

Gathering anew: Reflections on youth ministry amidst a pandemic

LESLIE FLYNN

Let me begin by explaining that I was a child, pre-teen and then teenager in the Anglican church. From the first moment I entered the church at age 10, I knew this is where I belonged. I have never forgotten that feeling and my relationship with the sacred has grown out of that relationship with the church. This belonging is what drives me to my calling of leading youth in the church and helping them feel like they have a place in this institution that is in constant change and yet doesn't seem to be moving fast enough for them.

Every teen I work with is different, but similar themes emerge in their relationship with the church. These include:

1. I love the community that I have as part of the church.
2. This is the place I have made real friends.
3. My family goes to church, my grandparents and my parents, it's part of family life.
4. My history is attached to the church, childhood memories, confirmation, youth groups, trips such as winter retreats at Sorrento, BCYAYM fall conference and CLAY.
5. I don't connect to the worship in church, I don't feel like the liturgy relates to my life.
6. I don't feel like people hear me, I feel that I am spoken over by adults in the church and I have great ideas if only they would listen.
7. I want to understand God and why it's important to have God as part of my life.
8. God is love.

9. I am passionate about social justice including indigenous rights, LGBTQIA+, climate change and black lives matter.
10. I use technology to connect with my faith, including social media, YouTube and podcasts.

In working with youth through COVID-19 I have seen loss in church which mirrors the wider loss in their worlds. An increased anxiety about the future, a downward spiral in mental health, lack of interaction with peers, a loss of hope and loss of control. Overall, however the church has been able to step up and fill a space for youth during this time. I have seen how church and youth groups have gone from being something that competes with sports, music, school and work to for many it being a central and important part of their weeks.

Many of our teens had grand plans for this summer, they were going to travel, work, have internships and continue with their studies. However, most of these plans needed to be stopped but as a church we were able to continue offering support.

Below are some examples of how COVID-19 was able to address some of themes of our youth's relationship with the church:

1. I have a young adult who is 22 and lives in Coquitlam. She grew up coming to the 10am Sunday service with her parents, but has not found a church in Coquitlam. Since church has moved to weekly Zoom services she has started coming to the services. When I spoke to her about this, she said this has been an extremely hard time for her with school ending and not being able to find a job. Her biggest issue at the moment is lack of community and boredom. She told me that for the first time she was able to come to church without her parents. She was no longer her mother's daughter but was her own person. She said this made her realize how important church actually is to her and that it's something that she wants to continue pursuing as part of her life.
2. In July three parishes in my region ran a virtual day camp. This was great for the campers who came but it was equally important for the 6 youth who came to the church each day, social distanced on their computers to be small group leaders. On the last day of camp, I had one youth approach me and tell me she wanted to start going to a church and asked that I help her find one. Another youth approached me and told me that she would like to start a spiritual discussion group to have deeper conversations about God, faith and life, which we began the following week. In doing

this virtual day camp I had no idea it would be a form of evangelism to our youth.

3. In March we moved our middle school and high school youth groups onto Zoom. This was a challenging change as many of our youth were experiencing Zoom burnout. However, I also received feedback from several parents telling me how bored and lonely their children were. They said having Zoom youth groups allowed them to feel connected society and greatly improved their mental health. We also had a youth who had previously come to youth group who moved about an hour away attend youth group again over Zoom.
4. As the weather grew warmer and we were able to meet safely outside we did that. We also continued meeting over the summer, which was of great benefit to our youth whose plans had been cancelled. I saw throughout the summer relationships that moved to a different level. Instead of being teens who went to youth group together I saw friendships begin to form. I also had many youths say thank you for offering programs throughout the summer.
5. What I had not noticed amongst all these changes was the faith that was changing and growing in my youth. When it came time to nominate youth delegates for Synod and the ecclesiastical election, I had three volunteers. When I asked them why they said that they felt the church was ready to hear them because of the changes they have had to endure. They also spoke about how they need to be louder to make their voices heard because the world needs the church, they need love right now. They feel that the church can be a part this social justice.
6. Another area where I have seen youth benefit is the power dynamic that has switched in the church since COVID-19. Our youth are now being asked to handle the technology for church services. Their gifts are being recognized along with their skills and wisdom. They have been able to get involved in the Sunday morning service, which has not been happening for some time.
7. Lastly, bringing more technology into youth ministry has made me rethink various aspect of my work. I have increased by use of social media to connect with youth, I am able to have Zoom conversations if having a meeting or going to lunch won't fit into their schedules. I am not saying that technology will ever replace those face to face interactions, but it has reminded me and I believe the church that we need to see where we can bend in order to meet this suffering world.

COVID-19 has made me think often about how different the world is for youth now then it was for me. I lived in a world before Facebook, Instagram or Snapchat. I did not feel the same pressures of comparing myself to others while also trying to figure out my place in the world. I was also not part of a generation that was as passionate about helping the world as this one is. COVID-19 has brought grief and loss in the lives of our youth but it has also helped them to see what I have seen in the church since I was a child. COVID-19 has helped create a tighter knit community, opened up conversations about God and how their faith fits into this ever-changing world and for many helped them realize the importance of the church in their lives.