

Report to the NE MN Synod Assembly

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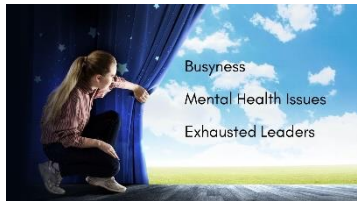
May 1, 2022

So, it's been an interesting couple of years, huh? It makes me think of a new calendar I got a few weeks ago. I value Google calendar, but I still like to have my paper calendar to see the month at a glance. I've used the same brand for years and was used to its style. When my new one arrived, I realized the layout had shifted. The left side of the page now ended with Tuesday instead of Wednesday, and it has been tripping me up every day. What had been a quick glance no longer works. I can't continue to do things the same way, because I land on the wrong day. And you know what? When we show up for a meeting on the wrong day, no one is there. And no one cares that you have it wrong.



Sound familiar to life and ministry the last two years? Things have shifted significantly. What had been quick and routine no longer works. And when we try to do what used to work, no one shows up...and they don't care that we have it wrong.

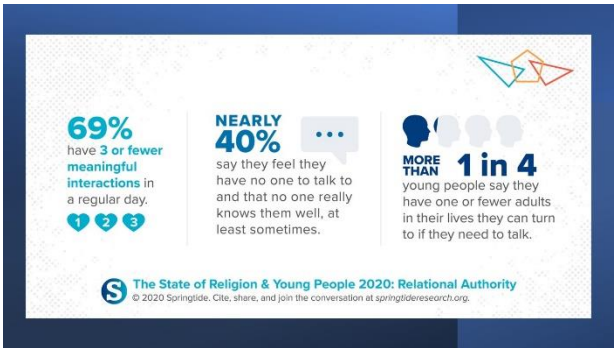
In the Growing Young Book Study this year we talked about how the first job of leaders is to "define reality". As I listen and learn from you and others, these are some of the realities I see:



- Our youth and families are struggling. They are overwhelmed with the pace and expectations of school and activities.
- I'm sure you've heard the statistics on the increase of mental health concerns for our young people. It's real and it's heartbreaking.
- Our ministry leaders are exhausted. There are no words for the amount of work and grief they have carried the last two years.

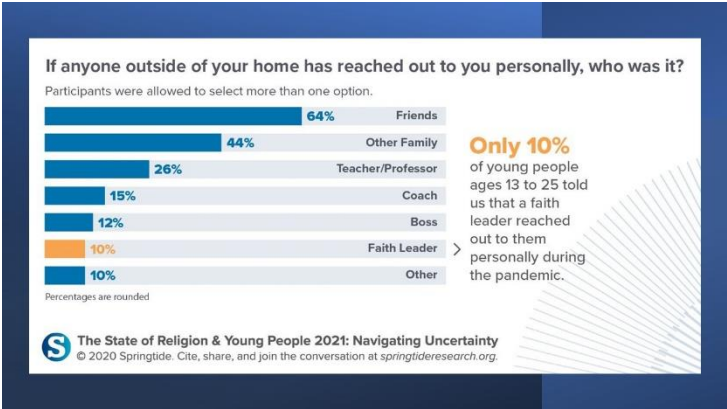


But the reality that keeps me up most at night are the statistics on how lonely people are. As you heard Friday night, Springtide Research has shared some heart stopping statistics from their recent reports. And they make me wonder if loneliness and disconnection are at the root of many of the issues we are seeing.



One in three feel completely alone most of the time.
 40% of young people say they have no one to talk to.
 69% say they have 3 or fewer meaningful interactions a day.
 1 in 4 say they have one or fewer adults in their lives they can turn to.
 How did this become the story our young people are living?

This statistic might have some insight:



Only 10% of young people said they had a faith leader reach out to them personally during the pandemic. I recently heard Josh Packard, the Executive Director at Springtide Research unpack that on a podcast. He assured listeners that he viewed this not as a failure of individuals – which I concur. There is no doubt in my mind that our leaders have been working above and beyond to care for

and reach out to young people as much as they were able to throughout the pandemic.



What Packard sees is that this reflects a failure of the systems we have created. Churches are set up for youth to come to us and our programs, not to go out and do relationships at scale. Meaning – we have not set up systems to be the church outside the church walls, allowing God to show up in people’s lives through us. Through relationships. By and large young people don’t

trust institutions like organized religion. But they trust relationships. So finding ways to scale or expand our ability to build relationships beyond programs within the church walls is critical.

So that’s a glimpse into some of what I see as our current reality. As hard as our current realities are, I do believe this is an exciting time in ministry as we pay attention to where God is calling us at this time and in this place. The important question is how do we move forward from here?



I would suggest we start by focusing on ministry practices that develop relationships. What if we set up our ministries to do relationships at scale? What could that look like?

This is not a new concept. Jesus did it. He had 3 in his inner circle. Then 12 disciples in whom he invested his time and teaching. You have to imagine those 12 disciples built relationships and invested in others, because we hear how Jesus sent out the 70 from among his followers. That's not a program. It's a strategic structure. That's relationships at scale.



Our pastors and youth ministry leaders can't – and shouldn't – be the only ones building relationships with youth and their families. We often talk about the need to have 5 caring adults in every young person's life for them to flourish. There is something almost magical about the number 5, and here's what I think it is – when you get past 3, you're moving past the

predictable people. Hopefully #1 and #2 are parents or caregivers. #3 might be a pastor or youth director – someone who from a youth's perspective is paid to care about them. But #4? That's an adult volunteer who isn't required to show up. And if you get to #5 or beyond...it becomes magical in how the Holy Spirit moves and works within those relationships to deeply root young people in faith.



The kind of relationships I am talking about need to be grounded and deeply rooted in faith, so we also need to focus on discipleship practices. Kenda Creasy Dean says it this way, "You get what you are." Or Rollie Martinson used to say, "Great youth ministry is good adult education – adults who are steeping themselves in faith practices." If we want young people who are deeply rooted in faith, the adults around them

need to be deeply rooted in faith.



And I would suggest we focus on leadership development. You might have heard the sayings, "give them a purpose" or "youth are either leading or leaving the church." Both are true. But we give youth leadership roles not only for their sake. The whole church needs the gifts young people have to offer, including their new way of thinking about and doing ministry.

Young people challenge us to be bold and courageous in faith in ways that are boundless.

These are some of the things I am keeping in mind as we make plans for synod faith formation this coming year. There are some important shifts we're planning for this year that I want to let you know about, and I hope you and your congregation participate in.



I am really excited about the shift to expand the pilot we began last year and offer a new Leadership Camp opportunity that is open to all congregations in our synod. This is no longer the LYO model for a select group of young people, but a way to support congregations in building relationships with and among their high school youth, deepen faith, and equip youth to lead in their congregations and beyond. This new model

is built around Congregation Teams, so adult leaders can walk with their youth during the time at camp, then carry those relationships back home. It was beautiful to hear the stories from this last year of the ways in which those teams led small groups, taught ministry skills to adults, worked with younger ages...and supported each other throughout the year as they lived their faith outside the church walls.



A youth director sent me this picture Wednesday night of her Congregation Team training their adult mentors. I can't imagine this picture being possible if they had not attended as a Congregation Team. They had an adult leader that learned alongside them, then helped them imagine ways to use their faith and skills in the congregation, and supported them to make it happen. Just think what a difference that

has made in their lives, and even more within the congregation.



I can't encourage you enough to attend Leadership Camp, and to come as a Congregation Team. But we do have an option for individual youth to apply when it is impossible to identify an Adult Leader who can participate with them. Applications for Leadership Camp close May 10, so there is still time to put together a Congregation Team or invite individual youth to participate.



With the shift to Leadership Camp, we are changing how young people apply to serve on the LYO Board that plans and leads our synod youth ministry events. Those who have attended Leadership Camp this year or in previous years will be eligible to apply to serve on LYO. Leadership Camp is required because it equips youth with the skills they need and steps them in the culture and relationships they need to lead our events. Another shift is that applications will be event specific, rather than a full year commitment.



The other shift I want to share is that we are introducing the “All Youth Gathering at Cragun’s” for youth in grades 6-12 this November. We know youth love the Middle School Gathering, and the chance to be together in this space with hundreds of other youth from across the synod. We also know that many of our current high school youth lost out on their chance to participate in a Middle School Gathering. So we are building one great

big synod youth gathering this year! It will be the Middle School Gathering model, with two events on the same weekend. You can come Friday – Saturday, or Saturday – Sunday. We’ll have large group sessions for the entire group and learning opportunities by age group. And of course there will be hotel life, games, worship and more.



Finally, we will continue to address mental health in our synod. Bishop Amy and I will be meeting with Joy Hensel later this month to discuss ways in which we might further expand the Mental Health Initiative that began in 2019.

As we move forward in ministry this year, I hope you hear you are not alone. And you are not meant to do ministry alone. This is the time to experiment, to find partnerships, to fail boldly, and have unexpected surprises. Synod events and resources are here to support you. Our camps are amazing partners and everything I have talked about - relationships, discipleship practices and leadership development – are at the center of who they are and what they do. Send your youth to camp. Pastors and youth leaders – if you want to transform your confirmation program this year, attend camp with your youth and spend a week building relationships. Encourage your young adults to work at camp. It provides far more life experience than any internship. And partner with our camps for your congregational ministries with all ages. Camp transforms faith and lives, and heals some of the painful realities of our culture.

Relationships. Discipleship Practices. Leadership Development.

So much has changed the last two years. We have changed the last two years. But these three foundations of faith formation are still critical for youth and adults alike. Thank you for investing your time this weekend to be deeply rooted in faith and connected to God and each other. The business we have done this weekend is important. But none of it matters if we are not deeply rooted in knowing and following Christ Jesus. Those statistics on loneliness don’t have to be the story for our young or older generations. As followers of Jesus, we have a better story to offer. I pray that the resources and events the synod offers will support you in sharing God’s boundless love story in the year to come. And I look forward to living that story with you.