

## Evaluating Programs

*“Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old.  
I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?”  
Isaiah 43:18-19*

The world changed in a flash with the onset of the pandemic in March of 2020. The church found itself engaging in online ministry, inviting folks to take communion at home and youth groups met on zoom. Not many of us would have guessed those would be widespread common practices of the church, but here we are. This is an amazingly exciting time! What we have learned in the pandemic is that we can change and try new things. And that we need to be less worried about failure or perfection. Instead, we should embrace the new things that God is doing in us and in the church.

The joy of all the newfound flexibility in our ministry is when we see the successes and recognize what needs to be eliminated. When we reflect on the growth in discipleship that has happened, despite the boundaries of the pandemic. As we have been bolder with innovations in ministry, adapting old programs in new ways and throwing open the doors to spirit-led plans, we haven't always considered what of these programs should continue. Moving into new phases of post-pandemic life, we don't want to lose what we have learned. Nor do we want to stifle where the Spirit is leading the church. A simple evaluation tool helps guide us to evaluate what we have been doing, whether it is working now, and if it should be pulled forward into our plans for the year. This resource offers simple evaluation questions to use when trying something new OR when considering bringing a former program back.

### **Spend some time in prayerful consideration:**

Isaiah 43 is a comforting passage written to a people in exile who were probably afraid, lonely, and missing their normal routine and lifestyle. This passage offers a great lens to look at the last year and to look ahead at the year to come.

Read verses 1 and 2:

- What are fears you had in the last 18 months?
- What are fears you still carry with you now?
- What has been overwhelming in youth ministry in the last year?

Read verses 18 and 19:

- Name something or a few things that you liked about how the pandemic changed the way you live?
- What are new things in your youth ministry that have been really meaningful?
- Where was God present in your life this past year?

Let's consider these last 18 months a reset button- a time for deep breathing and then an opportunity to re-evaluate, assess what is important and get rid of what has lost its meaning or significance. Let's keep in mind our goal of shaping disciples into more faithful people rather than seeking perfection, over-functioning and the “we always do this event” mentality. We are called, as church leaders, to look forward to what this transformed body of Christ will be when we are all safely back in our churches.

### **What have you been doing:**

The first step in evaluating is to actually list what you have been doing. Spend some time making a list of the programs you have been doing with your youth group during the past 18 months (or if your job morphed into something larger, all of the programs you are now doing). You may want to list these in categories: Things you did to support youth, things you did to support youth advisors, things you did to support parents, in-

person/distanced programs, zoom programs, lawn visits or other in-person/individual programs, mailings or supply bags you delivered.

Once you have some categories, jot down the programs, and then highlight any programs that were created because of the pandemic.

### **The new from the old:**

As you look at your highlighted list, add programs you have traditionally done with your youth group to each category. Now you have a list of all of the programs you have done in ministry with your youth. Take a moment to read these over. Put a check mark next to the programs that you have felt were relevant, important to faith development or positive community builders. Put an X next to the programs that didn't seem to have much purpose or missed their intended goal.

Putting a check or an X next to a program doesn't immediately mean it should be eliminated or continued for another century. It is just an acknowledgement of your pre-evaluative feelings. Before asking evaluative questions about a program, you are acknowledging that you already have misgivings or fondness for some of the ministry you have done. You may also want to put a \* next to the aspects of your program that you already know needed improvement. The pandemic taught us that perfection isn't what we strive for, faithfulness is our goal. Some gentle tweaks can make a significant difference in how participants experience a program.

### **Pre-evaluation questions:**

These pre-questions may help frame the way you answer the evaluation questions. Don't rush through these pre-questions. Reflect on them and even discuss them with others involved in your ministry.

- What have the youth in the church gained during the past 18 months? What have they lost? What have their families gained? Lost?
- What did I, or the church, consider impossible before regarding youth ministry, that we now see as possible?

### **Evaluation questions for your youth ministry:**

5 questions to evaluate a program:

1. Did youth name it as meaningful: Did youth engage in the activity or conversation? Have youth referred to the program again? *Sometimes we can plan something meaningful, and youth just don't connect or relate to the activity. Other times they just connect quickly to an activity or experience. Using the youth's own reflections on activities can help evaluate what types of things best connect with your youth.*
2. Was it faith forming? Did you achieve the goal you set for the program? How did it enrich/strengthen/engage youth in developing their faith? *One thing that makes youth group unique from many other great youth programs is that it helps young people connect to and explore their faith. These questions help you look at the faith building components of what you are offering.*
3. Did it connect youth to each other, to God and to the church? *Relational ministry is so critical. How are the ways we are engaging youth building these relationships with peers, caring adults, and God?*
4. Was it meeting the needs of these particular youth in your youth group today? *Youth group makeup continually changes and generations of youth change. Take time to ensure that your programming is meeting the needs for your specific youth and for Gen Z youth.*
5. Did youth show up? *While numbers aren't everything, attendance does help us understand if the timing, scheduling, and type of offering was a good fit for your youth group.*

As we think of moving forward with hope and creativity, let's rejoice in the opportunity to experiment, discontinue, change, and start up. Let's do that new thing that God has begun in us and embrace change with hearts open to the Holy Spirit doing a new thing in us.

Authors: Christy Williams & Brittany Porch  
Project Manager: Gina Yeager-Buckley

