

Things I Learned In My First Year

Part Two: Tips from a New Full-Time Youth Worker

In October of 2020, I made the decision to transition from my part-time administrative job at a financial institution to become the Director of Youth and Young Adult Ministries at the PC(USA) church I had recently joined. I was close to finishing my seminary degree and imagined I would have a full-time ministry position until I was ordained. Little did I know, God had a different plan in store. So there I was, a brand new youth ministries director in the midst of a global pandemic. Here are the top lessons I've learned in my first year. I pray these are helpful to you!

The little things go a long way. When I started in my position, I thought I had to find grand ways to show the students and families that I cared about them. In the midst of a global pandemic, there was seemingly very little I could do. So, I started with some little things. I drove little bags of Halloween candy to students' houses. I brought milkshakes and coffee drinks to backyards and listened to whatever students wanted to tell me from six feet away. These things that seemed so little to me made a huge difference, and I was happily surprised by how connections were formed through such small acts.

Resources are available. I felt alone in my first few months. I thought I had to recreate the wheel, and I felt less than equipped. Getting involved in [PYWA](#) and other groups within PCUSA was a huge gift. Suddenly, I had a community of people who were in this with me, and a myriad of resources available at my fingertips. I am so grateful for the support and encouragement I have received from the support groups I have joined.

Students are BUSY. I thought I was busy when I was in high school! Many students today are being pulled in every direction, and the pressure on their schedules is astounding. I've been working on searching for ways to benefit their schedules rather than simply adding things to their lives. Creating spaces for students to rest and feel safe and feel accepted exactly as they are huge. Telling students (over and over again) that I'm not mad or disappointed when they don't show up to things has been crucial, too.

Parents are willing to help. I have been so pleasantly surprised by how the parents of my students have leaned in and offered support during my first year. I quickly realized that they want thriving youth ministries for their students, and that they are willing to help create that however they can. Learning to accept help and support from parents has been a big learning curve for me, and one that has definitely been worthwhile.

Volunteers are faithful. I have been immensely blessed by the volunteers of the youth ministry in the congregation I serve. They have been consistent, dedicated, and faithful. They have given me grace when I've failed and have trusted my leadership even in moments, I maybe don't deserve it. I'm lucky I didn't have to find these volunteers, but if you're in a place of searching, know that there are amazing people out there ready to support students in meaningful ways.

Today's students want and need connection, perhaps more than anything else. It took me very little time to see how amazing this generation is. They are constantly challenging themselves toward growth, aware of the ongoings of the world around them, and are deeply committed to making a difference. They don't need Bible trivia or pressure to be a 'good Christian.' They want and need connection. In today's world of social media,

online school, and countless screens, students deeply desire to be truly seen and loved for who they are. I've learned the importance of meeting with students with no agenda but to listen to them, and to accept them exactly as they are. These students and I are learning about what it means to really follow Jesus through forming authentic relationships with each other.

Create culture together. When I entered this new world of leading youth ministry, I asked the students what they wanted from their church and youth groups. At the time, I wondered if this was a desperate move of naivety. Looking back, I think it might have been one of the best things I could have done. The students thought deeply and were honest in their responses. Together, we're creating a place that is safe and encourages growth. They are leaning in because they know their voices matter. It's a really beautiful thing.

Grace over perfection. As a bit of a recovering perfectionist, I've been learning that mistakes are okay. Over and over again, I've been utterly surprised by the grace given to me by students, parents, and volunteers. And trust me, I've made some mistakes during this first year. Somehow, these mistakes have been less important than my intentions. Students, parents, and volunteers have seen my heart, and by the grace of God they have decided they are willing to accept my shortcomings and failures along with my gifts. This has been such a sweet reminder of the character of God: God takes us as we are and loves us through our messes. Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!

For more tips see also Compass Points [Things We've Learned in Youth Ministry - Part One: Tips from Seasoned Youth Workers](#).

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