



SEVEN PRACTICES OF HEALTHY YOUTH MINISTRY



THE
LUTHERAN CHURCH
MISSOURI SYNOD

Youth Ministry

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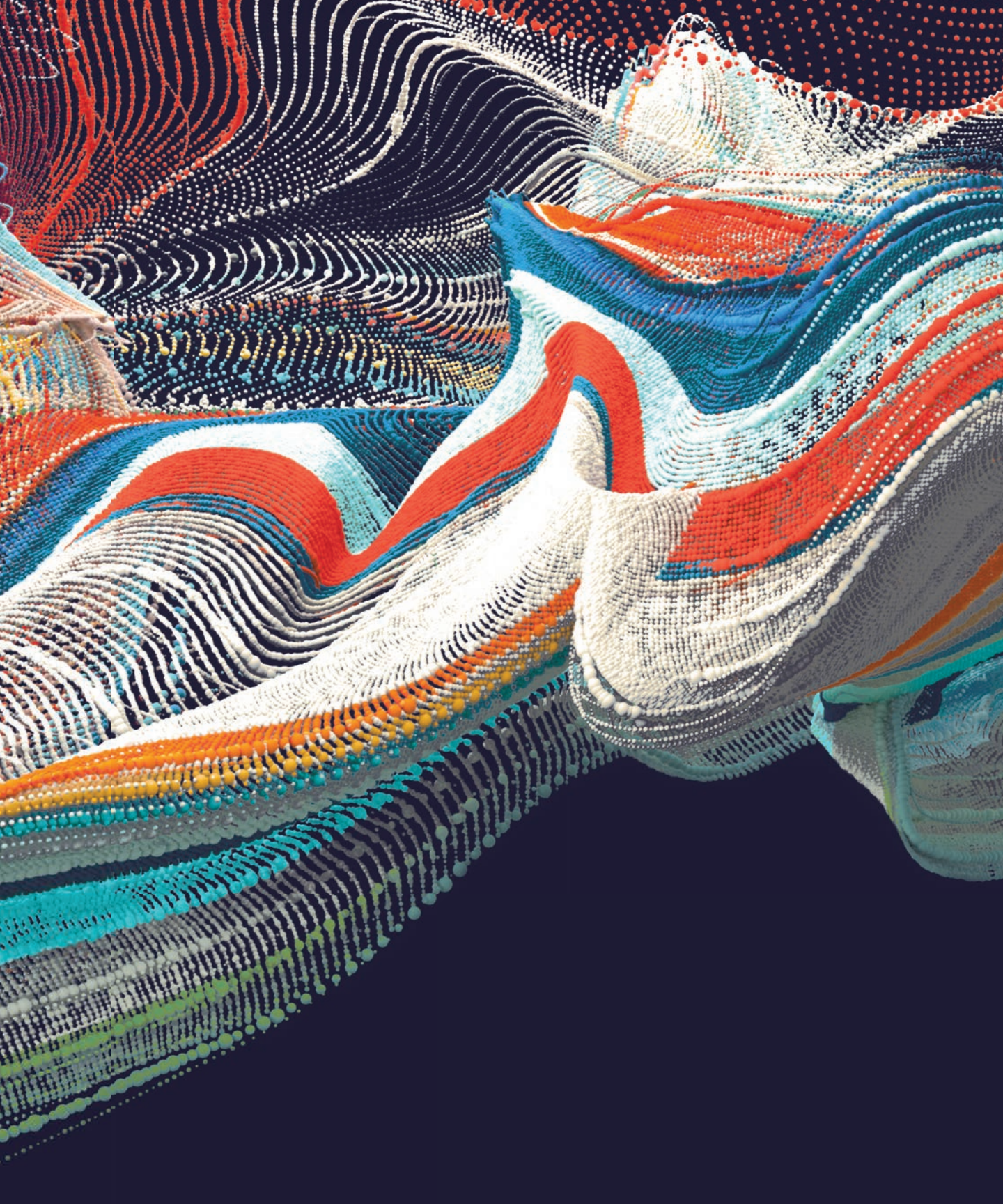
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Introduction

Seven Practices of Healthy Youth Ministry was designed by the office of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod Youth Ministry for use in LCMS youth ministries. While the LCMS Office of National Mission—Youth Ministry staff played a role in its development, this book was written by Rev. Dr. Mark Kiessling and Julianna Shults.

Julianna, a director of Christian education, serves as program manager for resources and leadership with LCMS Youth Ministry. Her work includes managing youthsource.com and LCMS YouthLead along with other research and resourcing. She supports adult leaders at the LCMS Youth Gathering and often speaks at district and other church conferences about service, leadership, and generational data. Julianna is a graduate of Concordia University, Nebraska and Loyola University Chicago. She has also completed training from the Karpenko Institute for Nurturing and Developing Leadership Excellence.

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As a part of the LCMS Youth Ministry staff, Mark and Julianna cohost the podcast *End Goals* on KFUE radio.





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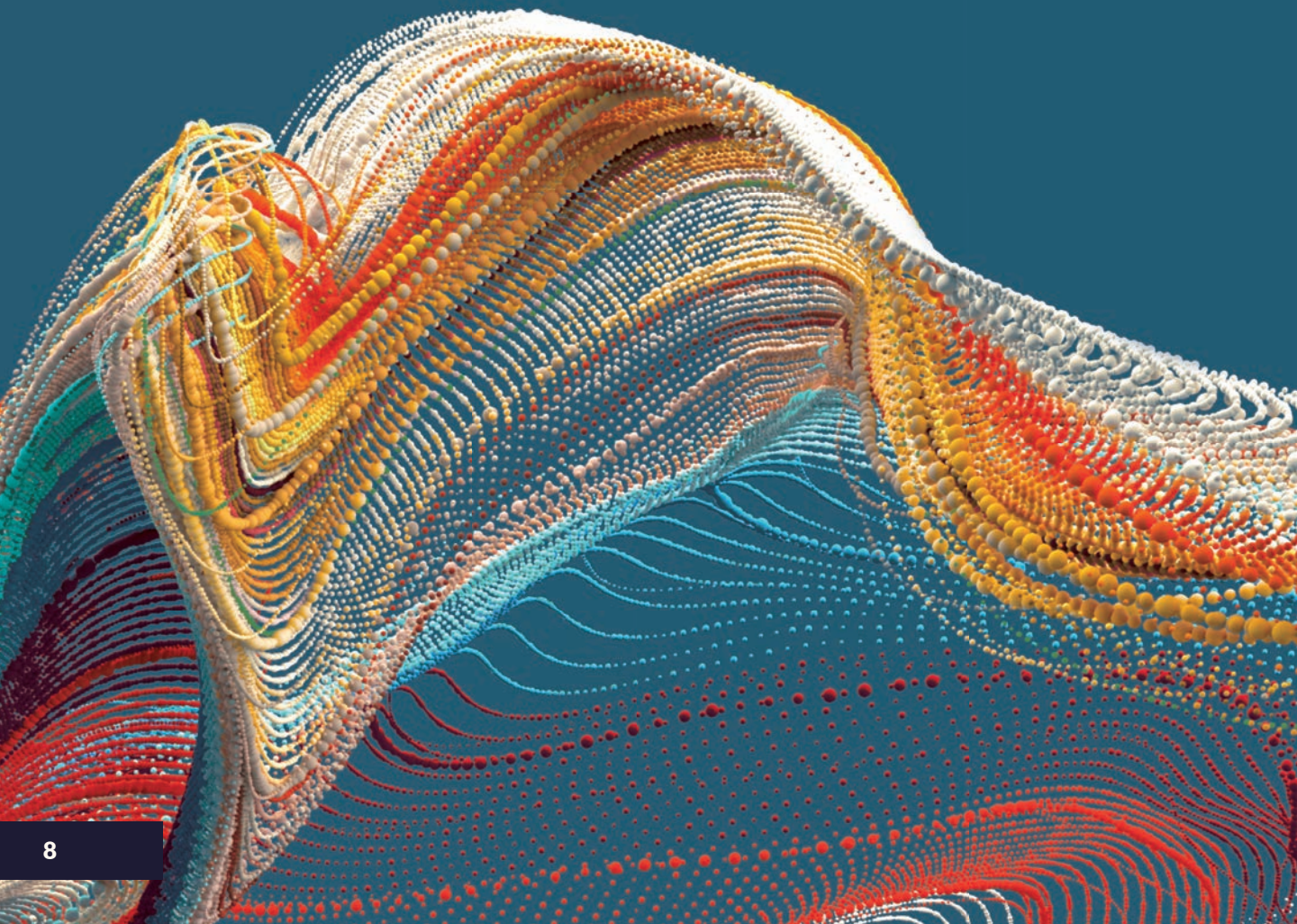
Julianna: I would also like to thank my parents, Rick and Marilyn Shults, for modeling Christ-centered servant leadership not just for our family but for so many young people in the church. Thanks to my sister, Christina, and her husband, James, for your examples of hospitality, service, warmth, challenge, and grace. Thank you to the staff and members of Faith Lutheran in Topeka, Kansas; Hope Lutheran in Plant City, Florida; St. Paul Lutheran in Chicago; and Christ Memorial in St. Louis, who shaped me and this book. Thank you to DCE Jim Bradshaw, Rev. Dr. Mark Kiessling, and countless other mentors for taking a risk and investing in me. I’m hoping you think it paid off.

Mark: I would like to thank my wife, Beth, for her love, support, and patience. Also, thank you, Mom and Dad, Richard and Maxine Kiessling, for being engaged parents who constantly showed me Jesus' grace. Thanks to my sisters, Julie Liedtke and Jill Davitt, for showing me love and forgiveness I don't deserve. Thank you to the saints at Grace Lutheran Church in Hamilton, Montana, who were amazing supportive adults and peers to this young disciple of Jesus. Specifically, thank you to Bob Baker, my youth director, who showed me Christ's love and compassion while encouraging me in my life with Christ. (I needed it!)



Chapter 1

WHY ANOTHER YOUTH MINISTRY BOOK?



It started with questions—lots of questions. In our office at LCMS Youth Ministry, we receive regular emails, phone calls, and occasionally even faxes from youth leaders who ask questions around a common theme:

“I’m in charge of youth ministry. Now, where do I start?”

“How do I know if our youth ministry is healthy and doing the right things to care for our teens?”

“My youth ministry is dwindling. What should I be doing differently?”

“What is youth ministry supposed to look like?”

Over the years, we have heard from a wide variety of youth leaders. Some were newly elected to the youth board and trying to figure out a first step. Others had been doing youth ministry for twice as long as the teens they serve have been alive. Some were naturally drawn to teens; others took a bit of warming up. Some questions came from trained professional church workers who focused on youth ministry; others were volunteers.

Parents, young adults, retirees, pastors, DCEs, and more are all deeply committed to filling this vital role in their congregation. They reached out to us for insight and resources to help them in the task of caring for young people. In doing so, we saw their love for the teens in their congregations and communities. Behind every email, Facebook message, and phone call was a servant heart that wanted young people to know Jesus.

Questions come to us a bit removed from their contexts. We often don’t know the youth leader or the young people. Youth leaders reach out with requests arising from a deep commitment to their vocations. They know each young person by name. Perhaps they were even there to witness some of these teens receive God’s gift of faith and forgiveness given in Baptism. They have been in a congregational community praying and supporting as children grow into teens. Parents and youth leaders know the value of youth ministry as teens face new challenges to their faith. Youth leaders take how the Spirit empowers them to teach, listen, engage, and mentor youth in this critical time seriously.

In each question to our office, we caught a glimpse of the church's desire for teens to be disciples of Jesus now and into eternity. We know youth leaders are praying regularly for God's wisdom and the Holy Spirit to guide them. They stay up late thinking about how they can best support the faith lives of teens. They read articles and talk to other pastors and youth leaders. Through constant assessment, they strive to meet youth in the congregation and community where they are at with the love of Jesus. Youth ministry constantly changes as teens join and grow and the culture shifts. Even in the best of circumstances, healthy youth ministry can seem like a nebulous task.

I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth. (3 John 4)

One thing all youth leaders share is that they take no greater joy than to see young people who are walking in the truth of Jesus.

HEALTHY YOUTH MINISTRY REALLY DOES BOIL DOWN TO SHARING THE GOSPEL WITH TEENS, AND THAT IS AN ANSWER THAT WILL NEVER CHANGE. IT'S NOT SURPRISING OR NEW. IT IS AS IT HAS ALWAYS BEEN. WE SHARE THE SAME HEART AND PASSION AS YOUTH LEADERS—TO SEE MORE YOUNG PEOPLE IN THE SAVING FAITH OF JESUS.

So when we respond to these questions, we start with what is most important. In many ways, our response is the same as it's always been: saving faith in Jesus through His death and resurrection. Healthy youth ministry really does boil down to sharing the Gospel with teens, and that is an answer that will never change. It's not surprising or new. It is as it has always been. We share the same heart and passion as youth leaders—to see more young people in the saving faith of Jesus.

Beyond that, we are learners who are constantly seeking better ways to respond to the questions around healthy youth ministry. In our roles, we get the joy of supporting, resourcing, and cheering on youth leaders. It is a gift to observe healthy youth ministry in LCMS congregations of different sizes and contexts. We celebrate when congregations and individual youth leaders impact the lives of young people, including when the Holy Spirit leads our youth to careers in church work. Every year, we get to see young people who have been supported by youth leaders discover more about themselves and their vocations. There is much to celebrate.

When we see healthy youth ministry, we gather stories and data so that we can share what we learn with others. As we see healthy youth ministry flourish, we take

keen notes so we can relay best practices that can be used in other places. We constantly study new research and ideas. We listen well to youth, parents, and church leaders for key takeaways. We also seek out experts in youth ministry to ask our own questions of those wiser and more experienced than we are. It's a task we don't take lightly. We hope these observations, resources, and data give us insight we can share to help the church.

Over and over again, youth leaders reach out with questions that focus on programs, relationships, development, structure, and environment, all informed by the Gospel. These kinds of questions have been asked of those serving in our Youth Ministry office for many years. Over those years, the responses and resources we've suggested have changed. In some eras, we might have encouraged youth leaders to join a larger youth ministry organization. In others, past staff might have provided them with a more systematic and programmatic handbook of ways to support young people. Or we may have shared books and articles by other youth ministry leaders.

We reached a point where we no longer felt like we had a clear, concise, and practical response. We noticed a growing discontent with how we replied to these questions. With God's help, we did our best, but we knew we needed to formulate something that was faithful, research-driven, and practical. We wanted a better response to the question of healthy youth ministry for ourselves so that we could share it with others.

We heard you, and we share your deep desire to see the young people you love walking in faith. So we began to develop our response.

Where to Find a New Response

Answers to big questions like this are not easy to develop. It took us years as we sought out many different important sources. Together, the staff at LCMS Youth Ministry listened to youth and youth ministry leaders, examined data, and dug into Scripture and Lutheran doctrine. We investigated with our own research. We had long discussions and debates over wording, order, and priorities. We wanted a way to articulate what was key for healthy congregational youth ministry—around which we could build our own programming and share with excitement. From this work, *Seven Practices of Healthy Youth Ministry* was formed.

We first turned to Scripture. God's Word to us is the center of all congregational

ministry, including youth ministry. In looking at Scripture, we can see who God is and what God has done for us and our young people. We base our faith, hope, and ministry on God's living and active Word above all else. There is nowhere else we can go but to the Bible to define what God has called us to do in caring for young people.

Throughout the Old and New Testaments, God gives direction on how we are to care for and teach young people. In Deuteronomy 6, God commanded the people of Israel to teach their children as they went along throughout their day. We see young people like Samuel and David stepping out in faith to do great things empowered by God's Holy Spirit. In Luke 18, Jesus told the disciples to let the children come to Him and not to hinder them. We see people both young and old sharing the Good News of salvation through Jesus in the Epistles.

IT IS NOT SURPRISING
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THEIR LIVES OF FAITH.

We found powerful instruction in our Lutheran theology as well. What we believe as Lutherans comes from God's Word, and it gives important language and understanding to what we teach young people. Our understanding of Baptism, vocation, the role of parents, and the distinction between Law and Gospel all informed how we defined healthy youth ministry. It is not surprising that in our Lutheran theology, as in Scripture, we hear of the importance of young people in the church and how we encourage them in their lives of faith.

We looked at research from reliable sources that have studied Christians and the church for many years. There are many components of the seven practices that you might hear from other sources. One of the things we wanted to do with the seven practices was to create a single place where we could synthesize different insights on healthy youth ministry that have been highlighted by others. Yet we wanted to give these a uniquely Lutheran perspective.

We do our very best to give credit to the original sources for research and ideas. Two that you will see most often are Fuller Youth Institute and The Barna Group research. Fuller's data and application in *Sticky Faith* and *Growing Young* played a tremendous role in helping shape some of the seven practices. In fact, we took certain components, like the suggested number of supportive adults for each individual youth, directly from their work. Barna also gave us key research that helped us translate what we know about millennials to Generation Z. In the past few years, Barna has worked in partnership with Lutheran Hour Ministries on several

important research projects, including what makes a spiritually vibrant household.

However, the most important research projects we pulled from were our own. The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod has a wealth of information from the annual LCMS reporting statistics. LCMS Youth Ministry has conducted research since the very first LCMS Youth Gathering in 1980. Rev. Dr. Terry Dittmer, the previous director of LCMS Youth Ministry, started polling young people who attended Youth Gatherings to get a sampling of the attitudes, beliefs, and interests of teens in the church. We have continued that poll for more than forty years with every LCMS Youth Gathering. While the poll is not taken by a large or random enough sample to make wide statements about LCMS teens, it does give us a glimpse into their thoughts and values.

In 2016, LCMS Youth Ministry began a research endeavor that was bigger than any before: a three-part research project on millennials and the LCMS. In the first phase, congregations were randomly invited to complete a survey. The survey contained questions about the congregation's program and context, then focused specifically on the confirmation classes of 2004–6. Assuming the standard confirmation age of twelve to fourteen years old, these young people would have been twenty-three to twenty-seven years old at the time of the study. Since many of the existing pastors or DCEs were not at their congregations during those years, respondents were encouraged to recruit help from staff or parents who might know more about these millennials.

Our second phase was an online survey of millennials who were in their twenties and who had grown up in the LCMS. The survey took about twenty minutes to complete and included questions about the millennials' lives, families, current faith practices, and theology. More than two thousand young adults took the survey, both those who had stayed active in the LCMS and those who grew up in the LCMS but had since left it. This was far more data than we ever expected, and we took listening to these young people very seriously.

In the fall of 2017, we followed up our survey with our third phase, which consisted of several focus groups that allowed us to get even more insight into some of the data we found in the survey. We chose questions that would help us better understand some of the data we saw around the need for peer support in young adulthood, what welcome and warmth meant, and more. These conversations helped us to better understand the statistical data we received in the survey. We captured what we found in this research in the book *Relationships Count: Engaging and*

Retaining Millennials, and you will see many references to that research throughout this book.

Last, but certainly not least, we talked to experienced youth leaders. LCMS Youth Ministry is blessed to have a network of youth leaders, both professional and lay, who are willing to share from their depth of wisdom and experience. While data and research are helpful, the seven practices needed to be practical. For us to develop something that wouldn't just work in theory, we spoke with those who are on the ground working with teens and their families every day. We also asked for input from those who train people at our Concordia Universities. We tried to listen well to their wisdom, and you will hear their stories throughout this book. If you have been around youth ministry for a while, we hope much of what you read here resonates with what you are already doing in youth ministry.

The seven practices have changed since we first laid them out. We adjusted language and focus as we started to see youth ministry in our own congregations through the lens of the seven practices. As we presented them to more youth leaders, we listened to feedback and clarified concepts. It was a beautiful thing to hear leaders share where they saw the seven practices in the Bible and as they served young people. Their perspectives and insights continue to guide us even now. While the seven practices may yet still change, we hope we have come to a place of confidence that we have a clear, biblical, and practical way of answering key questions about what healthy congregational youth ministry looks like.

THE SEVEN PRACTICES OF HEALTHY YOUTH MINISTRY

CONGREGATIONS HAVE . . .

Warmth, challenge,
and grace

Supportive adults

Engaged parents

Opportunities to
serve and lead

CONGREGATIONS HELP ALL YOUNG PEOPLE . . .

Deeply understand
their baptismal faith

Develop a resilient
identity in Christ

Live out their
unique vocation