2-4 weeks). While Coffee with a Cause is not technically a Christian non-profit, both its founder, Dan Davidson, and current leader, Melissa Spolar, are former pastors who embody love and compassion in their work in Southern California.<sup>23</sup>

- Just Us 4 Youth: In 2015, Just Us 4 Youth started by providing long-term assistance and care for young people and their families. It serves urban inner-city youth in Pomona, CA and has a current constituency of about 85 percent Latino and 10 percent African American young people. Its founder and CEO, Eric Vasquez, believes effective mentoring can bring transformation in the lives of young people. Eric's heart is reflected in Just Us 4 Youth's vision, which is "to positively impact a culture, a community and region by providing an innovative and holistic approach to quality mentoring for urban youth and their communities around the world."<sup>24</sup>

For further validation, initial findings for these three sites were compared to those of the pilot study.

## **Findings**

A careful analysis of both the leader and young adult interviews for each of the three chosen sites as well as a comparison of these results with those of the original pilot study has revealed several practices and leadership postures that lead to integrated, holistic ministries to and with young people.

### **Practices that lead to integrated, holistic ministries to and with young people**

The first cluster of practices that lead to integrated, holistic ministries to and with young

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<sup>23</sup> Coffee with A Cause: <https://www.coffeewithacause.org/>

<sup>24</sup> Just Us 4 Youth: <https://www.ju4y.org/who-we-are>

people center on identity—the leader’s as well as that of the young people they serve. One of the striking findings of this study is that steering integrated, holistic ministries requires leaders to know who they are, be confident in their identity, and lead out of and from their own experiences, including those involving pain and suffering. Just Us 4 Youth’s (JU4Y) founder Eric Vasquez explained, “I lead out of my own pain ...” an understanding that other leaders echoed. He continued, “God made me a certain way and I want to rep that to the fullest.”<sup>25</sup>

Confidence in their own identity enables leaders to better see and speak into the identities of the young people they serve. Leaders in this study recognize young people as beloved children of God. In the words of Vasquez, “God has given me his view of his children.” Leaders see teenagers’ potential, even choosing to classify them as “at promise” rather than “at risk.”<sup>26</sup> They assume that those they serve were given the same set of tools and acquired the same set of skills they received as young people.<sup>27</sup> This perspective allows leaders to see what young people “can’t see in themselves” and intentionally affirm them, which fosters a sense of pride and ownership in youth.<sup>28</sup>

Integrated, holistic ministries to and with young people also encourage both leaders and the youth they serve to bring their full selves to the table, including who they are as people of color, people of faith, and members of marginalized communities. They actively ensure that their leadership represents and reflects those they serve. According to Josey, the young adult interviewee from Just Us 4 Youth, “... I love that the people here look like me, sound like me, act like me, have been through some of the things that I had also been through. And so that helps

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<sup>25</sup> Eric Vasquez, interview by Jennifer Guerra Aldana, July 7, 2023, interview transcripts, Zoom interview.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Melissa Spolar, interview by Roslyn Hernandez, July 21, 2023, interview transcript, Zoom interview.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid. and Eric Vasquez.

a lot.”<sup>29</sup>

Maggie, a young adult from the Center for Faith and Justice (CFJ), also affirmed this. She explained that CFJ creates openness and space for kids and leadership to be themselves and bring ideas that fuel their shared work. This value is also shared by JU4Y, which focuses on “creating a space and environment” that allows young people to be who God created them to be.<sup>30</sup>

The second cluster of practices that lead to integrated, holistic ministries to and with young people focus on belonging. Each of the three organizations that are the focus of this paper all practice accompaniment. In accompaniment, caring adults provide “a loving, faithful, consistent presence” as they walk alongside young people in their daily lives, in “seasons of success and seasons of suffering.”<sup>31</sup>

CFJ practices accompaniment with young people in genuine relationships that are “pure, intergenerational, and mutually enriching.” JU4Y exercises “long-term accompaniment” in relationships that sometimes last for years, far beyond a prescribed amount of time. Vasquez explained, “As [young people] age, that commitment to accompaniment doesn’t leave.” Melissa Spolar, the program manager at Coffee with a Cause, affirmed this, even going so far as to say that it is important for leaders to endure so that they do not become “another person on the list who gives up” on young people.<sup>32</sup>

Holistically-focused organizations often accompany young people through mentoring programs. Stephanie Peddicord, the president of Center for Faith and Justice, clarified that the mentor’s role at CFJ is to be “like Jesus, [to] walk alongside and just listen and accompany.”<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Josey Ramirez, interview by Jennifer Guerra Aldana, July 27, 2023, interview transcripts, Zoom interview.

<sup>30</sup> Maggie Smith, interview by Jennifer Guerra Aldana, July 12, 2023, interview transcripts, Zoom interview.

<sup>31</sup> Eric Vasquez, interview by Jennifer Guerra Aldana, July 7, 2023, interview transcripts, Zoom interview.

<sup>32</sup> Melissa Spolar, interview by Roslyn Hernandez, July 21, 2023, interview transcript, Zoom interview.

<sup>33</sup> Stephanie Peddicord, interview by Jennifer Guerra Aldana, July 6, 2023, interview transcripts, Zoom interview.

Mentoring relationships can be both formal and informal. Formally, organizations often offer apprenticeships in order to intentionally develop leaders. Less formally, they integrate relationships with young people into “normal rhythms” that allow leaders to share their authentic selves with young people on a regular or sometimes even daily basis.<sup>34</sup>

The importance of mentoring cannot be underestimated for forming integrated, holistic ministries. For this reason, neither can the importance of finding mentors. According to Peddicord, “It's the part that we underestimated the most ... We were just like, yeah, we'll sprinkle some mentorship on top. And what a fun, like little add-on that will be. It was sort of a last-minute addition to our program design.”<sup>35</sup> Peddicord now believes mentorship has been the most significant part of CFJ's program.

In addition to investing in people through mentoring relationships, the organizations in this study also facilitate belonging by intentionally building their teams—both their staff and volunteers—through training, empowerment, and care.<sup>36</sup> They believe “leaders aren't just born. They're made.”<sup>37</sup> Because of that, they resource staff and volunteers, meet with them one-on-one, have regular check-ins, assess their strengths, observe them, and offer areas of growth.<sup>38</sup>

The goal of these organizations is to empower staff and volunteers “in their strengths.”<sup>39</sup> This practice necessitates affirming the giftedness of both staff and volunteers and helping them understand that you do not have to be one specific personality type in order to lead. Instead, “what you have to be is open, interested, enthusiastic, and supportive. I mean, these are sort of

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<sup>34</sup> Eric Vasquez, interview by Jennifer Guerra Aldana, July 7, 2023, interview transcripts, Zoom interview.

<sup>35</sup> Stephanie Peddicord, interview by Jennifer Guerra Aldana, July 6, 2023, interview transcripts, Zoom interview.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Eric Vasquez, interview by Jennifer Guerra Aldana, July 7, 2023, interview transcripts, Zoom interview.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Eric Vasquez, interview by Jennifer Guerra Aldana, July 7, 2023, interview transcripts, Zoom interview.



the baseline criteria.”<sup>40</sup>

Organizations also intentionally care for staff and leaders to increase their sense of belonging. As one interviewee whose organization is not featured in this paper (but is part of the full study) explained, she constantly evaluates, "Are my staff experiencing the goodness of God through knowing that I care more about them than the work of their hand?"<sup>41</sup>

The third cluster of practices that lead to integrated, holistic ministries to and with young people focus on purpose and helping people to understand how they can make a difference in the world around them. Unlike many traditional youth ministries, the organizations in this study are committed to ministry that is truly *with* young people and not just *to* them. This kind of commitment necessitates empowering youth by regularly giving them opportunities to make decisions and lead. In other words, these ministries give young people agency. For example, at CFJ, youth drive their justice work, a level of empowerment that also requires organizations to methodically organize themselves.<sup>42</sup>

Another practice that differentiates organizations in this study from those more traditionally associated with effective youth ministries is their focus on holistic practices. These organizations think "discipling people can be anything" and believe that discipleship must emphasize a person's overall well-being.<sup>43</sup> These organizations spend extensive amounts of time listening to their community in order to identify its "basic needs."<sup>44</sup> After learning about their needs, they "link them to ... resources within the organizations."<sup>45</sup> Because they are responsive

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<sup>40</sup> Melissa Spolar, interview by Roslyn Hernandez, July 21, 2023, interview transcript, Zoom interview.

<sup>41</sup> Angela T. Lee, interview by LaTasha Nesbitt, August 23, 2023, interview transcript, Zoom interview.

<sup>42</sup> Stephanie Peddicord, interview by Jennifer Guerra Aldana, July 6, 2023, interview transcripts, Zoom interview & Melissa Spolar, interview by Roslyn Hernandez, July 21, 2023, interview transcript, Zoom interview.

<sup>43</sup> Eric Vasquez, interview by Jennifer Guerra Aldana, July 7, 2023, interview transcripts, Zoom interview.

<sup>44</sup> Eric Vasquez, interview by Jennifer Guerra Aldana, July 7, 2023, interview transcripts, Zoom interview.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

to the needs of the communities they serve, their offerings leave their participants feeling respected and cared for as individuals.<sup>46</sup>

Holistic programs include educational opportunities, entrepreneurship programs, driving lessons, violence intervention prevention efforts, and performing arts lessons/camps, just to name a few. They make a difference in the lives of young people by teaching life “skills that are transferable” like doing taxes, reading leases, and scheduling your calendar.<sup>47</sup> These services are a means to an end—the formation of relationships—rather than an end themselves.<sup>48</sup>

Because they are holistically focused, these organizations also regularly lead efforts in their communities to engage people in “hard conversations” about topics like injustices and “the deep work of reconciliation.”<sup>49</sup>

These three clusters of practices around identity, purpose, and belonging—as well as the specific examples cited within them—were all present in the preliminary findings from the pilot phase, which discovered that practices that lead to integrated, holistic ministries to and with young people include the inclusion of social service components considered atypical in many other ministries; an emphasis on relationships and a focus on mentoring; an investment in developing leaders; a commitment to diversity; the creation of safe space; and the empowerment of those they served.

This phase has not yet confirmed the presence of six additional practices found in the pilot phase to lead to integrated, holistic ministry to and with young people: An unapologetic focus on God and an embodied gospel; success metrics that go beyond numbers; an emphasis

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<sup>46</sup> Melissa Spolar, interview by Roslyn Hernandez, July 21, 2023, interview transcript, Zoom interview.

<sup>47</sup> Melissa Spolar, interview by Roslyn Hernandez, July 21, 2023, interview transcript, Zoom interview. & Eric Vasquez, interview by Jennifer Guerra Aldana, July 7, 2023, interview transcripts, Zoom interview.

<sup>48</sup> Stephanie Peddicord, interview by Jennifer Guerra Aldana, July 6, 2023, interview transcripts, Zoom interview.

<sup>49</sup> Eric Vasquez, interview by Jennifer Guerra Aldana, July 7, 2023, interview transcripts, Zoom interview.

and awareness of assets; intentional, strategic, and collaborative partnerships; the identification of needs of individuals and communities; and the ability to leverage their resources to meet them. Initial hints and discussions with the interviewers suggest these practices might, however, be present in the organizations whose transcripts still need to be coded and analyzed.

### **Leadership postures that lead to integrated, holistic ministries to and with young people**

Just as organizations committed to integrated, holistic ministries to and with young people focus on practices related to purpose, their leaders do too. This study found that missional focus is one leadership posture that leads to integrated, holistic ministries to and with young people. Stephanie Peddicord, the president of Center for Faith and Justice, explained, “I felt really strongly as the president of this organization, if we don't have anything to contribute to this national conversation on youth and disaffiliation and identity, then we need to shut—shut this down and give other people the space to [do so].”<sup>50</sup>

Leaders are committed to their work because they believe it is part of God’s calling on their lives. According to Eric Vasquez, the founder of Just Us 4 Youth, “It's gotta be God pulling you forward and inspiring you in places of prayer where he reveals things to you that move you forward in tough times.”<sup>51</sup>

Integrated, holistic ministries are also fueled by leaders who prioritize their own wholeness. Aware that their work sometimes requires sacrifice, these leaders commit to refilling their own reserves. They know they cannot pour from an empty vessel, so they set and adhere to boundaries and prioritize their own relationship with God. They practice spiritual disciplines that foster their own spiritual health including reading Scripture, fasting, and “literally hitting my

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<sup>50</sup> Stephanie Peddicord, interview by Jennifer Guerra Aldana, July 6, 2023, interview transcripts, Zoom interview.

<sup>51</sup> Eric Vasquez, interview by Jennifer Guerra Aldana, July 7, 2023, interview transcripts, Zoom interview.

knees” to pray.<sup>52</sup> Their spiritual health enables them to embody the love of Christ in all they say and do.<sup>53</sup> Since they know they are loved by God, they are able to "love the unlovable."<sup>54</sup> They are aware of—and even attune to—the working of the Holy Spirit in their lives as well as in the lives of others.<sup>55</sup>

Because they value their own wholeness, leaders are able to bring their authentic selves to the organizations they guide. Young adults interviewed in this study repeatedly emphasized that a leader's authenticity is yet another posture that leads to integrated, holistic ministry. Leaders also know the importance of authenticity. Vasquez affirmed, “Young people will read the wackness and fakeness in you so fast in the urban inner city.”<sup>56</sup>

Still another leadership posture that leads to integrated, holistic ministry to and with young people is the ability to discern and make hard decisions. Vasquez explained, “There are times you kind of got to go out on a limb and make a decision that you know is right before the Lord.”<sup>57</sup> This posture requires leaders to own their decisions, effectively communicate them to their constituencies, make difficult but necessary changes for the sake of young people, and occasionally end programs that were once core to their organization’s identity.<sup>58</sup> For example, Peddicord’s recognition that “high school students are not as able to lean into these programs now as they were five years ago” caused her to let go of programs that “have been [CFJ’s] core identity for a long time.”<sup>59</sup> As these organizations can attest, effective youth ministry happens

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<sup>52</sup> Eric Vasquez, interview by Jennifer Guerra Aldana, July 7, 2023, interview transcripts, Zoom interview.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Stephanie Peddicord, interview by Jennifer Guerra Aldana, July 6, 2023, interview transcripts, Zoom interview.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

when courageous youth leaders are adaptable and remain flexible to change, even when it is disruptive in nature.

While the leaders of the organizations in this research are willing to make difficult decisions, they are also acutely aware that they cannot (and will not) do so in a vacuum. Instead, they are highly relational leaders who value collaboration and make themselves available to those they serve.<sup>60</sup> They collaborate by listening to those they serve *and* those they serve with.<sup>61</sup> They seek “wise counsel” and are open to feedback from others.<sup>62</sup> Even young people in their ministries recognize the humility needed to repeatedly seek feedback from others. Trinity Casey, a young adult involved in Coffee With a Cause’s ministry, called this out as being important in developing trust, which leaders also form by showing genuine interest in people’s lives and respecting who they are and what they do.<sup>63</sup>

Another important posture is a commitment to accountability—both to being held accountable by others and to holding those in their organization accountable to a certain set of standards. Vasquez urged, “You gotta have people in your life, in your corner, asking you the hard questions.”<sup>64</sup>

Finally, leaders committed to integrated, holistic ministry embody a hopeful posture. This was particularly evident as organizations described the impact of the pandemic on them. Like so many other organizations, the pandemic adversely affected those in this study. Their numbers decreased and perhaps more importantly, the marginalized communities they serve were

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<sup>60</sup> Eric Vasquez, interview by Jennifer Guerra Aldana, July 7, 2023, interview transcripts, Zoom interview.

<sup>61</sup> Melissa Spolar, interview by Roslyn Hernandez, July 21, 2023, interview transcript, Zoom interview.

<sup>62</sup> Eric Vasquez, interview by Jennifer Guerra Aldana, July 7, 2023, interview transcripts, Zoom interview.

<sup>63</sup> Melissa Spolar, interview by Roslyn Hernandez, July 21, 2023, interview transcript, Zoom interview.

<sup>64</sup> Eric Vasquez, interview by Jennifer Guerra Aldana, July 7, 2023, interview transcripts, Zoom interview.

adversely impacted by stay-at-home orders that left some teenagers in unsafe environments. In some instances, as with Rosebud, organizations were even unable to accept a cohort into their mentoring program during the pandemic. Even so, leaders remained hopeful. They faced the challenges of the pandemic head on and saw in them unique opportunities that allowed them to innovate. In some instances, they even birthed new programs. For example, Just Us 4 Youth gained Federal contracts to support unaccompanied minors from the US-Mexico border to Pomona.

These leadership postures were also all present in the findings from the pilot phase of the project, which revealed that postures that lead to integrated, holistic ministries to and with young people include availability, consistency, and presence; flexibility and adaptation based on a posture of observation and commitment to diversity; a willingness to collaborate; self-awareness; and the cultivation of trust.

## **Discussion**

As well-established youth ministry models that have historically centered on White, middle-class, suburban models have continued to result in young people drifting away from the church and their faith at alarming rates, the keys to effective ministry may well lie outside the bounds of traditional ministry. The practices being utilized by the innovative ministries interviewed in this study to create integrated, holistic ministries with diverse young people have tremendous implications for other innovative ministries as well as more traditional youth ministries.

**The practices that foster integrated, holistic ministry draw upon and expand well-documented ministry strategies that focus on identity, belonging, and purpose.**

Identity, belonging, and purpose collide in mentoring relationships, which seek to root people's identities in Christ and affirm their worth as beloved children of God; foster belonging by connecting people in intentional relationships; and help people understand how they can make a difference in the world using their unique gifts and calling.

The organizations involved in this study all utilized mentoring in ways that extend beyond a one-day, one-hour commitment to an ongoing desire to do life together. Conversations with young adults during this study revealed they were mentored well and that doing life together directly impacted their faith and connection to God. The consistent presence and affirmation from adults helped young adults understand their spiritual gifts. What's more, the three young adults that were part of the organizations featured in this paper all felt equipped with tools to succeed in the future because of their connection to their mentors and, moreover, to the organization that assisted them. Assuming these results hold in the continued analysis, this suggests the need to talk about and better utilize mentoring in youth ministries of all kinds as a means for effectively engaging young people long-term in faith communities.

**The practices that foster integrated, holistic ministry center those being served.**

Before acting, the organizations featured in this paper unapologetically listened to their communities. Rather than assume they knew what people needed, they asked—and then responded to what they heard—either by connecting the needs to existing facets of their ministries or innovating new solutions to the problems they heard. They sought holistic solutions that addressed real, felt needs and gave young people concrete skills that fostered their overall well-being. Moreover, they first gave those who identified the problem agency in solving it and

then equipped and supported them as leaders. Once again, if these results hold in the continued analysis of this research, this suggests that traditional youth ministry models may need to better center and listen to their constituents and also expand their scope beyond elements typically associated with faith formation (e.g., worship, small groups, and prayer) into needs/asset-based programming that seek to form whole people whose character reflects that of Christ.

**The leadership postures that lead to integrated, holistic ministry are learned; they can be developed in youth leaders everywhere.**

There are common leadership postures present in the leaders of the organizations involved in this research. These common postures, or characteristics, are critical to effective youth ministry and as the leaders of the organizations in this study have shown, they can be intentionally developed in people in a variety of ways, in very different contexts. In many ways, however, these postures run counter to the stereotypical youth leader that is often sought after in traditional youth ministry spaces: The extroverted, dynamic, hip young leader who commands a room. The common presence of these alternative postures in this initial analysis suggests that part of redefining youth ministry may actually be redefining who leads them.

### **Limitations**

Several limitations to this study exist. Though our research team interviewed 20 participants, only 30 percent of the study was coded and analyzed for this project. Hence, the limited sample size could be viewed as a deficit for this study.

The recruitment of the research participants and human bias is another limitation. Youth ministry leaders were asked to recommend young adults or past participants of their programs for the team to interview. Undoubtedly, their bias impacted who they recommended.



Lastly, structured interview instruments can also be limiting. Opponents of structured interviews suggest that participants can only respond to the questions that were asked, which necessarily limits their purview.

In all, small sample sizes, perceived bias in recruitment methods, and the structured interview style are real limitations to this work. In the future, FYI's research team will widen its recruitment strategy beyond initial contacts as well as offer a semi-structured interview style that allows participants and researchers further flexibility in engagement in efforts. Future iterations of results for this particular study will also feature analysis of all 10 organizations and 20 participants.

### **Conclusion**

Though young people drifting away from the church and their faith communities is cause for concern, we believe there is reason to hope. The organizations that were part of this study show us how to lead effective, integrated, holistic ministries that greatly impact young people. Their holistic approach to ministry has proven effective in understanding the identity and purpose of young people that has led to an increased sense of belonging, particularly for young people of color or those in marginalized communities. Their approaches have implications for youth ministries of all kinds that can help stop the exodus of young people from their faith.

The leadership postures identified in this study provide diverse ministries from varied contexts with the anatomy of an effective leader. This anatomy can be developed in leaders everywhere to further prevent young people from drifting from their faith.

This research recognizes some of those ministries that have been hiding in plain sight and have much to teach the larger church. Focusing on the practices and leadership postures they

regularly practice will enable faith communities to redefine ministry for young people so that they stay engaged with their faith into adulthood.