

Home, Hope, and Healing

Sending Love in a Box (Group Home Ministry)

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Love never ends.

—1 Corinthians 13:1–13 (NRSV).

Young people have great capacity for empathy. They hear a friend tell of a struggle at home, they encounter a person struggling with poverty at a shelter, they watch a video about abused animals on social media, and they are sad or angry or frustrated, sometimes with no concrete information or any idea of how to respond.

This plan was used during a multi-church event near Valentine’s Day to give youth an avenue for discussion, information, and action. It could be used at any time of the year to talk about ways that Christians can reach out in love to others.

Prior to using this: *It is important to know your group before embarking on this plan. If you have youth in your program who are or were foster children, who were recently adopted, or who are possibly living in a challenging situation, you may decide to cut aspects of this plan.*

Find out if there is a children’s home in your presbytery or synod or community. We used Thornwell Children’s Home, which is a mission of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). You may choose to use Thornwell, or you may find a representative from your local foster care agency to come talk or provide you with information. This program could also be used as your group gets ready to go on a mission trip to a children’s home.

1. Welcome Activity (10 min.)

As youth arrive, have “conversation heart” candies scattered in the middle of each table (if these are not available, write on small paper hearts similar words that you would find on heart candy). Ask each youth at the table to choose four to six hearts. Starting with the person whose birthday is closest to that day, use the words on the hearts to make a sentence or phrase about God’s love for us. Each person should add to the sentence or phrase.

2. Activity (10 min.)

Have an adult or youth leader put a drawing of a backpack (or use a real one) on the table. Ask the youth at the table to make a list of what would be in their backpack by 1:00 p.m. on an average day of school.

3. Discussion (10 min.)

Have an adult or youth leader read the following scenario:

“It is almost the end of the school day. A Tuesday. Nothing special. All you can think about is getting home and maybe talking to friends or catching up on your latest Netflix binge. Instead, you are called down to the guidance office of the school, and when you get there, two representatives from some department of children and families that you have never heard of are there with your guidance counselor. Your heart sinks. Something is wrong. You know that home isn’t always a good place to be, but you know that now there are other people who have figured this out too. What will that mean for your family? The guidance counselor is telling you that you can’t go home today. You must go with these strangers until something is worked out. You don’t know what that means or where you will be going. You don’t have a choice. No one can tell you when you will be able to go home—even to pick up your stuff.”

Have youth discuss the following questions:

- What do you imagine you would be feeling?
- What do you imagine you would be thinking about?
- What will you miss most?
- What questions would you be asking the people who are taking you from school?
- What about this might make you feel calm? What about this might make you feel anxious?
- How do you think you would feel about not having any choices?
- What items in your backpack might help you feel okay about going to a new place?

4. Information and Scripture (10 min.)

The scenario above is not fictional. It is one that a sophomore in high school told a group who was working at a children’s home in South Carolina. She had arrived at the home the night before, and that is the story of how she got there. She joked about feeling lucky that she wore her favorite jeans to school that day since she couldn’t go home yet to get any other clothes.

This scene is not uncommon when children are being placed in foster care. Of course, in this situation, as in others, the idea is that children and youth will be temporarily placed in a safer, more positive, loving environment. But “removing” a child or a teenager doesn’t always feel loving. In the midst of the chaos, there are places that work hard to be positive, loving homes for those who are anxious, scared, possibly abused, or neglected.

Read Matthew 19:13–15.

In this passage we see Jesus welcoming the children and holding them up as for whom the kingdom of God belongs. Jesus isn’t too busy or harsh with them. We imagine that he gathers the children in and talks with them. Many places, whether they are single foster homes or campuses filled with cottages for children to live in family groups, take this passage as a mandate to welcome children and take their needs seriously.

5. Activities for additional information (10-15 min.)

Here you may ask an invited speaker from your local children's home, foster care system, or foster parent to talk a little about their work in the community. Or go to Thornwell Children's Home website, click resources, and choose from several videos, or go to YouTube and find other videos produced by Thornwell about their facility.

6. Discussion (10 min.)

Whichever you choose to do, ask youth to share, in their table groups or with the larger group (depending on how large your group is) their answers to the following questions:

- How would you describe HOME? What is important to you about HOME?
- What are things that give you HOPE?
- How do you imagine that you might experience HEALING?
- What are things you heard from the speaker or video that would say HOME or HOPE or HEALING to you?

7. Activities for responding (20-30 min.)

Messages of love, hope, and care are needed by all of us. Many of us receive these messages in words and actions at home. As Christians, we may also experience love, hope, and care in our church family or youth group. We hear that God is love, and we love because God loved us first. We often learn about God's love by being loved by others. These others may be parents, teachers, confirmation mentors, pastors, youth advisors, directors of Christian education, friends, or foster parents or cottage-siblings.

Read 1 Corinthians 13:1–13 together. You may choose to have each table group read a verse aloud, or each grade level read a verse aloud, or every other verse be read aloud by youth alternating with adult advisors.

To end the program, as an offering of love, decide on one of the following activities to engage youth:

1. Get information from Thornwell or a local children's home about the number of cottages or houses they have and either make paper chains for each with messages of love from each person in your group or have youth decorate hearts that you can string together with ribbon. Or make cards sending God's love and prayers for hope. Box these and mail them with a note to the children and youth living there.
2. Have youth brainstorm what kinds of items they think they would want to be sure a child or teen had when they arrived at Thornwell or a similar place. Decide as a group what you would like to collect. Call the facility and see if those items would be appreciated or what is needed and then organize a church-wide or a youth-wide drive for those items (school supplies, underwear, coats, and jackets are all things that are often wanted). Some communities have programs like "Together We Rise" or "Comfort Cases" that work to provide children in foster care with a small suitcase or large duffel bag filled with a blanket, stuffed animal, toiletries, and other necessities.

3. Have youth work together, or individually, to write and illustrate prayers for children and youth who are displaced. You might ask your pastor if some of these could be used in worship the next week or put in the newsletter so that the congregation can be in prayer for children and youth in difficult circumstances. Maybe some youth could paraphrase the 1 Corinthians 13:1–13 passage to include aspects of home, hope, and healing as part of what God’s love is like. These prayers might be sent to a children’s home or foster care agency for their use with children or the adults who work with children and youth.

8. Offering of love (10 min.)

Close your program with youth and adults in a circle. Bring either your heart or paper chains or prayers or lists of items to collect and put them in a box for mailing or collecting in the middle of your circle. In your prayer, ask God to bless your offerings of love and have them received with love by those who tonight sleep in a new place and those who need to know there are others in the world who want to offer them hope, healing, and love.

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