

A Reflection and Prayer for Adults Who Minister with Youth

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A SAFE SPACE TO LAND

As my six-year-old once told me, “You’re not me. You don’t know how I’m feeling inside.” From the mouths of babes. Because she was right. I didn’t know how she was feeling. All I could do was imagine how I would feel at that moment. And the love I have for her overwhelms me with a desperate need to fix that feeling. To fix *her*. But feelings can’t always be fixed. And when we let that drive to “fix” overtake us, we usually end up doing too much.

Having grown up as a teenager in Colorado during the Columbine school shooting and having my senior trip to New York City drastically changed because of 9/11, I can tell you that adults often say too much in an attempt to fix things. And I get it; silence is uncomfortable. We often go to the worst place in our brains in moments of silence and wonder if we are doing enough or saying the right thing. We feel like we are the adults, and the youth are looking to us to have all the answers, and what if we are failing in that? But if my eighteen years of youth ministry, both at the parish level and at the diocesan level, have shown me anything, it’s that the youth are looking for a home. They are looking for that safe place. They don’t need their adults to have all the answers; in fact, they prefer if their adults don’t always know but rather walk in companionship with them as they figure it out together.

The youth in your community need to know without question that they are in a safe community where they can wrestle with the tough stuff and won’t be judged. Where they can be their authentic selves, free to feel what they feel. After a disaster has upended the security of a teen’s life, that safe space to land and just be is more important than ever.

So, what do you do after your youth have experienced a tragedy?

Maybe it’s a natural disaster, maybe it’s a school shooting, maybe it’s the death of one of their own. It can be so easy to jump into “fix mode” here. We brainstorm ideas: they need a prayer service, they need a way to seek justice, they need to talk, they need (fill in the automatic adult idea here). But do they need any of that? Maybe. But you’ll never know unless you ask. Ask the question: “What do you need? Right now, what will help you feel safe?” You may be met with that all-too-familiar silence or the equally terrifying answer, “I don’t know.” That’s okay.

Hold the space.

As adults, we often want an answer to *our* questions right away. We forget that sometimes, we genuinely don’t know what we need — youth are no different. If you’re met with one of those answers (and yes, those are answers), reassure them that it’s okay not to know and not to be okay. Then, remind them that the church is a safe place for them just to be.

What interests or activities are your youth interested in?

Do you have movie buffs? Throw a movie night complete with pizza and all the best junk food. Bonus points if you get homemade cookies from a church member. Is your group into something unique? After the COVID-19 pandemic, we had a church that was super into robotics, so they met and built and talked about all things robotics. Have some caffeine junkies? Pop to the local coffee shop for board games and java.

The point is to meet the youth where they are.

Be a stable presence in their lives, with no agenda other than being present with them. Maybe it takes one meeting like this to rebuild stability. Maybe it takes a handful; maybe it takes more.

Not sure what they need now? Ask.

You may be thinking: I *did* ask, and I got met with silence, and then I felt the need to open my mouth and ramble. Change the way you ask. Maybe this time, bring sticky notes and ask the youth to write down their answers, fold them up and slip them into a jar at some point in the night. Let them do it on their own time. Just like us, being on the spot and having to answer can be intimidating. Let them know that you and other trusted adults from the church are always there to listen if they need to talk — and that they can ask for a time to chat on a sticky note, too. After you ask, you will either have a new way forward, or you will continue to show up the way you are.

After a disaster has upended the security of a teen's life, a safe space to land and just be is more important than ever.

Remember, the best thing you can do is be a constant, loving presence. Be in the moment, and don't worry about having all the right answers.

A prayer for leaders with hurting youth

God of healing, be with me now. My youth are hurting, and I want so desperately to take their pain away. As a father who watched his own son's suffering, be with me and hold my heart. Help me remember that my own needs and desires come after the needs and desires of my youth. Help me to close my mouth and open my ears. Create in me a safe space, a presence that holds the pain without fixing it, that leaves room for the Holy Spirit to move among the wounds and bring peace that passes understanding. *Amen.*