



# Illinois Great Rivers Conference of The United Methodist Church

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## YOUTH MINISTRY ASSESSMENT REPORT

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Prepared by Ministry Architects

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### BACKGROUND

The Illinois Great Rivers Conference of the United Methodist Church (IGRC) serves as the regional connection and central office for over 800 congregations in the state of Illinois. The conference contains all or part of 87 counties in downstate Illinois and was formed in 1960. In 1996, the former Central Illinois Conference and Southern Illinois Conference voted to merge and form the Illinois Great Rivers Conference. The IGRC is divided into ten regional districts each named for a natural river that flows through or borders that district. The mission of the conference is taken from the Book of Discipline, and it states, "To form disciples of Jesus Christ by equipping its local churches for ministry and by providing a connection for ministry beyond the local church, all to the glory of God."

The bishop for the conference is Reverend Frank Beard, who was elected as bishop in the North Central Jurisdiction in July 2016 and assigned to the Illinois Great Rivers Conference effective September 1, 2016.

The conference includes 841 churches with a broad spectrum of congregations and a wide variety of average worship attendance as noted in statistics from 2016:

- 554 churches average 50 or less weekly worshippers.
- 150 churches average between 50 - 100 weekly worshippers.
- 86 churches average between 100 - 200 worshippers.
- 50 churches average a worship attendance greater than 200.

Focus group members included youth, paid youth staff, volunteers, pastors, and conference staff. In this assessment process, a survey was sent to all churches, of which there were 111 respondents. Of the 111 respondents, representing 109 churches, a significant portion responded to invitations to participate in online video-conference listening groups or one-on-one phone calls.

## **YOUTH MINISTRY OVERVIEW**

The conference values youth ministry enough that they have made it a priority to assess the ministries, reorganize the conference staff, and give the youth and camping ministries some precious floor time at annual conference for a presentation in 2018. Most of the congregations with youth actively participating in church programming are smaller churches. In 2016, there were 878 youth who were confirmed in Illinois Great Rivers Conference churches, an average of about 1 youth per church. Statistics from 2016 show less than 50% of churches in the conference have youth participating in their churches. The other 400 plus churches break down their youth participation in Christian Formation as follows:

- 250 congregations have 1-10 youth participants.
- 153 congregations have 11-50 youth participants.
- 21 congregations have over 50 youth participants.

“When looking at the data, the top 10 churches of each district represent 75% of our reach to youth, so that’s 100 churches total out of over 800,” remarked one listening group participant. The conference holds two annual events during the year, one for junior high students and the other for high school students. The IGRC doesn’t currently have a training plan for local church leadership, but is very supportive of Harvest Ministries, from Troy UMC, a ministry that offers training for youth workers.

The conference also has a youth committee made up of youth and adult leaders throughout the conference, but it has not met in over a year. There is also a N.O.W. planning team that meets regularly to plan the annual middle school event in October and the high school event in March.

The total budget for the conference is \$12,202, 213, and the allocation for youth ministry is \$77,600 (including the program budget and staff salaries specifically allocated to youth ministry). In the last decade, the youth and camping ministries have been led by a coordinator who also oversaw the young adult ministries for the conference. The IGRC has just increased staff in the area of youth ministry and camping and now has two full-time staff: Patric Newton, who started in January 2017, serves as the Coordinator of Camping and Youth Ministries, and reports to the Director of Connectional Ministries, and Curt Franklin was recently named the Associate Coordinator of Camping and Youth Ministries.

## **CAMPING MINISTRY OVERVIEW**

The mission of the IGRC camping ministry is to “engage in a ministry of reconciliation that aims to unite all things in heaven and earth with God through the love and grace embodied in Jesus Christ.” IGRC owned and operated five camps for several decades. In 2014, the Conference Commission on Camping & Retreat Ministries initiated a discernment process that resulted in a partnership with a camp and retreat consulting organization that created a strategic master plan for the camping ministry. In the summer of 2015, the annual conference approved the recommendations for a new model of offering camp and retreat ministry. The master site plans

from this process have begun to be implemented and have resulted in the sale of three of the five conference-owned camps. The camping ministry continues to operate at the East Bay and Little Grassy locations. Both of the remaining locations have properties that have great physical and natural assets from which sustainable ministry can be developed for future ministry. However, both East Bay and Little Grassy are in “dire need of major maintenance.” The operations of the remaining camps will maintain an emphasis on ministry to children, youth and families as their highest priority.

East Bay Camp, founded in 1930, is located on Lake Bloomington and has the capacity to sleep 160 guests in lodges or cabins. The dining hall can support 440 people total in four different areas, and the chapel, built in 1850, can hold 150 people. The camp is on 160 acres of woods, trails, and lakefront and has an indoor and outdoor pool, as well as a recreation center.

Little Grassy Camp, founded in the late 1940s, is 157 acres of hills, trees, bluffs, and rock formations adjacent to Little Grassy Lake in Shawnee National Forest. Activities like rock climbing, rappelling, caving, and hiking are all enjoyed at this camp. Little Grassy has beachfront cabins that sleep up to 96 people, and the camp can host around 280 people overnight.

The Illinois Great Rivers Conference staff invited Ministry Architects to complete an assessment of the youth ministry in an effort to understand God’s calling for the future of this ministry, to identify a strategic direction for the middle and high school conference youth, and to develop an intentional plan for how the youth ministry and camping ministry can collaborate well. The Ministry Architects team met with 45 individuals in video-conference focus groups or one-on-one phone calls. In addition, 111 surveys captured information from those vested in youth ministry. The findings of this report have been brought in conversation with our consultant team. This document represents an initial assessment of the assets, challenges, three phases of recommendations and a timeline for the conference in the hopes to gain clarity about how to support and equip congregations throughout the IGRC and provide a connection for ministry beyond the local church.

## **NAMING NORMAL**

### **Normal for Church-Based Youth Ministry**

As the conference seeks to build thriving ministries with middle school and high school youth in churches throughout the IGRC, the following norms can serve as a helpful baseline for normal. These norms are largely descriptive, not prescriptive, so there is no doubt that churches in the conference will be able to identify quite a few exceptions to these norms.

1. **10% of the Worshiping Congregation**—In a typical church, the size of the youth ministry tends to settle at a number that is around 10% of the worshiping congregation. In other words, a church with an average worship attendance of 100 could expect an average weekly participation of around 10 youth per week.
2. **\$1,000-\$1,500 per Youth**—The typical church invests somewhere in the neighborhood of \$1,000-\$1,500 per youth active on an average week (including program budget, staff salaries, and benefits dedicated to the youth ministry staff). So it would be normal for a church that sustains the involvement of 15 youth on an average week to have a budget between \$15,000 and \$22,500.
3. **1 Full-Time-Equivalent Staff Person for Every 50 Youth**—The trigger point for hiring a full-time staff person (or full-time-equivalent combination of part time staff people)

dedicated to youth ministry seems to be the participation of 50 different youth on an average week.

4. **1 Adult for Every 5 Youth**— Ministry Architects likes to think in terms of “spans of care,” recognizing that, realistically, most volunteers cannot effectively oversee the church’s Christian nurture of more than about five youth on an ongoing basis. According to this norm, a church with 10 youth would require a minimum of 2 adults volunteering in the youth ministry.
5. **20% Ceiling**- Ministry Architects has also discovered that in many churches, the youth ministry has difficulty growing beyond a level that equals 20% of the weekly worshipping congregation. Very few youth ministries seem to be able to break beyond this 20% level.

The key principle here is that effective youth ministry depends more on appropriate investment than on great ideas.

### **Normal for Youth Ministry Through Mid-Level Judicatories**

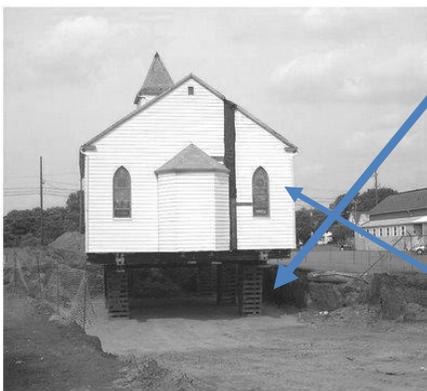
In short, there is no normal other than chronic ineffectiveness and shrinking investment from conferences, presbyteries, and synods. As a result, most mid-level judicatories are struggling to find traction in youth ministry. A growing number have no staff at all related to children, youth, and young adult ministry, despite the fact that the vast majority of churches are struggling mightily with these ministries.

Many full-time judicatory youth staff positions have become very part-time, and those who continue in full-time work find themselves with vastly expanded job descriptions (i.e., the once “Conference Youth Coordinator” assumes responsibility for children, young adults, college ministry, and technology). What is clear is that few, if any judicatories have identified a staffing model that actually moves the needle in youth ministry.

Those bright spots across the country are often expanding their reach by creative, collaborative, innovative partnerships, rather than by the tried-and-true, grind-it-out conference youth coordinator model.

### **Normal for Strategic Planning: The Parallel Priorities**

As the leadership of the conference begins to develop and live into a long-term strategic plan for youth ministry, it will face the challenge of working parallel priorities at the same time:



Laying the Foundation: Building a foundation and infrastructure that will ensure the conference youth ministry’s *future* effectiveness,

and at the same time,

Continuing to Do Ministry: Maintaining the *current* ministries in a way that builds the enthusiasm of youth, their families, the staff and the conference at large.

## **Sustainable Staffing for Youth Ministries**

We have repeatedly observed that the most stable approach to leading a ministry involves building a team with three different capacities:

- The Architect: A person or organization that designs the building plan and ensures that building is done in compliance with the agreed-upon plan. In conference ministry, this person or team would be putting together the strategic plan.
- The General Contractor: A person or team who manage the flow and sequencing of work, manages the building process according to the agreed-upon blueprint and ensures that the appropriate number of “laborers” is in place for each stage of the project. In conference ministry, this would be a business/office manager.
- The Laborers: That wide assortment of people with specific gifts, charged with responsibility for particular aspects of the work. For example, a typical laborer in youth ministry might be a worship leader, an event planner, or a small group leader. In conference ministry, this would be the communication team, counselors, NOW team, etc.

When a ministry leader attempts to play all three of these roles at the same time, as is the usually the case in almost every judicatory program staff, instability, burnout, and mediocre results are the natural outcomes. A secret to the success of effective ministry teams is clearly defined roles for each team member.

## **ASSETS**

### **Retreats**

The fall middle school retreat and spring high school retreat – formerly Y.A.R., currently N.O.W. - seem to be a win. Listening group participants commented on the great programming during the retreats, the quality worship and music, and the good leadership running these events. One individual said, “I love the relationships that are being developed through the conference retreats,” and another shared, “my students absolutely love going to Y.A.R.!” There is great, long-time support from pastors and youth workers alike who have participated in and/or helped lead these retreats over the years. This is also a time for youth and ministry leaders to connect with others from their conference, and with the staff. These connections are what make the retreats a highlight for many churches.

### **Communication Methods**

There are multiple ways that the conference is communicating about the youth and camping events and resources that are available to and designed for churches. Regular emails, Facebook pages/groups, the conference website, video promotions, and periodic mailings are successful means to keep pastors, and those connected to the conference in particular, in the loop on everything happening. One pastor said, “I’m out here in a community of 425 and I feel very connected,” and another said she also was “aware of what is going on and connected.” There is lots of good info available and being sent, posted, and shared consistently, which is effective and helpful for many in the conference.

### **Conference Support**

While there is room to grow, the conference has a long history of making youth ministry a priority. Listening group participants said things like, “The conference continues to say that this (youth ministry) is important,” and “It’s something they do care about.” Even though some changes will be needed, just the fact that the conference is taking the time to do this work demonstrates a shift in the level of priority the youth and camping ministries work is rising to. Another individual said of the conference leadership, “We don’t have a ‘we’ve always done it that way’ problem,” and this sense has many excited about the future.

### **Safe Sanctuaries**

In multiple listening groups, participants shared the good work that is being done to keep children, youth, and adults safe. The conference office is already at work on drafting a new policy for churches. All adults who volunteer for conference events are background checked every year, as handled by camp ministry human resources. And churches are asking for resources and training in this important area. The IGRC youth ministry is clearly modeling this healthy and necessary process and practice for churches.

### **Resource Availability**

There is a substantial youth section in the conference media resource center, that multiple listening group participants shared they have used and found beneficial. Youth workers can visit in person or access online, and request items from the website to be shipped to them at no cost. Individuals said, about this collection of resources, things like, “It is a way to help under resourced youth ministries” and “Those with limited budgets find it very helpful.” It was also shared that at some retreats there has been a table of curriculum and resources from the center that youth workers could pick up and take home with them to use at their churches. This was a huge gift to those who didn’t know where to start with finding youth ministry resources. There is even more potential for impact here, as one participant shared, “It’s an incredible resource and is getting utilized more but is still underutilized and not as widely known about as it should be.”

### **Passion for Deeper and More Effective Youth Ministry**

It is clear that conference wide, pastors and staff, full-time and part-time, paid and volunteer, all have a desire to do better youth ministry. Listening group participants drove this home, by sharing their hopes and dreams. One person shared, "We can have a deeper impact on parents and youth across the conference," and another added "Working together we'll have a deep impact." It was also stated, "We can pursue a new level of excellence across the board for youth ministry." Churches are longing for more: more connection, more training, more resources, more support, all to make deeper and more effective youth ministry possible, in individual churches and throughout the conference.

### **Regional Partnerships**

Many listening group participants expressed appreciation for training and connectional events happening at various times and locations throughout the conference, although not necessarily put on by the conference. One of the most notable examples of this is Harvest Ministries, led by Tim Price at Troy UMC. Since many churches support and attend these events, there is potential for a more formal partnership with the conference to make these gatherings more accessible to all youth workers in the IGRC.

### **Intern Program**

It was exciting to hear from a listening group participant that "The conference does have a budget for interns to be placed in churches." The IGRC has a well-funded and supported intern program, which allows young adults to engage in a variety of forms of ministry, including placement in local churches to explore ministry as a career and receive hands-on training as they discern their call to ministry. This program has successfully helped many churches in the conference, as interns can serve part time during the academic year and full or part time in the summer. Beth Fender, the coordinator of the internship program, is passionate about matching interns with placements that will not only challenge them, but also help them discern what ministry God is calling them to. Beth said that the intern program "gives me hope for the future of the church - the fact that God continues to call young adults to ministry in the United Methodist Church."

## **CHALLENGES**

### **Overcoming Perspective**

The overwhelming perspective is that the conference should be providing more, highly effective retreats for youth to participate in. One person described their perspective by saying, "Everything is dead as a doornail" on the conference level, while another stated, "The conference youth stuff is not very good." With the decline in attendance, rising costs, long distances to travel, and churches doing their own retreats, folks have a hard time seeing the opportunity for the conference to support youth ministry and youth workers in any other way. When asked about ways the conference can support youth ministries and churches beyond retreats, one listening group participant stated directly "We definitely need more than just retreats and events," while another added, "There's not much else available, but I'm not sure what I need." So, the desire is clear, and recent trends indicate that the conference will need to find new ways, and more ways, to support youth workers, youth ministries, and churches.

### **Centralized Ministry**

It seems that the idea of the conference producing large events for all churches to participate in is losing momentum and becoming more difficult for churches. One pastor remarked that youth at IGRC churches are, "flocking to external partnerships...not the church...partnerships away from the UMC." Many larger churches are doing their own retreats instead of participating in conference retreats, and a good number of churches are unable to participate in conference wide retreats due to several factors, including timing, location, and expense. Comments like "we need smaller, more local, events" were echoed by multiple listening group participants and clearly indicates the shift away from a primarily centralized ministry for youth and camping in the conference. As one participant put it, "If you can't get people to come to you, you have to figure out how to go to them."

### **Fuzzy Vision**

It was difficult to get a clear, consistent answer when listening groups were asked about the purpose and goals of the conference youth ministry. Because of this, one listening group participant shared honestly that, "Sometimes it's just simpler to narrow in and focus on your own community and church." Another individual said, "I'm not even sure about the difference between the youth ministry and camping ministry for the conference." One pastor mentioned, "I don't know what the conference's vision for youth ministry is... what are the goals? What are we striving for? How do they clearly disseminate that?" In order to connect the youth, youth workers, youth ministries, and churches of the conference, leadership will need to do the work that is required to discern and cast an exciting and unifying vision for the IGRC youth ministry. As a listening group participant stated plainly, "We need a new passion and attention to detail, to get people excited."

### **Budget**

The program and salary budget allocated to youth ministry of \$77,600 seems to be sufficient for the current level of activity for youth ministry in the conference, but it is unlikely that much more will be possible with the current funding. There is already the sense from some in the conference, as one listening group participant stated that "The biggest hindrance to change is the lack of financial resources." One individual said "I don't have the supplies or the equipment I need for my ministry; I wish there were grants available to help with these expenses." If the conference wants to deepen their impact with youth workers and with youth – on a conference level and in individual churches - it will require a larger total sum of money with which to work.

## **Youth Leadership**

There is a noticeable absence of youth empowerment and leadership opportunities at the conference level. In the past, youth have helped lead conference camps, and one listening group participant said this is important because “these youth come back and serve, they step up and step out as leaders in our youth group.” Another said, “We need to know what is happening in their lives, and what they would like to see happen in the conference.” Another pastor from the IGRC expressed his wish for more youth involvement as was in the past saying, “It was as much about youth ministry as it was about youth empowerment.” In addition having youth input was expressed as a priority from every listening group. As one person stated, “The youth must have a bigger voice.” That sums it all up.

## **Communication Range**

While ordained clergy, some administrative staff, and those with long, deep connections with the conference seem to be effectively receiving information, a large number of youth ministry staff and volunteers seem to be out of the loop on conference communication. Listening group participants shared things like:

- “I’m not familiar with the communication available.”
- “I didn’t even know about the Facebook group.”
- “It’s hard to find information on the website.”
- “I don’t know what’s happening or how to connect.”
- “This is the first thing I’ve heard about anything offered from the conference.”

It’s true that there are multiple ways that communication about youth and camping ministries is happening, but unless you’re in the inner circle, it’s unclear how to learn about and access these sources of information. Complicating this is an inaccurate list of who to contact, especially when there has been turnover in youth ministry staff at the church level.

## **Advance Planning**

A multitude of youth workers expressed a desire for more advanced planning, and subsequent communication about the plans coming from the conference. Sentiments like “We’re trying to plan ahead and we usually hear about conference events too late to be able to participate,” were voiced by many listening group participants. One said plainly, “We need information in advance.” With youth workers trying to plan their calendars sometimes 12-18 months in advance, even if they would like for their youth to participate in conference events, they simply aren’t getting the information in time to include it in their ministry schedules.

## **Missing District Ministry**

Numerous listening group participants expressed things like, “There is a basic lack of connection with others in the district” and “I wish we were more connectional in our district.” Another shared, “With nothing happening in our districts, we’re missing opportunities to get to know each other, worship and serve together, and grow in our faith.” One participant also shared the lack of relational approach from district leadership stating, “District leaders see their roles as more administrative than mission.” Increased connection between church workers, youth and ministries on the district level will require desire, knowledge, and skills to engage others, and the conference will need to play a significant role in helping to develop and facilitate these connections.

## **District Youth Leadership**

“We don’t have district youth leaders,” or, “I’m not sure about youth leaders in our district,” summarize the majority of responses from listening group participants when asked about

local/district youth workers. Only four districts have a name of a district youth worker on the conference record and only one or two of those are active. Some of the survey participants were not even aware what district their congregation is in. There is simply no one in these roles to provide any support, be a resource for youth workers and churches, and coordinate opportunities to connection in the districts.

### **Camping & Youth Ministry Integration**

At annual conference in June 2015, the IGRC voted to implement a strategic plan for the conference camping ministries, after a realization that the conference was not only unable to sustain the camping ministry but also waning in its reach of campers. The conference staff has been working to “rethink the actual mission and ministry” of the camping ministry because “Buildings aren’t the only answer to growing our sites.” The coordination of building and camp site improvements with a new vision that is in unity with the conference plan for youth ministry should set the stage for more sustainable ministry for children, youth, and families throughout the IGRC. Some listening group participants mentioned the need to merge the strategic plan with vision and mission, and one mentioned, “I can’t wait to see how the two plans fit together.” An overarching plan of ministry from childhood through young adulthood would be of great value to the conference’s ministry to young people and integrating the camping ministry into this plan is vital.

### **Financial Support for Smaller Churches**

There is the sense from some that, while the conference is targeting smaller churches with their events and retreats – churches that don’t have the resources to plan their own events and retreats – it’s also difficult for these churches to be able to afford the offerings from the conference. Listening group participants shared, “Camps are expensive, I wish there was a way to reduce the costs,” and “I don’t want to have to apologize for the expense of camp.” The long distances to travel and availability of vehicles to transport groups factors in to this financial challenge. Many churches have to fundraise just to be able to participate in the conference camps and would love for scholarships to be available to help with the monetary needs. Right now, it’s dependent on the churches to figure this out, and they are longing for help of some kind.

### **Lack of Connection for Youth Workers**

“I have no interaction with other youth workers, and there aren’t ways for us to get together,” one youth worker stated. Comments like this were shared from an overwhelming number of listening group participants. There is a deep hunger, like one listening group participant voiced, to “work together, share ideas, and support each other.” Some current youth workers lack a United Methodist background, while others are new to the conference or even new to ministry, and they are all currently lacking a tangible, organized way to connect with others who are doing similar or the same work.

### **Diverse Makeup of Youth Workers**

Over 110 individuals filled out the Youth Ministry Contact Form, designed as a first step in the assessment process to discover who is responsible for youth ministry in the local churches throughout the conference, and the results made it clear that there is diverse group of people doing this work. There are youth ministry staff, pastors, volunteers, and more, leading youth ministries. Over half of them are doing this in a part time capacity. Almost 80% are responsible for more than just youth ministry in their churches. And it was discovered through the listening groups that a large number of them are in their first two years of ministry. It will take careful work and an intentional plan moving forward as the conference tries to know, connect with, care for, and support such a varied body of youth workers.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### OVERARCHING PRINCIPLES

1. Support the Camping Ministries by staying in regular communication throughout this process and clarifying running lanes for collaborative and/or overlapping projects.
2. Disproportionately invest in the next generation of youth and youth leaders.
3. Focus *less* on the structure of programs and *more* on the structure of connections.
4. Cultivate an innovative ethos around youth ministry in the conference, choosing to:
  - Prototype and iterate.
  - Give up on THE answer or THE model.
  - Resist returning to comfortable categories that have failed to produce desired results (e.g., district youth coordinators, full-time youth ministry staff for the conference, etc.).
5. Provide latitude for the development of communication channels and innovative programs that may not naturally fit into the conference's current structure (the books, *Orbiting the Giant Hairball* and *Innovator's Dilemma* can serve as a reference point).
6. Combine the systems that ensure sustainability with a willingness to embrace disruptive innovation.

### STRATEGIC RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Establish a prayer team to undergird the strategic plan introduced in this document.
2. Set apart the next three years (through January 2021) as a time of deliberate focus on building a vital, sustainable, robust youth ministry plan throughout the IGRC.
3. Confirm that the youth ministry is a priority for the IGRC by reviewing this report and the visioning documents with the conference cabinet, asking for their support of the work and committing to continue to keep this group aware of progress being made throughout the process.
4. Create an Action Team (made up of 5-7 representatives) that will focus on the implementation of these recommendations and be responsible for the work of the timeline. Consider this team transitioning to a standing youth committee for the conference later in the process.
5. Organize work in to three phases: Building and Creating Connections, Building the Training Ground for Youth Workers, Honing and Refining Retreats

#### **PHASE ONE: Building and Creating Connections**

- To unify youth, workers, and ministries throughout the conference around a new, common, exciting vision, invite IGRC youth, youth workers, pastors, and other invested individuals to participate in a multi-session, onsite process of visioning a

new future for the youth ministry with Ministry Architects, resulting in the following documents which will direct the ministry:

- A ministry mission statement
  - A statement of values
  - A set of three-year revolving goals, and one-year corresponding benchmarks
  - An organizational structure for the ministry
- Develop a resource projection of the staffing and budget resources needed to implement this strategic plan.
  - Include a copy of this report on the conference website.
  - Calendar strategic planning dates:
    1. A Presentation of an Initial Executive Summary of the Strategic Plan to the Board (June 1, prior to 2018 Annual Conference)
    2. Presentation of the Strategic Plan to the Cabinet (July or August)
  - Be intentional about data management for youth workers, ministries, and churches in the conference. Create a pro-active process for collecting, maintaining, and updating contact information of all youth workers (regardless of position or paid status) in the conference on an annual basis. Develop a robust, nimble database of 1,000 contacts – about one contact per church in the conference - who can easily be sorted by at least the following categories:
    - All paid youth staff in churches
    - All youth ministry volunteers who have participated in a conference youth program
    - Veteran youth workers willing to serve as mentors
    - All pastors passionate about youth ministry
    - All college students considering a call to ministry
    - All seminary students engaged in the call process
    - Everyone on the N.O.W. registration list
    - All teenagers serving in leadership roles in their churches or conference
    - All current or alum District Youth Coordinators
    - All conference staff who touch youth ministry
    - All camping ministry staff
    - All camping ministry participants
  - Take a step toward addressing the need for youth leadership development and a culture of call by sending three to five students to one of the youth/theology academies across the country.
  - Invite youth to be part of leadership teams and decision-making groups on the district and conference levels throughout the IGRC.
  - Complete a census of churches in the conference to identify which churches are doing what kinds of trips with youth each summer.

- Establish a system for capturing contact information for every youth who registers for the middle school and high school NOW retreats and for their parents.
- Develop networks for youth workers through either the districts or by region for accountability, sharing, support, connections, and establishing mentor relationships. Include opportunities to meet regularly and ways to stay connected in between meetings. Consider recruiting veteran youth workers to serve as volunteer district coordinators. Include opportunities for conference youth and camping staff to get connected with local congregations.
- Create a master youth calendar, with programs and events scheduled 12-18 months in advance. Make hard copies of this available throughout the year and updated regularly as advance planning continues. Make an online version easily accessible to anyone in the conference, ensuring that youth workers in particular are aware of this resource, thereby allowing churches the time they need to include conference programs and events in their ministry calendars.
- Build a robust marketing process for the youth ministry in the conference, including:
  - A weekly email sent from the conference with just youth and camping events, resources, etc., targeted to youth workers (and pastors),
  - Monthly stories of effective youth ministry in the conference.
  - A plan to intentionally and regularly communicate with youth workers in ways and times beyond weekly emails (social media, website, text, etc.).
  - The building of an audience of at least 3,000 stakeholders in youth ministry – including youth, parents, volunteers, youth workers, church staff, and pastors – easily sortable by area of interest and engagement.
  - Targeted marketing plans to ensure achievement of participation goals for all conference-sponsored, youth ministry initiatives.
  - Intentional social media campaigns.
  - Use Paul Black and the conference communication team to help create and manage.
- As a part of the new communication plan and strategy, develop an online support system that moves the conference youth website and social media accounts from a space to just hear about events to a space which also allows and encourages individuals to find support, share successes and challenges, be known by others in the conference, and receive ideas and feedback for their own ministry context.
- At least once a year, beginning this year, conference staff will organize and lead gatherings in each district/area, in order to meet with, get to know, and build relationships with youth workers in the conference.
- As these connections are established and developed throughout phase one, continue to evaluate and ensure that the infrastructure is in place to support current needs, as well as future growth, on the conference level. Draw on and apply the latest research on “Growing Young” churches that “disproportionately invest in the young.” Establish a plan that will provide the volunteer capacity necessary to sustain the conference’s youth ministry to a targeted number of youth and churches. Explore new processes for sustaining healthy economic

engines for youth ministry, in light of the fiscal realities facing churches today. Determine a reasonable long-term staffing model for conference youth ministry, given its identified vision and goals.

## **PHASE TWO: Building the Training Ground for Youth Workers**

- Create a folder, in both hard copy and electronic/online forms, for all conference youth workers that includes a 12-18 month calendar for all youth and camping programs, contact information for conference and district level leadership, FAQs for those new to ministry, how to get connected to the conference communications, conference recommendations on safe sanctuary practices, and information on UMC theology.
- Plan a series of training events for youth workers, which take place at varied times and locations, to make these opportunities accessible to the diverse group of youth workers in the conference. Focus training on key challenges, such as volunteer recruiting, communication, leadership development, and curriculum. Recruit veteran youth workers to help facilitate these opportunities. Make sure that there are training events specifically designed for youth workers who are in their first two years of ministry. Present alternative models and new prototypes for the future of youth ministry, particularly highlighting ways of programming beyond a traditional single-church, Sunday morning, youth group structure. Consider partnering with and promoting existing events like this which already exist in the conference.
- Develop a user-friendly, easily accessible, on-line youth ministry “resource hub” that provides churches with what they need to establish sustainable youth ministries, including (but not limited to):
  - A list of recommended camp and retreat centers in the area and a link to those websites.
  - Easily downloadable games, curriculum, videos and music for youth leaders.
  - A list of recommended vendors for catering, t-shirts, transportation, etc.
  - A list of all the opportunities for service and mission for young people in and through the conference
  - A Resource Bank for sharing and exchange that includes:
    1. Curriculum
    2. Props for VBS
    3. Spaces on Trips and Retreats
    4. Sports Equipment
    5. Transportation (vans and trailers)
    6. A Meeting Space
    7. A Youth Band
    8. Web or Design Expertise
    9. Children and Youth Ministry Manual Templates
    10. Parent Ministry Resources
    11. Confirmation Resources
  - Templates for all-things youth ministry including:
    1. Release Forms
    2. Safe Sanctuary Policy

3. Job Descriptions
  4. Calendars
  5. Sample Retreat Schedules
  6. Major Event Notebook Templates
  7. Fundraising
- Youth Leader Training Modules
    1. How to grow a youth ministry
    2. Leveraging Transitions (Elementary-Middle School; Middle School-High School; High School-College; First Time Parents)
    3. Cultivating Sticky Faith
    4. Turning First-Timers Into Regulars
    5. Leading Instead of Leaving: Secrets to Retaining Older Youth
    6. How to Design and Launch a Pre-Teen Ministry
    7. From Zero to Something: Reaching Children and Youth When You Have None
  - Using items from the conference media resource center and building on the resource table available at Y.A.R./NOW, provide a mobile resource “table” for youth ministries that would include books and materials for personal development, resources for training and equipping other leaders, and pre-vetted curriculum that can be utilized by churches. Include a collection of resources specifically designed for parents to assist and support them in the task of Christian parenting. Make this directly available to parents, through their church’s youth worker, and via district and conference level leadership and events. This supply of resources can be shared at events throughout the year, with district offices, during visits by conference staff with youth workers, and by request.
  - Support youth workers, and their work within their individual churches, by teaching strategies and making resources available which help youth ministries become more fully integrated in to the life of their congregation. This will include expanded communication practices, more active, visible roles for youth in worship and other church-wide events/programs, and their inclusion leadership teams and the planning processes of the church.
  - Provide opportunities for intentional spiritual development/retreat in the lives of youth workers, as well as space for youth workers who are tired, burned out, and frustrated to express their concerns and experiences, and have a trusted voice speak into their life, work, and ministry. Ensure that these resources are widely known and easily accessible, so that youth workers know that their well-being is a priority, and to increase youth worker retention throughout the IGRC, for the health of youth, ministries, churches, and the conference.

### **PHASE THREE: Innovate, Prototype, and Iterate**

- Design and implement a coaching program for leaders who do not yet have youth in their congregations but are committed to the next generation.

- Incubate Connective Structures for youth and youth leaders in every district, considering a different one of these alternatives in every district (All could be coached, tracked, and supported by Ministry Architects):
  1. District Youth and Camping Ministry Champion Team: two adults representing youth ministry, one adult representing campus ministry, and four teenagers from different churches
  2. Youth Leadership Cohort: A group of 10-20 high school students engaged in a two-year cohort that trains them in the fundamentals of Christian leadership and coaches them in investing back in their home congregations
  3. A Multicultural Cohort of youth and adults from a variety of ethnicities and economic backgrounds
  4. A study of the book Growing Young, as a resource for congregations throughout the conference
  5. Collaborative Clusters of Churches doing youth ministry together
  6. Support and Connectivity Structures Specifically for Churches with less than ten youth.
  7. Support and Connectivity Structures Specifically for Churches with 11-35 youth.
  8. Support and Connectivity Structures Specifically for Churches with more than 35 youth.
  9. A summer collaborative youth ministry within a single district or district cluster.
  10. A Transportation co-op allowing churches with limited options for transportation to formally partner with churches that have vans that might be shared.
  11. A Short-Term Missions Arm of Youth Ministry that offers groups of churches (both within the conference and outside it) short-term mission opportunities, including housing, meals, and work projects within the conference.
  
- Create leadership teams, including youth, to evaluate current conference wide offerings, including consideration of venues, speakers and worship leaders, themes, budget, calendars for schools and churches, and similar programs offered by other ministries/organizations. Based on this feedback, target, design and promote future conference wide events 12-18 months in advance, and in coordination with other conference activities planned on the local and district/regional levels.
  
- In addition to conference wide retreats, consider what it might look like to plan, organize, and implement regional opportunities or gatherings. Connect with youth workers in districts/regions to determine needs, locations, dates, costs, and other details/logistics to scheduling and planning for these events.
  
- Research alternative ways for the conference to receive additional funding to support programs and events, as well as help offset costs for conference programs and events for, and possibly assist in resourcing, individual churches. This will include considering exploring grants and scholarships available for the conference and churches, reaching out to major donors for financial support, and examining ways to reduce expenses for conference programs and events.

- After a year of iterating and prototyping,
  - Reshape the structure of the youth ministry to a structure that has proven over the previous year to be more effective in executing and promoting excellent ministry and building vital connections between stakeholders in the youth and camping ministries
  - Design a long-term staffing plan for conference level, long-term youth ministry. This long-term staffing plan might involve a staff person solely over youth ministry and one solely over camping.

## **IMPLEMENTATION TIMELINE**

*The following provides the Illinois Great Rivers Conference with a timeline that can serve as a beginning blueprint for the strategic launch of sustainable youth ministry focus throughout the conference. The timeline, organized by quarters provides a sequencing plan for implementing the recommendations of this report over the coming three years.*

### **PHASE ONE: BUILDING AND CREATING CONNECTIONS**

#### **May-July 2018**

##### **Focus: Strategic Plan Details, Presentation for Annual Conference**

- A prayer team to undergird the strategic plan in this document has been recruited.
- The IGRC Youth Ministry Action Team has been recruited (5-7 representatives) and the first meeting has been scheduled to take place.
- A shared folder has been created (Google Drive, Dropbox, etc.) to house all documents related to this effort.
- A Vision Summit has taken place resulting in the following documents:
  - A ministry mission statement
  - A statement of values
  - A set of three-year revolving goals, and one-year corresponding benchmarks
  - An organizational structure for the ministry
- This report and the vision documents have been presented to the conference cabinet asking for their support of the work and committing to continue to keep this group aware of progress being made throughout the process.
  - In coordination with the conference communications team, a plan for distributing and making available this assessment report and the visioning documents in hard and electronic versions has been created and implemented.
- Strategic planning dates have been scheduled:
  - A Presentation of an Initial Executive Summary of the Strategic Plan to the Board (June 1, prior to 2018 Annual Conference)
  - Presentation of the Strategic Plan to the Board (July or August)
- This report and the Visioning documents have been presented at the 2018 Annual Conference.
- A copy of this report has been added to the conference website.
- A game plan for gathering information in a database of at least 500 youth ministry stakeholders in the conference has been created and integrated into the conference's database, including:
  - All paid youth staff in churches
  - All youth ministry volunteers who have participated in a conference youth program
  - Veteran youth workers willing to serve as mentors
  - All pastors passionate about youth ministry
  - All college students considering a call to ministry
  - All seminary students engaged in the call process
  - Everyone on the N.O.W. registration list
  - All teenagers serving in leadership roles in their churches or conference
  - All current or alum District Youth Coordinators
  - All conference staff who touch youth ministry
  - All camping ministry staff
  - All camping ministry participants

## **August - October 2018**

### **Focus: Plan Regional Launch, Marketing Plan**

- A resource projection of the staffing and budget resources needed to implement this strategic plan has been developed, and conference/cabinet conversations around necessary resourcing for the coming year have begun.
- The IGRC youth ministry has begun working with camp staff and the board to align vision between the IGRC camping and youth ministries. A process to filter camp activities and events through the vision of the IGRC has been created.
- Networks for youth workers through either the districts or by region for accountability, sharing, support, connections, and establishing mentor relationships have begun being developed.
  - One or two districts to launch in the fall of 2018 have been chosen. Veteran youth workers have been considered to serve as district coordinators. Key leaders have been identified in the IGRC districts/regions to recruit and train for district leadership, ensuring the vision and mission of the IGRC is being upheld. Regular meeting times have been established for the networks. Avenues of connection for these networking groups to stay connected in between meetings (i.e. social media platform, etc.) have been determined. Opportunities for conference youth staff to get connect with local congregations have been created and scheduled.
- A robust marketing process for the youth ministry in the conference has been developed including:
  - Share the good news happening in the youth and camping ministries throughout the conference, highlighting the progress and momentum of this assessment, visioning process, and the work of the camping strategic plan.
  - Monthly stories of effective youth ministry in the conference
  - The building of an audience of at least 3,000 stakeholders in youth ministry – including youth, parents, volunteers, youth workers, church staff, and pastors – easily sortable by area of interest and engagement
  - Targeted marketing plans to ensure achievement of participation goals for all conference-sponsored, youth ministry initiatives
  - Intentional social media campaigns
  - Collaboration with the conference communication team has begun to help create and manage monthly youth and camping emails.
  - The conference communications team has been collaborated with to determine communication norms for promoting events.
  - A communications request form for camp and churches who want to have events promoted through conference channels has been created and shared.
  - Determine the appropriate level of conference support churches can expect in creating communications products for their events (video, mailers, etc.)

## **November 2018 - January 2019**

### **Focus: Calendar, Youth Leadership, Database**

- A master youth and camping calendar has been created, with programs and events scheduled 12-18 months in advance. The calendar has been coordinated with district and regional events to ensure highest possible participation rates, distributed via hard copy to all conference churches, available throughout the year, and regularly updated as advance planning continues. An easily accessible online version has been made

available so anyone in the conference can access it. Youth workers in the conference have been made aware of this resource.

- Take a step toward addressing the need for youth leadership development and a culture of call by sending three to five students to one of the youth/theology academies across the country.
- Complete a census of churches in the conference to identify which churches are doing what kinds of trips with youth in the summer of 2019.
- Youth have been invited to be part of leadership teams and decision-making groups on the district and conference levels throughout the IGRC. Youth workers at churches in the conference have recommended youth to fill these roles. Youth delegates for Annual Conference have been identified, and it has been ensured that youth involved in leadership teams have a voice, which is heard and valued by all involved. Leadership development opportunities for youth at conference events/programs have been created
- Establish a system for capturing contact information for every youth who registers for the middle school and high school N.O.W. retreats and for their parents.

## **February-April 2019**

### **Focus: Regional Connections**

- A follow up process for reaching out to camp participants has been created that matches with the vision of the IGRC.
- A game plan has been written that will ensure at least once a year, beginning in 2019, conference staff will organize and lead gatherings in each district/area, to meet with, get to know, and build relationships with youth workers in the conference.
  - Consider coordinating these gatherings with training events or resource events.
  - Contact district youth leadership and/or mentors to create opportunities for regional connections as well.
  - Create connection points at Annual Conference for district and regional networking for youth and camping ministries.
- Resource projections of the staffing and budget resources needed to implement this strategic plan for the next two years have been finalized.

## **February-April 2019**

### **Focus: Database, Connections, Annual Conference Report**

- A pro-active process for collecting, maintaining, and updating contact information for all youth workers (regardless of position or paid status) in the IGRC on an annual basis has been created.
- Phase one relational connections have been established and developed, and the team has continued to evaluate and ensure that the infrastructure is in place to support current needs, as well as future growth, on the conference level.
  - Draw on and apply the latest research on “Growing Young” churches that “disproportionately invest in the young.”
  - Establish a plan that will provide the volunteer capacity necessary to sustain the conference’s youth and camping ministries to a targeted number of youth and churches.
  - Explore new processes for sustaining healthy economic engines for youth and camping ministry, in light of the fiscal realities facing churches today.
  - Determine a reasonable long-term staffing model for conference youth ministry, given its identified vision and goals. Put structures in place to ensure the ongoing health and vitality of the conference’s camping ministries.
- An inspiring update of the strategic implementation process of the youth ministry Action Team has been presented at annual conference, including a progress report on the

youth ministry strategic planning process, new initiatives, and news related to developing student leaders.

## **PHASE TWO: BUILDING AND TRAINING GROUND FOR YOUTH WORKERS**

**May-July 2019**

**Focus: Ministry Manual, Training**

- Collaboration with the Conference communications staff has occurred to create and produce an IGRC youth worker ministry folder in hard and electronic/online forms for all conference youth workers that includes:
  - 12-18 month calendar for all youth/camping programs
  - Contact information for conference and district level leadership
  - FAQs for those new to ministry
  - How to get connected to the conference communications
  - Conference recommendations on safe sanctuary practices
  - Basic information on UMC theology.
  - Determine a process for the annual updating of this information.
- A series of training events for youth workers have been planned that:
  - At varied times and locations, to make these opportunities accessible to the diverse group of youth workers in the conference.
  - Focus training on key challenges: volunteer recruiting, communication, and curriculum.
  - Recruit veteran youth workers to help facilitate.
  - Make sure that there are training events specifically designed for youth workers who are in their first two years of ministry.
  - Present alternative models and new prototypes for the future of youth ministry, highlighting ways of programming beyond a traditional single-church, Sunday morning, youth group structure.
  - Consider partnering with and promoting existing events like this which already exist in the conference.
  - Consider virtual and online versions of each event for those who cannot attend.
- Provide opportunities for intentional spiritual development/retreat in the lives of youth workers, as well as space for youth workers who are tired, burned out, and frustrated to express their concerns and experiences, and have a trusted voice speak into the life, work, and ministry. Ensure that these resources are widely known and easily accessible, so that youth workers know that their well-being is a priority, and to increase youth worker retention throughout the IGRC, for the health of youth, ministries, churches, and the conference.

## **PHASE THREE: INNOVATE, PROTOTYPE, AND ITERATE**

**August - October 2019**

**Focus: Resource Hub**

- Develop a user-friendly, easily accessible, on-line youth ministry “resource hub” that provides churches with what they need to establish sustainable youth ministries, including (but not limited to):
  - A list of recommended camp and retreat centers in the area and a link to those websites
  - Easily downloadable games, curriculum, videos and music for youth leaders
  - A list of recommended vendors for catering, t-shirts, transportation, etc.

- A list of all the opportunities for service and mission for young people in and through the Conference
- A Resource Bank for sharing and exchange
  - Curriculum
  - Props for VBS
  - Spaces on Trips and Retreats
  - Sports Equipment
  - Transportation (vans and trailers)
  - A Meeting Space
  - A Youth Band
  - Web or Design Expertise
  - Children and Youth Ministry Manual Templates
  - Parent Ministry Resources
  - Confirmation Resources
- Templates for all-things youth ministry
  - Release forms
  - Safe Sanctuary policy
  - Job Descriptions
  - Calendars
  - Sample Retreat Schedules
  - Major Event Notebook Templates
  - Fundraising
- Youth Leader Training Modules
  - How to grow a youth ministry
  - Leveraging Transitions (Elementary-Middle School; Middle School-High School; High School-College; First Time Parents)
  - Cultivating Sticky Faith
  - Turning First-Timers Into Regulars
  - Leading Instead of Leaving: Secrets to Retaining Older Youth
  - How to Design and Launch a Pre-Teen Ministry
  - From Zero to Something: Reaching Children and Youth When You Have None
- All database information for youth and camping ministries has been updated by the end of the school year.
- Using items from the conference media resource center and building on the resource table available at Y.A.R./N.O.W., a mobile resource “table” for youth ministries has been created that includes books and materials for personal development, resources for training and equipping other leaders, and pre-vetted curriculum that can be utilized by churches. A collection of resources specifically designed for parents to assist and support them in the task of Christian parenting has been included. This resource has been made available to parents, through their church’s youth worker, and via district and conference level leadership and events. This supply of resources can be shared at events throughout the year, with district offices, during visits by conference staff with youth workers, and by request.
- A game plan for discipleship of summer camp staff has been created.
- A plan for leadership opportunities for youth during summer camp has been finalized and incorporated into summer camp promotional and training materials.

## **November 2019-January 2020**

### **Focus: Prototyping**

- Design and implement a coaching program for leaders who do not yet have youth in their congregations but are committed to the next generation.
- Incubate Connective Structures for youth and youth leaders in every district, considering a different one of these alternatives in every district (All could be coached, tracked, and supported by Ministry Architects):
  1. District Youth and Camping Ministry Champion Team: two adults representing youth ministry, one adult representing campus ministry, and four teenagers from different churches
  2. Youth Leadership Cohort: A group of 10-20 high school students engaged in a two-year cohort that trains them in the fundamentals of Christian leadership and coaches them in investing back in their home congregations
  3. A Multicultural Cohort of youth and adults from a variety of ethnicities and economic backgrounds
  4. A study of the book Growing Young, as a resource for congregations throughout the conference
  5. Collaborative Clusters of Churches doing youth ministry together
  6. Support and Connectivity Structures Specifically for Churches with less than ten youth.
  7. Support and Connectivity Structures Specifically for Churches with 11-35 youth.
  8. Support and Connectivity Structures Specifically for Churches with more than 35 youth.
  9. A summer collaborative youth ministry within a single district or district cluster.
  10. A Transportation co-op allowing churches with limited options for transportation to formally partner with churches that have vans that might be shared.
  11. A Short-Term Missions Arm of Youth Ministry that offers groups of churches (both within the conference and outside it) short-term mission opportunities, including housing, meals, and work projects within the conference.

## **February 2020-April 2020**

### **Focus: District/Regional Gatherings, Summer Camps, Annual Conference**

- Youth workers, and their work within their individual churches, has been supported by teaching strategies and making resources available which help youth ministries become more fully integrated in to the life of their congregation. Expanded communication practices, more active, visible roles for youth in worship and other church-wide events/programs, their inclusion on leadership teams and the planning processes of the church have helped ensure this support.
- In addition to conference wide retreats, it has been considered what it would look like to plan, organize, and implement regional opportunities or gatherings. Youth workers in districts/regions have been contacted to determine needs, locations, dates, costs, and other details/logistics to schedule and plan for these events.
- Camping systems of database management, communications, and volunteer management have been evaluated and necessary game plans have been written for those needing to be shored up.
- Census results for youth summer camp trips throughout the conference have been reviewed and a game plan has been written to determine next steps for conference wide church engagement at summer camps.

- A report for annual conference has been prepared, including updates on the progress of implementing the strategic plan and camping master plan.

### **May 2020-July 2020**

#### **Focus: Leadership Teams, Alternative Funding**

- Leadership teams, including youth, have been created to evaluate current conference-wide offerings, including consideration of venues, speakers and worship leaders, themes, budget, calendars for schools and churches, and similar programs offered by other ministries/organizations. Based on this feedback, conference wide events 12-18 months in advance have been designed and promoted, and in coordination with other conference activities planned on the local and district/regional levels.
- Alternative ways for the conference to receive additional funding to support programs and events has been considered, as well as help offset costs for conference programs and events for, and possibly assist in resourcing, individual churches. This will include considering a capital campaign for the camping facilities, exploring grants and scholarships available for the conference and churches, reaching out to major donors and past campers for financial support, and examining ways to reduce expenses for conference programs and events.

### **August 2020-January 2021**

#### **Focus: Review, Reshape**

- After a year of iterating and prototyping,
  - Reshape the structure of the youth ministry to a structure that has proven over the previous year to be more effective in executing and promoting excellent ministry and building vital connections between stakeholders in the youth and camping ministries
  - Design a long-term staffing plan for conference level, long-term youth ministry. This long-term staffing plan might involve a staff person solely over youth ministry and one solely over camping.
- A timeline for the next 12 months has been created that has identified pressure points needing to be addressed and game plans to address them.
- Preventative maintenance calendars have been finalized and implemented.
- Game plans have been put in place to sustain the processes and procedures implemented during the past three years.

## The *Ministry Architects* Team Serving Illinois Great River Conference of the UMC



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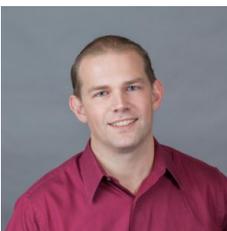
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Bryant began working in youth ministry in 1996 in the United Methodist Church. He has been worship speaker for summer camps, taught seminars for youth workers, and written curriculum for the Florida United Methodist Camping programs.

Bryant graduated from Florida Southern College with a Bachelor of Science in Sociology.

In his free time Bryant enjoys all things technology, exercise, good movies, and blogs at thepostlu.de. He and his wife, Tonya, and new son, Preston, live in Kernersville, NC.



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Mike began serving in youth ministry in 2001. He has worked at Kanakuk Kamps and has been involved with the para-church youth ministry K-Life. From 2008-2014 Mike was the youth pastor and children's pastor at the Van Buren, AR campus of Community Bible Church. Mike is currently on staff at Church at the Red Door where he oversees the youth ministry and children's ministry.

Mike graduated from Abilene Christian University with a Bachelors Degree in Youth and Family Ministry and continued his education with a Masters of Divinity from Bethel Seminary.

Mike and his wife, Ashley, live in Indio, CA with their daughter, Adeline. Mike enjoys sports, history, and interesting documentaries.



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Krista's passion is youth ministry, and creating experiences for young people to connect with Jesus. She also has a heart for helping families disciple their kids in partnership with the church, and raising up volunteers in ministry. She has worked with youth, children, and families in a variety of roles through a lengthy career in the Florida Conference of the United Methodist Church.

Krista graduated from Mars Hill University with a degree in Youth Ministry. She is also a coach for the Youth Ministry Institute in Orlando, and serves as the Youth Coordinator for the Southwest District in the Florida Conference.

She loves reading, running, playing basketball and watching her kids play sports. Currently, she serves as Director of Student Ministries at St. John's United Methodist Church in Sarasota, Florida. She and her husband Greg are die-hard Green Bay Packer fans and have three girls, Laney, Rylee, and Gemma.



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Sean began working in youth ministry in 1997 and has served as Youth Minister in United Methodist Churches in Texas, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, and South Carolina. He is currently the Children's and Youth Minister at First Baptist Church in McMinnville, OR.

Sean graduated from St. Mary's University in San Antonio, TX with a B.A. in Theology, and continues to learn and study in a variety of fields, including leadership, economics, theology and more. Sean lives in McMinnville, OR with his wife, Jenn, their son, Parker and daughter, Sybil.



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Jen DeJong began working in youth ministry in 2002 as the Youth Program Coordinator at First Presbyterian Church in Nashville, TN. She currently serves on the Ministry Architects executive team, overseeing the work with many of our churches.

Jen graduated from Vanderbilt University with a B.S. in Cognitive Studies and a minor in Communications. She also earned a M.S. at Vanderbilt in Developmental Psychology with a special emphasis on parental involvement in teenagers' extracurricular activities.

Jen currently resides in Springfield, Illinois with her husband, Marc, their two daughters, Maria and Rose, and their two dogs.