

Growing Young in Our Small Town and Rural Context by Rachel Mueller



The STAR Youth Ministry Initiative began as a dream of youths attending the 2018 ELCA Gathering in Houston, TX, who wanted more opportunities to gather with other Christian youths in the small town and rural communities. The Initiative is a pilot project funded by the Congregational Vitality team at Churchwide and supported by our Synod. Our goal is to build a networking team to coordinate quarterly youth events where they can build community and grow in faith together.

I, Rachel Mueller, began working at Grace Lutheran Church (Dodgeville) in December of 2019 as the Director of Youth and Family Ministries and Coordinator of the Small Town & Rural Youth Ministry Initiative (isn't that a mouthful!). Unfortunately, the coronavirus changed how we thought the Initiative would take root.

In August 2020, the ELCA offered to Directors of Evangelical Mission, Pastors, and Lay Leaders a two day *Growing Young* Seminar, led by The Fuller Youth Institute. We were impressed with the practical knowledge and wanted to take that learning to provide a training series for our local leaders. Participants representing Adams (Argyle), Faith (Cuba City), First English (Platteville), Grace (Darlington), Grace (Dodgeville), Peace (Belmont), and St. John's (Richland Center) met Thursday nights during February and March to study the qualities of churches that have successfully engaged and retained their youth. This training was our first official offering of the Initiative.

According to the Fuller Youth Institute, the six core commitments of any congregation that wishes to Grow Young are: Keychain Leadership, Empathy Today, Jesus' Message, Warm Relationships, Prioritize Everywhere, and Best Neighbors. These core commitments revolve around a Jesus-Centered Community.

Several types of leaders are described in the *Growing Young* book; there are key-hoarding leaders who keep all of the power, key-lending leaders who give their keys away on a short-term basis, key-less leaders who are not given authority or are not properly resourced, and keychain leaders. Keychain leaders are aware of the power & access they hold and are intentional about entrusting and empowering young people. It's important to decentralize the authority in the church. Young people are drawn to communities that empower them and entrust them with leadership.

The word, "empathy," means "to understand and share the feelings of another." A community that demonstrates Empathy Today is a community that steps into the shoes of our young people. The youth of today live in a completely different world than the youth of even 30 years ago; The Fuller Youth Institute encourages us to step away from judging or criticizing our youth & their journey and instead work to understand where they are in life in relation to the world we live in.

Jesus' Message: We must take Jesus' message seriously. Instead of blowing a lot of hot air, we need to welcome and support our young people in a Christ-centered way of life.

“Taking Jesus' message seriously means churches pay attention to the life and words of Christ. Young people can then articulate a gospel that is less talk about beliefs and more talk about Jesus, less tied to formulas and more focused on redemptive narrative, and less about heaven later and more about life here and now,” (*Growing Young*, pg 159-160.)

Our young people will find it easier to share their own faith when we take initiative to build authentic relationships, listen well, and are honest about our own questions and doubts. We grow best in faith when we walk alongside another.

Young people (and grown people alike) crave a warm community of genuine people who care for one another. Young people are drawn to churches where they feel at home. From the research done by the Fuller Youth Institute, many young people referred to their home church as a place that was “welcoming, accepting, belonging, authentic, hospitable, and caring,” (*Growing Young*, pg 193.) We cannot rely on awesome programming and worship stage lighting... relational connection must be made a priority.

When we say “Prioritize Everywhere,” we mean there should be a commitment to “look for creative ways to tangibly support, resource, and involve [young people and their families] in all facets of your congregation” (*Growing Young Wheel*.) We can't just talk about how and why the youth are important to the church-- we need to emphasize them in our church philosophy/mission, worship gatherings, leadership, and budget. Church communities thrive when youth are empowered to use their gifts to serve.

The last, but not least, core commitment is being the Best Neighbors. In the bible, Jesus tells us that the second greatest commandment is to Love Thy Neighbor. Showing the world outside our church walls grace and mercy is a wonderful way to live out the Gospel. Our young

people are looking for a faith that translates to their life today; the Good News of the Gospel becomes more tangible when we help provide ways for them to neighbor well locally and globally.

At the end of our training series, we asked participants to fill out a class evaluation. To the question, “What aspects of this training were most useful or valuable,” one participant said: “Establishing connections with other congregations, a framework to implement discussions, and ideas to focus site specific discussions and planning.” Another commented: “I got a lot of new ideas on how to engage the younger members, and to help include others in our community...”

When we asked, “How would you improve this training series,” one participant responded:

“There really needs to be an effort to put the learnings into action. Knowledge isn't power; Action is power. It's great to know these things, but putting them into action in the various congregations will be challenging for the individual [church]. To make lasting change, I think you need a network to help participants support each other as they try, fail, adjust, and succeed. It's too easy to give up when you feel like you're the only person trying.”

Growing Young isn't a one-person job, it's a congregation-wide movement! No, not everyone needs to lead a small group bible study, organize youth events, or spearhead committees, but everyone can still invest in the lives of our young people, whether that's “sitting on the curb” with them, listening to their stories, going to their extracurricular sports/music/theater productions, welcoming them at church, inviting them into your home, or sharing your own life stories. Everyone can get involved in the lives of our young people.

So where do we go from here? We generated some awesome ideas from the training series, if I do say so myself. We would love to see the Small Town & Rural churches send their youth to summer bible camps together and engage in other outdoor activities (such as hiking, fishing, kayaking, etc), coordinate joint retreats for middle school & high school students

(whether that's through local camps, weekend trips organized by the Initiative, or going to the Youth Quake), pursue Campus Ministry Connections and organize Lutheran College visits, invest in a Young Adult Ministry that focuses on 20-30 year old's, host Lefse & other Christian Holiday gatherings, organize summer block parties, and coordinate groups & fundraising for the ELCA Youth Gatherings (especially for congregations with few high schoolers or congregations which lack history with the Gathering). The possibilities are endless! The STAR Youth Initiative is a great way to help our congregations in the Iowa, Lafayette, and Grant counties grow young. I am looking forward to building a steering team that can dream, coordinate, and network together to live out the dream that began this Initiative.



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