

REOPENING CONSIDERATIONS

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(working draft)

CBOQ Youth

In Ontario and Quebec, the provincial governments continue to give direction on how to safely lift the restrictions established during the COVID-19 pandemic, which we, of course, must follow. The purpose of this paper is to provide both short-term and long-term considerations for youth ministries and churches planning what many term “reopening”.

First, let’s clarify that “reopening” refers to the gradual resumption of in-person physical activities, programs, and other engagements occurring on church property. While physical gathering is part of our tradition and ecclesiology (i.e., the theological understanding of the church and her existence), the church as the body of Christ has never closed: we have found other ways to engage one another and our neighbourhoods with the person and message of Jesus.

Secondly, these considerations are that: considerations. These are not directives on how a church should reopen. Rather, we believe each local congregation is uniquely positioned to fulfill their God-directed mandate and can discern as a local group of believers his will for their specific circumstances. We offer these considerations as part of a discernment process.

This paper will aim to look at both the short-term (i.e., within the calendar year) and long-term (i.e., in the next 2-3 years) considerations.

SHORT-TERM CONSIDERATIONS

CONSIDERATION 1: Don't assume your Fall 2020 plan can automatically be implemented this coming season.

Our understanding of this pandemic continues to evolve. The virus itself continues to adapt in unpredictable ways. Our population is becoming more vaccinated. These, and other, changing factors mean you need to reconsider how you are physically re-integrating your ministry.

For those churches who were able to host some kind of in-person experience in Fall 2020, you likely already have a template to work from (perhaps you'd be willing to share your ideas with other area churches). However, continue to consult both local public health authorities and provincial restrictions as your church plans so the plans can be revised accordingly. Your church's health and safety representatives (or a similar group) should be regularly reviewing local and provincial updates and providing recommendations for adaptations to your church's leadership team, with applicable recommendations passed to your youth ministry. You may also need to look at areas such as food services/handling, physical proximity/contact, required PPE, and sanitization.

As you continue to adjust your plans, communication with your key stakeholders is crucial for:

- Understanding the updated policies required by your church leadership.
- Providing updated training for youth leaders.

- Asking for feedback from parents/guardians, including their comfort level in allowing their youth to participate.

Whether these are done through formal reports or surveys, or by regular messages with those key people, make sure communication about expectations (both *for* the youth ministry and *from* the youth ministry) are clear and concise.

CONSIDERATION 2: In your area, the potential of churches reopening before some other businesses/institutions allows you to be a favoured place for in-person social interaction.

One of our youth pastors has commented that there is a good chance churches will be able to have larger group gatherings than most other businesses/institutions. Assuming you are appropriately fulfilling your civic and social due diligence, you may want to consider ways to provide space for both youth who are regularly connected to your group and others who are not. There likely will be numerical or proportional restrictions to consider when you gather; don't assume everyone can come together.

Determine what is the best way you can serve your youth and their friends. This could include:

- Understanding who you expect to gather.
- Asking your youth how many of their friends are also interested in in-person gatherings.
- Investigating reasons why certain groups want to gather.

With that, determine what kind of space, availability and personnel you need to facilitate those gatherings.

During your first meeting consider having your core students re-gather and, together, set an understanding of the intent of upcoming gatherings. This can include prayerfully considering their various friend groups who gather in different locations for different purposes. For example, some may want to participate in socially distanced active experiences, while others may want to hang out around campfires. Still others may prefer gaming together or watching movies in groups.

As a core group, discern the best way to serve their various groups of friends and potentially other groups (i.e., new friends/acquaintances) as restrictions allow. While you may not be able to gather everyone together every time, having a clear understanding of who a gathering is intended for and who the priority invitees are will give a deeper purpose to your gatherings.

From there, you can determine the best way(s) to accommodate those youth, their friends, and possibly other youth in the neighbourhood. This could include:

- Have different "satellite" gathering places either simultaneously or at different times.
- If you can only meet at specific times in the week, alternate between different small groups or "pockets of friends" meetings.
- Supplement with different online engagements, whether it's synchronous gatherings via video conference platforms or asynchronously in group chats.

These opportunities to physically re-gather are not just for your own youth; but for the community your church serves within.

CONSIDERATION 3: Take the time now to discern the best way(s) to serve your youth and community and have the necessary resources in place.

A couple of caveats with this:

- Do not presume your youth ministry mandate/objectives/methods are exactly the same as they were pre-pandemic. In some cases, you may have youth who did connect with your youth ministry in the last few months who are not geographically able to meet in-person. Your strategies may need to be revised in light of new factors.
- Your youth ministry is not meant to be all-encompassing. Whether through CBOQ or other networks, you are part of a greater community: the body of Christ! Find out what ways your fellow youth leaders are ministering. Perhaps some of your youth could benefit from the ways in which they are serving youth.

This may be a great (or necessary) time to do a ministry audit

(www.cboqyouth.ca/ministryaudit) to see how your youth ministry's approach could be reframed. Note: The depth of your ministry audit will be determined by how far into the future you're attempting to project. Your adjustments for the next few weeks will be different than your more substantial adjustments aimed at the next 2 years. (For the latter, see Considerations 1 and 2 under "Long Term".)

CONSIDERATION 4: Let youth share in the processing/building experience.

Youth ministry continues to evolve from doing things FOR youth to doing things WITH youth. That shared experience in creating something together is more life-changing than any program we can create.

One youth pastor shared how they began creating baking YouTube videos. Now, via Zoom, some of their youth group bake together. While it usually takes much longer than doing it by herself, they share how the youth are impacted in several ways: in creating shared memories, developing (baking) skills and building trust with each other.

As things continue to re-open at your church property, continue seeking ways youth can participate in creating experiences with you. Delegating meaningful roles gives deeper ownership. You may even want to include some youth (or brainstorm with the group as a whole) in making recommendations on what the re-opening plan looks like.

LONG-TERM CONSIDERATIONS

CONSIDERATION 1: There are foundational changes in the ways the youth ministry operates that include different channels of discipleship.

The pandemic showed our primary (in many cases sole) dependency on synchronous in-person gatherings. Some ministries were able to pivot to other ways of helping youth in their faith development; others stalled and were unable to adapt. It's clear that we need to consider other ways of engaging in discipleship to allow for greater adaptability, whether it's for individual or societal reasons.

There are 4 channels for consideration:

- 1:1 connections
- Synchronous onsite / in-person
- Synchronous online
- Asynchronous

No one channel is intended to replace another, rather they work as complements to one another.

SYNCHRONOUS ONSITE

This is the most conventional form of programming in youth ministry. The in-person gathering allows for deep interpersonal and social interactions. So much happens when a group of youth learn, share, and have fun together. Some suggest the program part of the youth group meeting is really an "excuse" for youth to gather and be with one

another. Informal conversations become easier to start because of the attendees' proximity to one another. Many youth remember the spontaneous and informal moments more than the program. They learn relational skills, and hopefully sense a place of belonging in the group.

While this is an effective channel in discipleship, it also runs the risk of becoming the most precarious format if the discipleship process relies exclusively on every person's availability/consistency. Whether it's because of other commitments (e.g. jobs) or health/safety concerns, the likelihood of a youth showing up for every gathering is low.

SYNCHRONOUS ONLINE

Real-time collaborative online engagement is becoming a vital part of youth ministry. The effectiveness of synchronous online engagement depends on how it complements/supplements synchronous on-site gatherings. Content and dialogue happen in a very different ways online compared to on-site. One method/delivery of content cannot be transplanted directly from one medium to the other. Understanding those differences is essential to successfully adapting methods that engage youth and program content.

Some have used the term "hybrid youth ministry". Generally, this refers to having both on-site and online channels, however before a useful discussion can occur it's necessary to agree about whether this refers to both onsite and online happening simultaneously and all interacting together OR the onsite and online components operating independent of each other. This distinction will influence how you set up both the online and onsite programs and the logistics of each. For instance, if you are hosting both onsite and online meetings simultaneously, you need to have at least 2 capable hosts (1

onsite, another online). While the two formats may have common elements, the experiences will differ and the hosts must adapt it to best serve their “audiences”.

1:1 CONNECTIONS

Research has shown that mentoring relationships are one key to a youth remaining in the Christian faith beyond their young adult years. Having a personal and direct connection with a youth is still the best way to support them in their faith development.

It allows for 2 things:

- for them to be known (cared for, belong)
- for you to adapt and personalize to their context

Mentoring is a key vehicle for faith development; a term CBOQ Youth uses for this aspect of discipleship is called “sharing life” (www.cboqyouth.ca/sharinglife).

Conversations between mentor and mentee can be tailored to the individual mentee both synchronously (i.e., in real-time) and asynchronously (i.e., self-paced). With peoples’ complex schedules, these 1:1 connections are more likely to continue in meaningful ways (even when group meetings cannot). A mentor can adapt according to the needs of an individual youth even if in-person dialogue is not possible through digital communication(e.g., social media, SMS) exchanges.¹ Sharing life on an ongoing basis allows for more frequent “bite-sized” exchanges and can help youth integrate faith discussions into multiple parts of their lives not only during youth group meetings.

¹ Ensure you consult your church’s social media policy on best practices.

1:1 connections also allow students space to process and deepen their understanding of faith because they encourage shared experience between mentor and mentee who are both working through learning tool(s): the asynchronous library (see below) or research/resources they curate on their own). This doesn't involve the mentor in telling the student what's right and what's wrong, rather the mentor facilitates conversations that help guide the youth in learning how to understand the content and potentially discern which parts are helpful to integrate into their own faith development.

ASYNCHRONOUS

Asynchronous (self-paced/self-directed) learning allows the individual to take ownership of their own development. This is different than "homework" which are activities done for a pre-determined purpose (e.g., "Read this for our next Bible study"). Asynchronous is self-directed by the student (think of it as a "rabbit trail" they explore on their own).

While some students may know what resources to access, others likely do not. Having both online and physical resources/playlists allows a student to gravitate to what's of interest to them. Essentially the student can curate a "library" that's intentionally geared towards their personal pathway and interests. A mentor/guide can give suggestions and guidance, then allow the student to take their course as far and as fast as they'd like.

Much of this is predicated on your youth ministry's understanding of what discipleship is (this understanding should come from the broader church and be applied to your specific age group). Identifying the core elements that your church defines as discipleship helps to focus the kinds of resources that are most helpful for each youth's exploration of faith.

What's vital about asynchronous engagement is it allows youth to learn how to take ownership in their own faith development. While the other channels are typically guided by leaders and can help reinforce and guide faith exploration, ultimately our hope is for youth to become disciples who can seek out ways of growing and learning.

You may already have some of these channels in place. Others will take time to develop. We encourage you to begin the conversation this summer—both within your own youth leadership team, with students, and with your church leaders—on how asynchronous learning can be adapted for your ministry.

CONSIDERATION 2: Evaluate how your resources may need to be redistributed.

As noted in Short-Term Consideration 2, a ministry audit can help determine what adjustments may need to be made. If you are also looking at Consideration 1 above, then you may need to redistribute how your resources are used.

For example, what specific skills sets does your team of youth leaders have? It's likely the majority of your youth leaders want to relationally invest in the youth. If that's the case, it may be better to have them spend most of their time in the 1:1 connections rather than program planning (especially if it's not their strength). Perhaps there are others (even outside your youth leadership team) who are good at research? They may be willing to help build an asynchronous library of resources.

Some may feel that investing heavily into 1:1 connections will negatively impact the synchronous onsite gatherings. This is not true and does not mean that in-person programming should be disregarded. A redistribution of resources may mean in-person

programming looks different than it did pre-pandemic in terms of quality or frequency. Perhaps instead of meeting every week, in-person gatherings meet every other week (with the understanding that the in-between weeks will focus on 1:1 connections). Or instead of spending three hours of preparation for a youth meeting, the leaders' prep time is reduced by half (with the understanding that the program may not be as polished as before) but that extra 1.5 hours can be used to research for the asynchronous library.

Ultimately, expanding the ways in which we do youth ministry does mean synchronous onsite gatherings are not the most important part of the discipleship process. By strengthening the other channels of support, you can lessen dependency on this one avenue.

CONSIDERATION 3: Discerning between needs-based and consumer-based programs.

The pandemic has led to the formation of new habits and expectations. Some have voiced the concern that some youth have become too comfortable with online interactions and just stay there with their cameras turned off; they believe there should be a greater "nudge" to in-person gatherings. This is a consumer-based point of view.

While some of these concerns are valid, we must ask some deeper questions because there may be legitimate reasons to accommodate those behaviours. For example, using the "staying online and cameras off" scenario, a person may be dealing with high social anxiety and this may be the best (or the only) way for that youth to participate. In that case, accommodating that person is appropriate and is needs based.

What obstacles might hinder a youth connecting in person? An array of physical, psychological and other factors might legitimately stop someone from attending an in-person group or program. Perhaps it's time to audit the different barriers that exist for in-person gatherings (e.g., a not fully accessible building). Some youth have specific mental health or social disabilities that make online a safer place to connect. We must also recognize that factors are dynamic and may change over time.

For some, digital space engagement is the best entry –point to youth ministry. This may be especially true for unchurched youth. Whether it's through social media connections or platforms like Esports, a growing number of ministries are bringing the person and message of Jesus to digital platforms in order to create a meaningful Christ-based community.

Who is having those sensitive conversations with your youth? How often? It's possible that through mentoring/sharing life relationships, we can help youth to walk through their rationale for their decisions—to help them gain perspective or insight. Sometimes, a consumer-based approach can work (e.g. a general discussion of self-centered motives that require gentle correction) but other times specific needs-based guidance and conversations are the best way to help.

On a side note, we may need to revisit our own ecclesiology (i.e., the theological understanding of the church and her existence). For many, church itself revolves around a physical gathering in a physical location (i.e., at a church building on a Sunday morning). While the physicality of a faith community is part of an ecclesiology, what does it mean to have a gathering in a digital space? How we view that influences what we determine as “the church”.

CONSIDERATION 4: Reframe the metrics of your youth ministry.

In many youth ministries, success has been defined by the number of youth who attend a meeting/program. However, focusing solely on attendance without any other metric does not give an accurate picture of the success of the ministry.

Here are some possible metrics to consider:

- How many youth are involved in mentoring relationships?
- How many youth can identify 5 non-related adults who invest in their lives (the youth and the adults acknowledge the investment)?
- What are some noted progressions/steps taken by an individual youth this past season?

Assuming the objective is to help youth grow closer to Jesus through a deepening personal relationship, questions like these help to give a clearer picture of how your youth ministry is making an impact. (It may also be helpful to determine what your current metrics are intended to measure. It may reveal whether 1. the wrong metrics are being used or 2. the actual objectives are different from the stated ones.) Be clear about the specific metrics that reflect what you're actually aiming to achieve.

CONCLUSION

This is not an exhaustive list of things to consider as you adapt your reopening strategy.

However, we encourage you to:

- Be diligent in adhering to the protocols within your region.
- Seek input from others (e.g., youth leaders in other churches, trusted members of your church, youth and parents).
- Be flexible in your approach. Even if you have the best plan drafted, we know that things can change, so be free to adapt as needed.
- Be an advocate for your youth especially with your church leadership.

It is our desire at CBOQ Youth that you faithfully follow the promptings of the Holy Spirit. We are also a resource available to assist you as needed. At the very least, we are praying alongside you as you discern your next steps in the coming months.

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