The Faith Formation Leader’s Handbook

A guide for seeking and maintaining a faith formation position in a local church

Southern New England Conference
United Church of Christ
Living the Love & Justice of Jesus

Adapted with permission from
Called To Educational and Formational Ministries,
Association of United Church Educators (www.AUCE-UCC.org)
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This booklet may be found online at
  [https://www.sneucc.org/hiring-faith-formation-and-youth-ministry-leaders](https://www.sneucc.org/hiring-faith-formation-and-youth-ministry-leaders)
  along with the Youth Ministry Leader's Handbook.
Definitions of Faith Formation and Youth Ministry Leaders

Faith Formation Leader
For our purposes here, a faith formation leader is a person experienced in educational/formational ministry in the local church, having had some education, either formal or experiential, and whose gifts are recognized by a congregation through a formalized agreement. Thus, an ordained person, with a master’s degree called to a local church as a minister of education is a faith formation leader, just as a lay person who recently accepted a part-time offer from her or his congregation to oversee the church school is a faith formation leader. Though possessing vastly different education and experience and serving in vastly different roles, both have in common the fact that a local church recognizes its need for a staff person responsible for faith formation ministries and selects or calls the appropriate person to serve in that role.

Youth Ministry Leader
A youth ministry leader is much the same as a faith formation leader except that their focus of ministry is in working with and ministering specifically to teenagers. Again, education and experience will vary. The exact definition of “youth” should be determined by each individual congregation.

In order to determine whether your congregation requires a volunteer or paid Christian educator or youth ministry leader, consider the descriptions that follow:

Volunteer
A volunteer faith formation or youth ministry leader should be considered a part of the church staff, even though he or she is not paid. The support, training, and communication with the pastor, other members of the church’s staff and this volunteer are required for an effective working relationship resulting in an effective ministry. The absence of a salary should in no way diminish the value and quality of the expectations of the volunteer who takes on this important ministry. All expenses and supplies need to be reimbursed. If the congregation determines that it requires tasks of the faith formation or youth ministry leader that need more education and background such as training, specific skills, knowledge of educational and developmental theories, and biblical and theological training, it should consider making this a paid position.

Employed Layperson
Laypersons who serve as faith formation and/or youth ministry leaders may not view their work as a calling, yet they may find enough enjoyment and fulfillment in these positions to willingly dedicate their time and energy to the children, youth, and adults they serve in a paid staff position.

Employed Authorized Minister
In the United Church of Christ, many ministers of faith formation and/or youth ministry are ordained. An ordained minister is a minister of word and sacrament having taken a few, one, or no Christian education or youth ministry courses in seminary, as some seminaries do not require these courses for graduation.
Southern New England Conference Certified Faith Formation &/or Youth Ministry Leader
A paid professional who has completed the course work and other requirements for certification in the Southern New England Conference's Faith Formation Leadership Certificate Program (https://www.sneucc.org/certification).

Contractor or Consultant
A consultant is generally contracted by the project rather than working a set number of hours. As a contractor, he/she is self-employed and as such is responsible for providing his/her own resources, primary office, and benefits. The hourly or unit rate is thus higher than for a typical employee.

How a Consultant May Be Utilized
• Develop with and for the congregation a program for faith formation. This could include an overview of the church year, an outline for weekly programming, and long range plans for the program.
• Recruit volunteers and serve as a mentor to them, providing leadership training, program evaluation, and resources.
• Serve as an interim faith formation and/or youth ministry staff person.
• Serve as a resource person to boards and committees responsible for youth ministry and/or youth ministry personnel. This may include developing a job description, compensation recommendations, clarification of goals and strategies, and assisting in the search process. (Your Southern New England Conference Faith Formation Team is available for this type of support through the offerings your congregation already gives to support the Conference: https://www.sneucc.org/faith-formation-team.)
• Serve as a mentor for a faith formation and/or youth ministry staff person, providing resources, support, and guidance for a specific period of time.

A Note About These Categories
Although the descriptions above seem to fit nicely into labeled boxes, the educational background of faith formation and/or youth ministry leaders can be as different and varied as each individual. Some discover their call to be a faith formation and/or youth ministry leader early on, and are able to follow a college (and sometimes graduate school) curriculum that gives them a good academic background in Bible, theology, and developmental and educational theory. Others arrive at a position in faith formation ministries much later, but are able to use their life experiences in the church, as well as their secular employment experience, to carry out their responsibilities effectively.

It should also be mentioned that the course of study that most ordained ministers undertake in seminary does not include training in faith formation and/or youth ministry. Be sure to talk with prospective ordained candidates to find out what their training and experience has been with children and teens, rather than assume that their process to ordination included such training. It will be up to the search committee to examine the education and training background of the candidates they interview for the congregation's faith formation and/or youth ministry position.
Strengthening the Leadership of Faith Formation and Youth Ministry Leaders
Marks of Faithful and Effective Christian Education/Formation Practitioners

Able to think critically.

Engages the stories of the Christian faith and the stories of God’s people throughout time and history.

Engages in sacramental living and recognizes the power of ritual and practice to form and transform the life of faith.

Engages in professional development as time and resources allow.

Knowledge and understanding of human, faith, generational, and spiritual developmental theories and research.

Able to translate theological and biblical concepts across age levels and life stages.

Able to utilize varied teaching and learning styles across age levels and life stages.

Has knowledge and understanding of multiple intelligence theories and cultural frameworks for learning.

Able to present and engage learners in processes of guided discovery that lead to the learners’ insights and decisions.

Is self-aware and engaged in his/her own experience and story of faith.

Is committed to and participates in intentional continuing education that develops increased levels of expertise and experience.

Engages in ongoing development of (professional) relationships with peers/colleagues through informal and formal networks and organizations (i.e. Association of United Church Educators, Religious Education Association).

Actively engages in and is knowledgeable of the denomination’s expressions of basic history, identity, and ethos, including justice, global, interfaith, and ecumenical perspectives, and is able to relate them across age levels, life stages, and individual faith history.

Advocates on behalf of each group within a congregation for intentional faith formation.

Advocates for appropriate faith formation and engagement which addresses the particular needs of all populations within the congregation.

https://www.auce-ucc.org
Engages with and participates in all aspects of a congregation’s ministry and mission and advocates for a faith formation perspective throughout all aspects of the congregation’s ministry and mission.

Actively engages in a regular practice of goal setting and assessment of the work/ministry in cooperation with the congregation he/she serves.

Able to teach others to teach—not as the sole faith former/educator of the congregation, but teaching with others and beside others.

Able to lead and equip others to lead, develop programs, and fashion faith formation within the congregation.

Models and maintains healthy boundaries in all aspects of the faith community life and in all relationships within the community of faith he or she serves.
The Church Educator’s Code

The Ministry of Church Education
I believe that God calls the whole church and every member to participate in and extend the ministry of Jesus Christ; that the privilege and responsibility of witnessing to the gospel in church and society belongs to every baptized Christian; that God empowers the ministry of the church and its members by the Holy Spirit; that the church nurtures faith, evokes gifts, and equips its members for service; and that God calls certain of the church’s members to various forms of ministry in and on behalf of the Church.

I have been called by God to be a minister and servant of Jesus Christ in a ministry of education in the United Church of Christ, a church attentive to the Word, inclusive of all people, responsive to God’s call, and supportive of one another.

I will seek to witness to the ministry of Jesus Christ.
I will faithfully and diligently perform the work of ministry to which I have been called.

Partnership in Ministry
I will nurture and offer my gifts for the teaching ministry of the church. I will seek to call forth and nurture the gifts of others for the sake of the mission of Jesus Christ.

I will seek to understand, support, and interpret the diverse ministries of the United Church of Christ and its members as carried out throughout the world.

I will work cooperatively and collegially with those with whom I serve in ministry.

I will stand in a supportive relationship with, and for the rights of, my staff colleagues, offering and receiving counsel and support in times of need.

I will be an advocate for fair and just employment standards for all employees of the church, particularly in the place where I serve.

I will be a responsible participant in the life and work of the local church, association, conference, and national settings of the United Church of Christ.

I will be a responsible representative of the Church Universal and participate in those activities which strengthen its unity, witness, and mission.

I will seek the counsel of the appropriate body and persons in local, conference, or association settings should divisive tensions threaten my relationship with those with whom I minister.

The Ethics of Ministry
I will regard and minister to all persons with equal respect and concern.
I will honor all confidences shared with me with the exception of times when I am legally bound to share information.

I will honor my legal and moral obligations where appropriate to disclose and report to civil and/or ecclesiastical authorities situations of actual or pending harm to myself or others. I will not use my position, power, or authority to exploit or harass any person for sexual, financial, or other personal gain.

I will adhere to my setting’s policy statements concerning appropriate and ethical behavior.

I will diligently care for the health and safety of those in my charge.

I will not misuse the finance of the institution which I serve.

I will deal honorably with the record of my predecessor.

I will not, upon my termination and departure from a ministry position, interfere with nor intrude upon the ministry of my successor.

**Growth in Ministry**
I will seek to grow in faith, knowledge, and the practice of educational ministry through intentional continuing education, study leave/sabbatical, membership in relevant professional organization(s), ongoing study, and worship and devotional life.

I will encourage and participate in the periodic evaluation of my ministry.

I will cooperate with the appropriate certifying and/or authorizing bodies in the periodic review of my ministry.

**Commitments to Self and Family**
I will honor my commitments to my family and to myself.

I will honor my need for time for physical and spiritual renewal, recreation, and vacation.

I will honor my family’s need for privacy and time together as well as my own need for privacy.

I will be a responsible steward of my personal and family finances. I will honor and accept responsibility for all debts which I incur.

I will attend to my physical well-being and avoid abusive behaviors and abusive use of substances.

Relying on the grace of God, I will lead a life worthy of the calling to which I have been called.

*The Church Educator’s Code Guide for Conversation and Planning may be found, along with The Code, by visiting:*

https://www.auce-ucc.org/professional-support
A Covenant for Church Youth Ministries

This “Covenant for Church Youth Ministries” is inspired by and adapted from “The National Charter,” a similar set of promises promoted in the United Kingdom by two organization — the Association of Christian Youth and Children’s Workers, and Youthwork — a collaboration of organizations working together to resource and inspire Christian youth work. We are grateful to the Eastern Ohio Association of the United Church of Christ, which obtained permission from these UK organizations to draw upon and modify the contents of “The National Charter” for use in this covenant. It is shared here with their permission and blessings.

1. **We will pray and support.**
   We believe that our youth ministry leaders need spiritual support in their work with young people.
   We promise to pray for our youth ministry leaders and keep their needs a high priority in church prayer life.

2. **We will acknowledge the importance of gifts and God’s call.**
   We believe that gifts and call are best discerned in the context of the faith community.
   We promise to provide opportunities for prayerful discernment.

3. **We will provide opportunities for retreat and reflection.**
   We believe that taking time to think and pray is just as essential for our youth ministry leaders as organizing events and meeting young people.
   We promise to provide opportunities for our youth ministry leaders to use part of their schedules for retreat, reflection, worship and personal development.

4. **We will provide ongoing training and development.**
   We believe that maintaining the gifts and skills of the youth ministry leaders is an ongoing process and that it is important to continually invest in professional development.
   We promise to set aside time and money to provide this for our youth ministry leaders.

5. **We will give a full day of rest each week.**
   We believe that taking regular time off helps maintain our youth ministry leaders’ passion and energy for their work with young people.
   We promise to actively encourage our youth ministry leaders to take a day away from their role each week.

6. **We will share responsibility as a priesthood of all believers.**
   We believe that having a youth ministry leader does not release the rest of the church from our responsibilities toward young people.
   We promise to encourage everyone to play a part in volunteering, praying for and supporting young people.
7. **We will celebrate and appreciate.**
   We believe it is vital to acknowledge what our youth ministry leaders are doing and the commitment they have made to work with young people in our church. We promise to make sure our youth ministry leaders know they are appreciated and we will celebrate their achievements.

8. **We will strive to be a just employer.**
   We believe it is important to have clear structures and procedures for recruiting and employing youth ministry leaders, and to provide supportive management structures which are fair and just. We promise to follow non-exploitive practices in the way we employ our youth ministry leaders.
Faith Formation Leadership Certificate Program

https://www.sneucc.org/certification

Classes may be taken as either part of the certificate program or as stand-alone workshops
Participants may choose to take classes either as stand-alone opportunities, or as part of a process for certification in faith formation leadership in the Southern New England Conference UCC.

Classes are for anyone with a passion for faith formation and/or youth ministries
While designed for the Southern New England Conference, anyone — both lay leaders and authorized ministers — within or beyond the United Church of Christ and southern New England, may participate, with the understanding that the focus will be on ministry within a United Church of Christ congregation.

Faith formation and youth ministry for the 21st Century
Our instructors are selected for their experience and expertise in their specific ministries, and who present best practices and teaching methods for forming faith and making disciples in today’s congregations, particularly during this post-pandemic time.

Classes offered over the course of two years
Visit https://www.sneucc.org/certification to view the list of class for the current program year and to register.

✴ Engaging Our Sacred Scripture’s Story
✴ Serving Together — Mission For All Ages
✴ Boundary Awareness for Faith Formation & Youth Ministry Leaders
✴ Exploring Curriculum & Digital Resources
✴ Developing Faith — Ages & Stages
✴ Living Into the Mystery — Worship & Sacraments in the United Church of Christ
✴ Making Disciples — Theories & Practices for the 21st Century
✴ Faith Formation 101 — Practices for a Sustainable Ministry
✴ Youth Ministry 101 — Practices for a Sustainable Ministry
✴ Creating Safe Environments — Policies & Practices
✴ Racial Justice
Seeking a Call
Discerning Your Call to Faith Formation Ministries

Discernment is an important process in saying “yes.” It is important in determining if the work of leading faith formation ministries as an employee of a local congregation is right for you. The following questions for reflection will enable you to consider your sense of a call to this work. Your reflection process will be most effective if used as a tool for conversation with a trusted advisor, mentor, or church leader.

- What is my passion or my “Why”? View these videos by Simon Sinek and Michael Jr. for powerful explanations of discovering your “Why.”
  - Start with Why (Simon Sinek): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TDi4hzRIrgc
  - Know Your Why (Michael Jr.): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1ytFB8TrkTo

- Am I good at my passion? In what ways?
- What are areas for improvement?
- How does this passion fit within a faith community? (“I’m not sure” is a valid answer.)
- Describe faith experiences that have helped you discern or name your call.
- Who are the individuals who have helped encourage or affirm my passion and/or call?

Next Steps
Action steps enable you to put your passion into action in the ministry of the church. Complete the following tasks and respond to the questions to begin taking the next steps:

- List two next steps that you can take to explore how your passion (and call) find a place in your/a church?
- List two next steps that you can take to develop your skills for carrying out your passion (and call).
- With whom should you discuss enacting your passions (and call)?
- Who can assist you in naming or living out these next steps successfully?

After completing this reflection process, and if your “yes” is affirmed, contact your SNEUCC Faith Formation Team (https://www.sneucc.org/faith-formation-team) for assistance in getting started on the next step of your journey!

Adapted from a document created by Ashley Grant and edited by Karen Ziel
Self Assessment

While the questions that follow are written for a person currently engaged in faith formation ministries, persons seeking their first call are encouraged to reflect on the same questions, adapting them to their present employment and/or volunteer setting, even if secular.

Leadership Effectiveness

Achievements
1. List the achievements of the past year in your faith formation ministry. (These may be activities, events, services which occurred for the first time or continuing ministries which were effectively sustained.)

2. Identify three things you would do differently if you were facing the same issues and circumstances again. Why?

Interactions
3. Reflect on individuals with whom you have interacted in the course of fulfilling your faith formation ministry role. Are you able to identify persons who have responded enthusiastically to your efforts? In what way(s) have they done so?

Goals and Objectives
4. What were your goals and objectives for the previous year? Did you establish them or were they developed by a group assigned to this task? Did you work with that group?

5. Evaluate these goals and objectives in terms of the following:
   a) Which ones were achieved?
   b) Which ones were not fully achieved, but made progress?
   c) Which ones were abandoned or not achieved?
   d) Which ones (in your judgement) were not helpful to individual faith development or to the building of a faith community (whether achieved or not)?
   e) Which goals were established by sources external to you and were they achieved? Why or why not?

6. Reflect on the reasons for each of your responses to a) through e) above.

7. List the goals and objectives you would like to propose and implement for the coming year.

Leadership Style
8. Examining your own leadership style(s), what would you like to change in order to be more effective in working with people or in coordinating the faith formation ministries? Why? What do you feel is good and should continue and why?

Visibility and Support
9. How do you sense the people you are called to serve receive the faith formation ministry you are engaged in? Do you have a network of colleagues, staff, or volunteers to provide feedback on a regular basis? How has it been helpful or not helpful?
10. Is your role visible to the congregation? Is there understanding of what you do behind the scenes? Is that work valued? Is more interpretation needed? If so, how can that be achieved? What is your image as a faith formation ministry leader within the congregation? In the community? Among the children and youth? Among parents and other adults? Within the official board or church council? How are you described?

11. Have you received adequate support from the committees, task forces, and boards that work alongside you? Is there appropriate attendance at the meetings of these groups? Is there a balanced sharing of tasks or did you do much that could be delegated? Is there a healthy flow of ideas and suggestions for programs, procedures and improvements? Is the climate congenial and positive? Are meetings purposeful, well organized, and personally supportive of participants? Is the Christian faith lived out in this support?

**Personal and Professional Development**

**Caring For Yourself**

12. Do you have enough time for yourself, for rest, recreation, friends, and family? If not, how can you re-arrange your work patterns to correct those limitations?

**Job Description**

13. Is your salary and benefit package adequate or do you need to advocate for improvement? Can you identify someone who can help you with your salary and benefits?

14. What continuing education experiences have you had in the past year? In what areas could you benefit from continuing education opportunities to strengthen your ministry? Where and how can you secure these opportunities?

15. Review your job or position description. Are there changes that need to be made in emphasis or priority? What are they? How can you advocate for these changes most effectively? If the changes are made, will you be comfortable in the new roles or with the revised priorities?

**Involvement Beyond Your Current Ministry Setting**

**Related Involvement Outside of Your Church**

16. In what denominational, community, and ecumenical activities were you involved during this past year? How do you feel about your contributions and the effectiveness of these ministries? Are you overly involved? Are questions being raised about the level of your involvement?

**Staff Relationships**

17. On a scale of 1-10, how would you rate your relationship with your senior pastor? Does it need to be improved? In what ways? Are there some issues of leadership, style, or substance that need attention? What are they? Do you feel comfortable in your relationship?

20. How is your working and personal relationship with other staff members? Are there issues that need to be resolved? Can you manage those issues or must other persons or committees/boards resolve them with you?
Developing a Resume

A resume is a concise summary of your skills, background, and credentials. It communicates a maximum amount of relevant information through a minimum number of words. A resume is a capsulized biography designed to persuade an employer to grant you an interview or to request your formal application. In the United Church of Christ, lay faith formation ministry leaders may use resumes when searching for a position on a church staff. (Faith formation and youth ministry leaders who are authorized ministers are encouraged to prepare a UCC Ministerial Profile, as described in the next section.) When desiring to communicate specifically about faith formation ministry experience and skills, a resume is an important tool.

Formats
There are two types of resumes: chronological and functional. The following definitions and sample resumes are provided to assist you in discerning which is most appropriate for your use.

Chronological
The chronological resume format is the most common one used and reveals your employment, education, activities, and other information in chronological order, with the most recent event listed first under each heading. This format is best used when your vocational direction is clear and the position you seek is directly in line with your employment experience and history.

Functional
This format is most often used in cases of career change, redirection, or re-entry when you wish to emphasize areas of ability and potential rather than your work history. A functional resume allows you to highlight major areas of accomplishment and competencies and to organize them in the order that best supports your vocational objectives and desired employment positions.

Developing a Strong Resume
Sell yourself
Create a good first impression by highlighting your skills and abilities appropriate to the position you are seeking. Look at your transferable skills and how they can be used in the new position.

Use active language
Always use action words and articulate marketable skills acquired through your previous positions.

Be consistent
Choose a pattern of spacing, an order of information presentation or format of highlighting and be consistent throughout.

Clarify your history
When preparing a chronological resume, present the information in reverse chronological order.

List education and work experience
Start with the most recent first.
Check your grammar
Misspellings and poorly constructed sentences communicate negative impressions about a candidate. Have someone else proofread your resume and make comments.

Create a positive impression
If not using an online form, ensure that your resume is neat and visually appealing. If you make hard copies, choose a simple font, such as Helvetica, Calibri, Didot, Garamond, or Times New Roman. Choose high quality paper in white, off-white or other neutral colors. If possible, have the final version professionally reproduced.

Research sample resumes
An online search will provide you with a variety of sample resume formats and tips. Some churches will ask you to submit your resume information in an online form. Keeping the above content suggestions in mind will help you to paint a good picture of yourself and your skill, even in the online format.

**Other Helpful Do’s and Don’ts**
- Do be honest.
- Do reflect your uniqueness.
- Do design it to pique the curiosity of the reader, rather than answer all questions.
- Do be consistent in format.
- Do write in phrases, rather than complete sentences.
- Do keep it short.

- Don’t include personal information such as birth date, height, weight, marital status, number of dependents, or health.
- Don’t mail a resume to a prospective church or placement person without an accompanying cover letter.
Example of a Chronological Resume

Name
Street or P.O. Box address
City, State, and Zip
Telephone
E-mail

**Vocational Objective** (be as specific as possible)
Brief description of the type of position for which you wish to be considered. If you are unwilling to relocate, your geographic preference should be indicated in this section.

**Summary of Qualifications** (Work experience and education)
Name of seminary, college/university, technical/vocational school, and/or high school, dates attended, degrees received, and major field. List significant information about related coursework relevant to the vocational objectives. Also, include any relevant information about thesis, related research work, field experiences, workshops and seminars, special skills, etc.

**Activities**
Organizations, memberships and other pertinent information. Be sure to include any areas of service and/or committee memberships beyond your local church (i.e., camp directing, Association, Conference, or national committee memberships).

**Special Skills**
If you have other assets, skills or experiences significant to your career objective which may not be easily organized under another heading, they may be included here.

**References**
Furnished upon request.
Example of a Functional Resume

Name
Street or P.O. Box address
City, State, and Zip
Telephone
E-mail

Vocational Objective (be as specific as possible)
Brief description of the type of position for which you wish to be considered. If you are unwilling to relocate, your geographic preference should be indicated in this section.

Professional Skills
List three or four functional skills in order of importance. The skills most related to your present job objectives should be listed first. Within each skill area, stress the ones most directly related to accomplishments, results produced and tasks performed that indicate you do indeed possess each stated functional skill.

Employment History (or work experience)
List position title, organization, institution or company, and dates of employment.

Education
Name of seminary, college/university, technical/vocational school, and/or high school, dates attended, degrees received, and major field. List significant information about related coursework relevant to the vocational objectives. Also, include any relevant information about thesis, related research work, field experiences, workshops and seminars, special skills, etc.

References
Furnished upon request.
Preparing a Ministerial Profile

All United Church of Christ authorized ministers are encouraged to use the UCC Search and Call process and prepare a Ministerial Profile.

Visit the United Church of Christ’s Ministerial Profile webpage, which includes a video tutorial of the online Profile system, to get started: https://www.ucc.org/what-we-do/justice-local-church-ministries/local-church/mesa-ministerial-excellence-support-and-authorization/ministerial-profiles-external-site/
Networking for a Job Search

Your credentials are set. Your resume or Ministerial Profile is finished and polished to your satisfaction. Your references are all lined up. Now what?

Talk To People
The best way to find a good job is through talking to people with contacts and connections in your chosen field. Networking is a process of developing and involving contact persons to research and solve problem issues, like finding a job. It is a simple process of talking to people who refer you to other people. There are a number of ways to begin to network as a part of your job search; several are listed here.

Local Faith Formation Leader Meetings
First, do your homework by checking to see if there is a local gathering of faith formation ministry leaders. These gatherings can take a variety of forms. The Association of United Church Educators (www.AUCE-UCC.org) may have a regional, conference or a local chapter in your area that holds periodic gatherings of Christian educators and youth ministry leaders for study and renewal. The Southern New England Conference has Communities of Practice for faith formation and youth ministry leaders. Contact the Faith Formation Team (https://www.sneucc.org/faith-formation-team) for more information and to connect with the Community of Practice nearest you. These gatherings are excellent opportunities to meet other faith formation and youth ministry leaders to find out current information on everything from curriculum to the best ministry practices. These people may also be in a good position to know about current and potential job openings.

Conference Staff
Network with Conference and Association staff (https://www.sneucc.org/your-conference-staff), and be sure to visit the Southern New England Conference Classifieds page at https://www.sneucc.org/classifieds.

Talk With Your Pastor
If you intend to begin networking with the goal of leaving your current position, it would be best that your pastor not hear this from someone else. Your pastor may be the perfect person to start with, especially if they have been encouraging your professional development. They may be in the best position to give you advice and direction on how to make the changes you feel you need to make. However, if one of your reasons for making a change is that your relationship with the pastor is not a good one, you may want to defer that conversation while networking quietly and in a confidential manner.

Search the United Church of Christ Ministry Opportunities Listing
The following link takes you to a searchable database, updated in real time, that includes employment and other opportunities for clergy and laypersons in the United Church of Christ. http://oppsearch.ucc.org/web/default.aspx

Expressing Thanks
A key part of networking is acknowledging the assistance you received from your contacts. A note or card is one way to express your gratitude but even a phone call or e-mail will be appreciated.
Signing a Contract or Letter of Call

Whether a faith formation ministry leader is called or hired, a written contract is to be negotiated and signed. The position may be part-time or full-time, but careful attention should be given to the terms of the contract to avoid future conflict and misunderstanding.

Several key questions must be answered and/or clarified by the faith formation ministry leader and the local church before signing the document. The written document must be carefully studied and all items considered conscientiously.

Expectations and commitments of both the faith formation ministry leader and the local church or the calling body should be in the document, to serve as a guide for both parties regarding the performance of the responsibilities and accountability of everyone involved.

Job Description
✓ Are the areas of primary and secondary responsibility clearly defined?
✓ If the position is part-time, are the hours expected specified? Is compensation provided for extra hours worked?
✓ Could accountable extra hours be applied as compensated time off?
✓ Will there be time off for weekend seminars and conferences?
✓ How will involvement with the association, conference, national, and ecumenical settings be addressed?
✓ What are your responsibilities for worship, visiting parishioners, meeting with committees and boards?
✓ To whom are you accountable? Who will sign your contract on behalf of the church?

Compensation
✓ Are all terms, salary, and benefits agreed upon and understood?
✓ If part-time, what benefits will the church provide?
✓ What has been determined with regard to insurance, annuity, vacation time, educational allowance (books, publications, professional memberships (such as the Association of United Church Educators — [https://www.auce-ucc.org](https://www.auce-ucc.org)), and seminar dues and travel expenses to seminars and conferences), mileage?
✓ If you are ordained, is there a housing allowance?
✓ How many weeks of paid vacation are provided? Is there a time of the year when vacation must be taken? or may not be taken?

Evaluation/Assessment
✓ Is there an evaluation process established for all staff? What is the process and who is part of it?
✓ Is this process separate from any salary negotiations?
✓ Is there a provision in the agreement for you to meet with the evaluation committee privately?
✓ How often does the evaluation takes place?
Support
✓ Is there a support system for all staff?
✓ Who makes up your support network or committee? Do they understand their role in caring, giving affirmations of appreciation, clarification, and constructive criticism?
✓ Are they comfortable being the channel of communication between the faith formation ministry leader and the congregation?

Administrative Office Support
✓ Although most faith formation ministry leaders are familiar with the use of digital technology, it is necessary to clarify how much administrative support will be provided.
✓ Will preparation outside the actual performance of the responsibility be counted as part of the contractual time?

Separation Issues
✓ How much notice is required by either party to terminate the agreement?
✓ In the event of termination without cause, what does the severance package provide? How are benefits handled?
✓ Who will represent the church in the event of a separation?

Supporting the Relationship Between the Faith Formation Ministry Leader and the Local Church

Love God.
Service of Covenanting
for the Faith Formation and/or Youth Ministry Leader

This service of worship and covenanting should be welcoming of children and youth by incorporating the arts and as many of the five senses as possible, as well as leadership by children at appropriate times. Adapt as needed for your particular congregation.

PRELUDE

OPENING STATEMENT

Dear Friends in Christ,
Our ministry to youth celebrates the love of God for all God’s children, even as it celebrates our hope for the church of today and tomorrow.

HYMN: Called as Partners in Christ's Service  TNCH #495
or
Jesus Loves Me  TNCH #327
or a hymn/song of your choice

INVOCATION

WORDS OF INTRODUCTION

[Name of faith formation and/or youth ministry leader, and their title] stands before you as the person with whom we entrust this ministry on behalf of our church family.
[A member of the Faith Formation and/or Youth Ministry Committee/Board or other appropriate group shall interpret the purpose of this service of covenanting. They should tell the congregation something of the youth ministry leader's background and welcome them on behalf of the congregation.]
As [name of faith formation and/or youth ministry leader] builds trusted relationships with the youth in our congregation, we are reminded that this is an opportunity for all of us to learn, to grow in faith, and to serve together. As [name of faith formation and/or youth ministry leader] ministers in God’s service, it is our responsibility to support them with our engagement, our cooperation, and our prayers.

HEBREW SCRIPTURE
Choose from Deuteronomy 6:4-9; Psalm 25:4-10, or a Hebrew scripture from your choice.

(YOUTH) CHOIR ANTHEM OR SPECIAL MUSIC OFFERING

CHRISTIAN SCRIPTURE
Choose from Ephesians 4:1-16; 1 Corinthians 12:4-31, or a Christian scripture from your choice.
COVENANT

**Pastor:** Dear friends, [name of church] has declared that, having gathered under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, it has called [name of faith formation and/or youth ministry leader] to minister in this place as [title of position] and that it now receives them as appointed by God for this ministry.

[Name of faith formation and/or youth ministry leader], are you willing to enter this covenant with [name of church]?

**Faith Formation and/or Youth Ministry Leader:** I am willing, and I promise to serve this church faithfully, teaching the word of God, according to the faith and order of the United Church of Christ.

**Pastor:** People of [name of church], please rise in body or in spirit and affirm your covenant with your youth ministry leader.

**Congregation:** We, the people of [name of church], receive [name of faith formation and/or youth ministry leader] as our [title of position], promising to labor with them in the ministry of the gospel and to give them due honor and support.

**CHARGE TO THE FAITH FORMATION AND/OR YOUTH MINISTRY LEADER**

[Name of faith formation and/or youth ministry leader], may the Holy Spirit guide and strengthen you, that in this faith community, you may do God's will in the service of Christ. On behalf of this congregation, we commend you to this work and promise you our prayers, encouragement, nurture, and support.

**RESPONSE BY THE FAITH FORMATION AND/OR YOUTH MINISTRY LEADER (optional)**

A statement of faith incorporating the faith formation and/or youth ministry leader's understanding of and hopes for the faith formation ministries of the church, utilizing visuals and symbols of education/formation and/or youth ministries.

At this time, simple gifts of symbols of faith formation and/or youth ministry may be presented to the faith formation and/or youth ministry Leader to exemplify these promises, this work, and the congregation's support.

**PRAYER OF DEDICATION**

Great and gracious God, be with [name of faith formation and/or youth ministry leader] who has now affirmed their commitment to follow Christ and to serve in his name. Give them openness, patience, and vision. Strengthen us all as we follow Christ's example and way of love and service to others. We pray this in your glory. Amen.

**HYMN:** You Are Called to Tell the Story  TNCH #357

or hymn/song of your choice

**BENEDICTION**
Establishing a Faith Formation and/or Youth Ministry Committee

Adapted from The Youth Ministry Handbook, Rev. Kim Mislin, First Congregational Church, Bakersfield, CA. Used by permission.

Note: This article is intended for larger congregations with a good number of children and youth. The information provided is still important, but should be adapted by each individual congregation to meet its unique ministry needs.

No one person should be responsible for all aspects of faith formation and/or youth ministries. There must be shared leadership and a network of accountability, even if the church has only fifty members and four children/youth. Without this, the church leaves itself open to the potential for significant liability. The easiest way to establish this network of accountability is by establishing a Committee for Faith Formation and/or Youth Ministries that is accountable to the governing body of the church, and works closely and cooperatively with the hired faith formation and/or youth ministry leader(s).

The group that the Committee for Faith Formation and/or Youth Ministries reports to should have a member of the Committee as a voting member. This person serves as the link between both groups.

The establishment of a Committee for Faith Formation and/or Youth Ministries makes a clear statement about the desire to be involved, and intention in having a high quality program for its children and youth. This positive approach provides a good foundation for the ministry.

A Committee for Faith Formation and/or Youth Ministries should include representation from the governing body that the Committee reports to, parents, the youth themselves, other pertinent staff, and other interested persons.

If youth activities such as choirs, service clubs, and sporting groups are also considered to be youth ministry activities, then representatives of these groups should also be voting members of the Faith Formation and/or Youth Ministries Committee. The goal is to provide a voice for all aspects of the children and/or youth ministries, enriched by the viewpoints of those not directly involved in this ministry, thereby providing balance.

The Committee for Faith Formation and/or Youth Ministries should exercise leadership in the following ways:

1. Establish a Mission Statement of the vision, objectives, and theology of the youth ministry program.

2. Establish in writing clear guidelines and procedures for all youth ministry activities, regularly reviewed and modified as needed. Guidelines and procedures should include fiscal matters, so that those involved in youth ministry are aware of the financial resources available to the program, such as a fund-raising policy, for instance.

3. Review and approve youth ministry activities before they occur. It will be up to the committee to decide which activities require approval.

4. Act as an advocate for the youth and for the adult leaders with prayer, affirmation, and support. Find opportunities to publicly acknowledge the youth and their adult leaders.
5. Mediate difficulties and disputes that involve the youth and/or the youth ministry program modeling positive conflict management and communication skills so that problems are dealt with directly and in a respectful, timely manner.

After a committee is established, it should be publicly recognized in a worship service in whatever way is consistent with the particular faith tradition. In this way the entire church acknowledges and empowers this very important ministry.

One of the first tasks of this committee should be to discuss and draw up a covenant for working with the staff member(s) responsible for faith formation and/or youth ministries, outlining specific roles, relationships, and expectations of each party.

The Faith Formation and/or Youth Ministry Committee should meet monthly for the purpose of being consistently and faithfully involved in the children’s and/or youth ministry program. Once a committee is established and becomes comfortable with a routine, an hour should be sufficient for conducting most business. A sample agenda for a routine meeting is as follows:

1. Prayer
2. Sharing of joys and concerns
3. Review of events requiring approval and any other business
4. Long-range planning
5. Other business
6. Affirmation of youth and leaders
7. Prayer

The Committee for Faith Formation and/or Youth Ministries should report monthly to the committee or governing body to which it is accountable. In this way, open communication will be maintained and the children’s and/or youth ministry program stands a better chance of being integrated into the overall church ministry.

A planning retreat is often helpful when a committee first forms. A retreat can be a wonderful time for relationship-building and dreaming, as well as designing concrete guidelines and plans.
Ongoing Nurture and Support

Adapted from Called To Educational and Formational Ministries: A Guide for Local Churches, Educators, and Youth Workers, Association of United Church Educators. Used by permission.

Support Group
The Southern New England Conference provides its faith formation and youth ministry leaders with Communities of Practice. These groups of local church faith formation and youth ministry leaders meet regularly with colleagues from the same geographic area to share best practices and networking opportunities. Contact a member of the Faith Formation Team for more information: https://www.sneucc.org/faith-formation-team.

Personnel Committee
If there is a separate personnel committee, be sure that new staff members are connected and have regular meetings with that group. The policies of your congregation will act as a guide to the frequency of the meeting. These meetings should always include time for meeting with a staff person without other staff members present. This will help to build an atmosphere of trust and ensure honest communication between individual staff members and the committee. The evaluation process should be clearly defined (see the Periodic Review page that follows) and a personnel file begun. Confidentiality must be respected.

Communication
Affirm and support the youth ministry of your congregation by intentionally keeping the youth ministry leader's role and work visible. Youth ministry events can be publicized in your newsletter, bulletin, on your church’s website, Facebook page, and other social media. Announcements can be made during worship. Determine how frequently and in what role the youth ministry leader will participate in worship with the teens to help the congregation to view them as a part of the Body of Christ. Consider other ministries in the life of your congregation that can be opened up to the youth and made an intergenerational opportunity for all.

Personal and Professional Growth
Encourage and support the personal and professional growth of your youth ministry leader. Make available resources (time and money) for them to attend professional seminars and workshops, as well as personal retreat time for spiritual nurture. The Southern New England Conference offers a Faith Formation Leadership Certificate Program for faith formation and youth ministry leaders: https://www.sneucc.org/certification. Include the class’ fees in your budgeting for your youth ministry leader’s training and continuing education. Provide an allowance for books and other resources. Provide money to join professional associations such as the Association of United Church Educators (www.auce-ucc.org), which will also acquaint them with colleagues in youth ministry and solid professional development opportunities.

Resources from the Southern New England Conference
The SNEUCC Faith Formation Team curates resources and current information about faith formation and youth ministries on its “Make Disciples of Jesus” webpages: https://www.sneucc.org/disciples. Visit these pages often for access to best practices and UCC-friendly resources.
Periodic Review

*Adapted from* Called To Educational and Formational Ministries: A Guide for Local Churches, Educators, and Youth Workers, Association of United Church Educators. *Used by permission.*

Review is a process for assessing what is of value. The review or evaluation process is not a substitute for conflict resolution. Rather it is a means of identifying growth and growth goals and affirming the youth ministry leader. This review guide has been arranged in three sections so that the board or committee and the youth ministry leader can work separately, then together, to compare expectations and work out any discrepancies.

**Questions and areas for the Board or Committee to address**
- What are the strengths of our faith formation and/or youth ministry leader?
- Is support for your faith formation and/or youth ministry leader adequate? Not adequate? In what ways?
- List the goals the committee considers important to implement for the coming year.
- Which goals could our faith formation and/or youth ministry leader plan/coordinate/implement?
- For which goals might other staff take responsibility?
- For which goals might volunteers take responsibility?
- List possible ways to implement these plans.
- What are areas in which our faith formation and/or youth ministry leader might consider continuing education in the coming year?
- How will participation in continuing education be facilitated?

**Questions and areas for the youth ministry leader to address**
- What are some major personal accomplishments of the past year?
- List the goals you see as important to implement for the coming year.
- Which goals could I plan/coordinate/implement?
- For which goals might other staff take responsibility?
- For which goals might volunteers take responsibility?
- List possible ways to implement these plans.
- What are the areas in which I might engage in continuing education in the coming year?
- What will I need in the way of resources and time to do so?
- How has the Board or Committee been most helpful? Least helpful?

**Questions and areas for both the Board or Committee and the youth ministry leader to address together**
- List the strengths of the faith formation and/or youth ministry leader.
- What are the highlights of our church's faith formation and/or youth ministry in the last year?
- Which previously set goals were met? Which were not? Which goals were changed or modified?
- Are the position description expectations still realistic? What might be added? Deleted? Changed?
- How can the support for the faith formation and/or youth ministry leader be improved?

**Recommendations for the coming year**
- Compensation review
- Resources for ministry (volunteers, program and expense money, facilities, etc.)
- What goals for the coming year could strengthen the church's faith formation and/or youth ministry? Be specific and realistic!
Recognizing Stress and Burnout

Definitions
All people who work with human beings on a daily basis at one time or another may experience stress or burnout. Stress is the result of having to deal with too many crises that break the balance we have in our lives. Burnout can produce exhaustion, depersonalization, and a reduced sense of personal accomplishment. Burnout is the result of our inability to deal with stressful situations in our work, in our lives, or in our family life.

Crisis
Life brings with it certain levels of crisis. (For the purpose of this document, the word “crisis" refers to high-stress events, both positive and negative.) The two main classifications of crisis are developmental and accidental. A developmental crisis is one that is produced by our own maturation. Such events include marriage, birth, graduation, retirement, new jobs, and other changes that are part of the life cycle. Accidental crises, on the other hand, include sickness, accidents, surgery, moving, unemployment, and/or natural disasters. Both types of crises produce stress in our lives. If we are not able to deal with the levels of stress produced by various types of crises, burnout can result. Psychologists and psychiatrists agree that stress is cumulative. When you keep adding too many crises together, the level of stress increases and the ability of the person to cope is diminished.

Faith formation and youth ministry leaders are continuously dealing with different types of crises in their work environment. Just a message from a volunteer stating that they can not be present for a ministry commitment creates a certain level of stress if the ministry team is not functioning well. If parents are complaining, then stress is created. How much stress a person can handle at a particular time depends on how well equipped that person is and what support is available and utilized by them.

Let's look at the previous example. When the faith formation and/or youth ministry leader receives that message and knows that there are other people they can count on, the level of stress is reduced. On the other hand if there is nobody that they can contact at the last minute to fill in, it creates a stressful situation.

Potential Sources of Stress
• How many hours a week do you work?
• Do you see your work growing and your time shrinking?
• Who is in charge? To whom do you report?
• What kind of relationships do you have with your colleagues?
• What are the things you do not like to do, but are expected of you?
• Do you feel well compensated for the work you do?
• Who cares about your work?
• What are the sources of support for your work?
• How do you balance your work with your family life and your leisure time?
• What support do you receive from your Conference, Association or national offices?
• How do you renew your skills?
• How do you adapt to or resist change?
These and many other questions can help determine if the situation you work in creates levels of stress that can lead to burnout. Stress is dynamic and can change from one moment to the other. However, burnout is a sense of failure that is more difficult to deal with because it radically diminishes coping mechanisms.

**Signs of Burnout**
- Are you frustrated with your ministry situation?
- Do you think you are at the end of your rope?
- Do you feel emotionally drained?
- Have you lost the passion for your ministry?
- Do you care what happens to the participants?
- Are you having problems relating to other people?
- Do you feel everybody blames you for what is wrong and nobody recognizes what is right?
- When you wake up in the morning, do you dread going to work?
- Do you feel that you are pounding your head against the wall?
- Has your health been affected?

If you answered yes to two or more of these questions, you are a candidate for burnout. But this does not necessarily mean you are at the end of your rope. There is hope.

**Steps for Dealing with Stress and Burnout**
- Take a break. Create distance between yourself and the situation. Take time for spiritual renewal through prayer and biblical reflection.
- Explore and identify the situations creating stress. Try to boil down the problem to just the specifics. What is going on? What is the real problem or situation? Break down the problem into its parts.
- What resources do you have available to help you deal with the particular problem? Consider personal strengths, a problem solving process, and communication skills.
- Identify the problem or situation. Define all the possible alternatives, evaluate the alternatives and choose the best options, and act on them.
- Celebrate the value of personal relationships and the support network you have. Take time to seek support and other points of view. Contact your Association, Conference or national office for networking and support, particularly your Southern New England Conference Faith Formation Team: [https://www.sneucc.org/faith-formation-team](https://www.sneucc.org/faith-formation-team). Your Association of United Church Educators Regional Representative is also a good source of support ([www.AUCE-UCC.org](http://www.AUCE-UCC.org)).
- One of the strengths of human beings is to learn from our mistakes or our challenges. Take time to articulate in writing what you have learned. These learnings can be helpful in a future situation.
- God will not abandon you. Pray. God will provide you with the peace, patience, and endurance to work through those situations that create stress and burnout in ministry.
Resignation or Dismissal

You love what you do. You love being a faith formation and/or youth ministry leader. However there are times when a person needs to move on, and there are times when a church needs to move in a different direction. Separation can take two different forms — one is resignation from the position; the other is termination by the employer. Each one requires a different approach.

Resignation
Resignation is considered a voluntary action. Changes in personal circumstances, the discovery of incompatibilities with the persons you work with, or marked theological differences that make you uncomfortable are possible issues leading to your resignation.

The issue of separation is a stressful one to deal with, even if you are resigning on good terms. You have developed special relationships with people in the congregation, staff, children, youth, and adults. What should you do?

Create opportunities to express your feelings to those who will be missed. Provide some kind of closing, perhaps during a service of worship, or the congregation may want to have a special reception for you. An Exit Interview (see the following pages) is a process that many churches find helpful for allowing each party to share thoughts and learnings, as well as joys at the close of your time together. Events like this help in the separation process with all concerned. Once you leave a position, ethics requires you to respect the church's new beginning without you.

If resignation is provoked by particular situations in the work environment, and you feel that the best way out is by resigning, you should be honest. Learn from your experience. It may be time to make an assessment of yourself and set new goals. (A self assessment process is included earlier in this handbook.)

Dismissal
The other type of separation is dismissal by your employer. This type of separation creates high levels of stress for all involved.

Questions to assess your situation:
  • Were there any early signs that termination might happen? Did your evaluation show possible signs of dismissal?
  • Was there an unusual amount of criticism about you and your work? If so, how did you respond?
  • Were your relationships with other staff members deteriorating?
  • Were there major theological or philosophical differences between you and the congregation and/or the staff?
  • Was the church cutting staff because of reduced financial support or other budgetary losses?
  • Do you feel the dismissal was unfair, or you have been mistreated?

Dealing With Reality
Responding to some of these questions may help you put reality in perspective. Do not jump immediately to conclusions before you have examined the total context of the situation. Try to get some responses from the pastor, your supervisor, the faith formation or youth ministry committee or the church board. An Exit Interview (see the following pages) with church representatives can be helpful to you and the church.
Face Your Feelings
Whenever dismissal occurs there are a lot of feelings on both sides. You may feel anger, bitterness, guilt, confusion, loss of identity and low self-esteem. Remember this type of news creates imbalance in your life and emotions need to be addressed in a healthy manner. Remember to be intentional in retaining your professional demeanor.

An unexpected dismissal can create financial setbacks, loss of health insurance, separation from loved ones, and can threaten your personal stability in many different ways. Refer to your contract. What does it say about termination? Does it guarantee any type of compensation in such cases or continuation of the health insurance for a reasonable time? Be sure to check if you are eligible for unemployment.

An Ethical and Professional Response
You will need to maintain a professional attitude when interacting with your peers, colleagues, and the people in your congregation after your departure. Realize that, like you, the congregation needs to move forward, and any disruptive conversations or actions that arise out of unresolved anger or stress will not be helpful for either party. The Southern New England Conference Faith Formation Team (https://www.sneucc.org/faith-formation-team) can help you work through any pain as well as offer guidance in working through issues that you or the congregation may need to address. (If you are ordained, your Committee On Ministry can help in this way.)

After your final day of employment, it is customary, and wise, to discontinue contact with the members of the congregation (this includes social media). This will help them to make a smooth transition to a new faith formation and/or youth ministry staff person. If you are a member of the congregation you served, you will need to have discussions with the pastor and church leadership as to how you will continue to function as member, particularly when a new faith formation and/or youth ministry staff person is hired. As difficult as this could be, it may be possible that both parties will determine that you seek membership in another church. In either case, speaking the truth in love will be the best course of action, followed by a decision or compromise that will best serve the congregation.

Planning Your Future
Your next step is to take responsibility over your life. Life must continue. This is not the end of the world, although it might seem like it to you now. These are some of the steps you can take:

- Pray
- Do something good for yourself.
- Make an assessment of yourself and your personal resources. (A self assessment process is included earlier in this handbook.)
- Set continuing education goals, if needed.
- Find support from people doing the same type of ministry.
- Do not let your bitterness sever relationships with people closest to you.
- Take steps to promote your spiritual growth.
- Prepare new goals for your ministry and your life.
- Update your resume or Ministerial Profile.
- Develop a network leading to your next position. (See “Networking for a Job Search” included earlier in this handbook.)
- Try to learn the most you can from this temporary setback.
- Trust God. Trust in the One that can lead you forward.
Exit Interview

This process may be revised or adapted to your individual circumstances and church context as necessary. Remember that an exit interview is a time for mutual reflection, not evaluation or a time to emphasize negative experiences. Yet it may be helpful to the church to hear the departing individual speak honesty and openly about challenges, both professional and personal in nature, without judgment.

It is recommended that two or three gather to listen and reflect with the faith formation and/or youth ministry leader. It would be important for the Chair or representatives of the faith formation or youth ministry committee or board and either Personnel or Pastoral Relations Board or Committee to be present, as well as an individual of the departing staff member’s choosing — invited for support and to listen in.

Opening Prayer and Candle Lighting  5 minutes

Moments of Reflection  20 minutes (Choose 3-5)

1. Who or what has blessed your ministry here?
2. What were the greatest joys or high points in this work?
3. What were the greatest challenges or low points in this work?
4. How have you known God’s presence in this work/ministry?
5. What do you celebrate about your work or what gave you great satisfaction?
6. Is there an accomplishment you’d place first on your resume or Ministerial Profile?

Moments of Review  20 minutes (Choose 4-6)

1. What enhanced your working relationships here?
   (With staff, committee members, etc.)
2. What hindered your working relationships here?
   (With staff, committee members, etc.)
3. Which job responsibility was most rewarding? (In what way or why?)
4. Which job responsibility was most difficult? (In what way or why?)
5. Do you have recommendations to make to the congregation regarding the scope of this work?
6. Would you add/delete any tasks or responsibilities?
7. Was the work adequately resourced and supported?
8. What, if any, changes or improvements would you recommend that might be particularly helpful to the person that will be hired as the next faith formation and/or youth ministry leader?

Closing Prayer  5 minutes
A Post-Pandemic Addendum
Post-Pandemic Faith Formation

The COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 created a major shift in the way that congregations provide faith formation programming for their children, youth, and adults. Some congregations found virtual ministry to be as effective as face-to-face, yet others struggled to maintain relationships with their congregants. Given that the culture of every congregation is different, imitating the success of one congregation’s ministry can in no way guarantee that it will work with every congregation.

This realization drove church leaders to discover and utilize adaptive skills, envisioning and choosing the best methods and resources for the personality and needs of their particular congregations. The guiding question for that time, and continues to be, “At this point in the life of our congregation, what will be the most effective way to pass on the faith to our children, youth, and adults?”

One of the things we learned during the pandemic is that a return to Sunday School programming is not the only response to that question. The pandemic challenges us to evaluate our programs. So how can we be faithful leaders and mentors as we fulfill our congregational and baptismal commitments to making disciples of Jesus for generations to come? What else did we learn from the pandemic?

We learned that family matters, perhaps more than we were previously aware.
As congregations, we can continue to support our families (which come in all shapes, sizes, colors, and configurations) through fostering intentional connections between these families and those who could benefit from having surrogate “families.” We can support parents/grandparents/caregivers in their essential role of passing on the faith to their children and youth, in particular by offering resources that don’t add “yet one more thing to do” to their already busy and complex lives (such as resourcing bedtime and mealtime routines, time spent traveling in the car together, and even via Zoom with extended family members). The family will always be the primary vehicle for passing on the faith, and we can offer them much-needed support.

We have learned the critical importance of self care.
As Christian congregations, we have access to a wide variety of self care experiences that have been around for centuries. We call them Christian practices. Perhaps a shift in focus from church attendance and committee meetings to intentional, soul-nurturing opportunities for praying together, small group support and learning, singing together, and worshipping together as an intergenerational community of faith can help our people to slow down their daily routines in order to practice better self care. How can your congregation support and resource a nurturing and conscientious slowing down in the life of your faith community?

We have learned about the faith-forming capacities of intergenerational ministries.
Worship that has been “Zoomed” and “Facebook Lived” into homes has opened up a new kind of intergenerational worship experience. People who live alone have benefitted from online congregational experiences to connect with others in their faith community. Intentional, life-giving (Christian) relationships can happen anywhere and at any time whether we can be together in person or not.

A congregation that puts these three focuses into practice, by virtue of being the Body of Christ together, will grow and strengthen the faith of each and every one of its people in effective and life-giving ways — more than through most of its programs that were in place before the pandemic. In the words of Maria Harris, an internationally acclaimed religious educator who taught at Andover Newton Theological School:

“The church does not have an educational program; the church IS an educational program.”

38
BE THE CHURCH

Protect the environment.
Care for the poor.
Forgive often.
Reject racism.
Fight for the powerless.
Share earthly and spiritual resources.
Embrace diversity.

Love God.
Enjoy this life.

God is still speaking.
UNITED CHURCH
OF CHRIST