

# YOUTH LEADER'S GUIDE TO **EXERCISING EMPATHY**

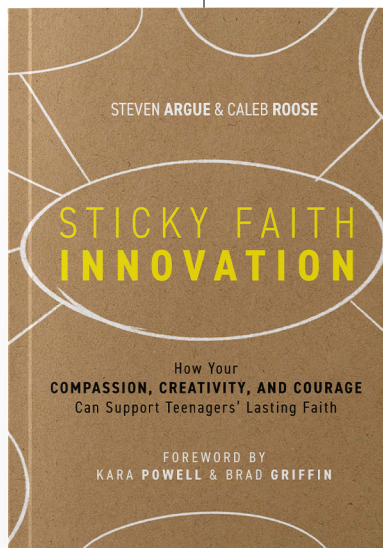
How to focus your youth ministry on people, not programs



Fuller Youth Institute

# STICKY FAITH INNOVATION

A step-by-step guide that helps you bridge the gap between your youth ministry programming and the ever-changing needs of your students.



*Sticky Faith Innovation*, a new book from the Fuller Youth Institute, gives you and your team a process to help you listen and adapt your ministry to the unique needs of your students. It is designed to leverage the best of your ministry and channel your compassion, creativity, and courage in the ways that your teenagers need you most.

*Sticky Faith Innovation* is more than theory—it's led to amazing stories from youth leaders

like you who have channeled their compassion, creativity, and courage to support their teenagers in ways that they need them most. Inside you'll find Connor's story on exercising empathy at City Church, with a congregation of less than 200 people, as they learned to meet his teenagers where they need them most. After going through the exercises in *Sticky Faith Innovation*, Connor developed an innovation team with the volunteers interested in loving and serving teenagers.

"Stopping to listen to the teenagers in our church and community made me realize how much I had assumed teenagers today are just like the millennials I'm used to working with. Empathizing helped me learn new things about who young people are today."

—CHRISTIAN, YOUTH LEADER

## A Story of Compassion—City Church

"This is the stupidest thing I've ever heard of. I'm never going to do this." Not exactly the words you want to hear from a teenager when you try something for the first time in your youth ministry.

While working on developing a deeper sense of compassion, Connor's innovation team had listened to their teenagers, and their students were honest: they felt alone, unloved, and didn't think they could have a purpose outside of finding an hourly job at some point in the distant future. It was actually hard for Connor's team to hear their pain and disillusionment. Yet they hung in there and kept listening.

Through prayer and discernment over what they sensed Jesus would want to say to their teenagers, the team came up with this: "You are fully known and still loved." To bridge the gap between their teenagers' current and Jesus-centered answers, they decided to innovate around the practice of lament for their youth group. They longed for their young people to discover that God cares about what they've been through, is with them in their pain, and isn't intimidated by their anger or grief.

Connor's team was excited to try their new practice with their teenagers, but 16-year-old José just wasn't having it.

"This is stupid. Why am I going to complain to God about all the sh\*t that's happened in my life? He doesn't care."

Connor and his team had developed creative ways for their teenagers to lament to God through yoga, painting, and writing songs, poems, and spoken word, but they started second-guessing themselves after José's reaction. Yet, thankfully, the other teenagers

in the group seemed cautiously open and willing to give it a try.

Week after week, the youth group gathered and Connor

invited his students to lament. The more opportunities the teenagers had, the more honest they became with God and each other. The pain they slowly started to reveal was extraordinary and heartbreaking. One week, a teenager broke down and sobbed, "They keep making fun of me because I smell. But we don't have any running water at home." This lament prompted Connor to visit the girl's home the next day. He was shocked by what he found: the gas and water had been cut off, and the family was struggling to put food on the table.

**"Rejoice with those who rejoice;  
mourn with those who mourn."**

—ROMANS 12:15

Three months later, what started as a small experiment practicing lament in the youth group led to the church opening shower and laundry facilities, budget management classes, and family dinner nights during the Wednesday night youth group meeting. The entire congregation rallied around the families in their church and community who were facing enormous need.

Today, as a result of their innovative journey, Connor's youth group has become a nonprofit that partners with the city to bring care to families in the community who are facing food insecurity and poverty.

When Connor told us about their innovation and all that it led to, we were dumbfounded. It surpassed our wildest expectations. He shared with us,

*If we hadn't reimagined lament for our community, our youth group would have never made the impact it is having today. But I'll be honest, in my 25 years of being a youth leader, I've never been so exhausted. Yet I've also never been so sure that I'm doing what God has called me to do. Lament is helping our whole church grieve the "good old days" from fifty years ago to meet families' needs today, helping them turn toward the future. Oh, and you know what? José is now the first person to share his laments each*

*week, and he's encouraging teenagers new to our ministry to do the same.*

Perhaps you noticed that what drove Connor's youth group to begin these new initiatives started with opening their hearts toward each other and to God. Their compassion led to creative expressions of lament; lamenting opened up their teenagers' hearts; and their teenagers' vulnerability made way for the church to care for their families' greatest needs.

### NOW IT'S YOUR TURN

What inspires us about Connor's story is that he and his innovation team compassionately empathized with their young people, creatively expanded their imaginations for what was possible, and courageously took steps to make their homegrown ideas a reality. The City Church story is unique—as unique as their young people. And so are yours.

We've created a listening guide to get you started with empathizing with your teenagers. As you and your innovation team try this exercise, remember that empathy is more than a formula—it's a posture.

This listening exercise begins with a fairly simple premise—we want to frame our thinking by beginning with young people, not our programming. What this means is that before we launch any new programs

for teenagers in our communities, we invest time with them, listening and empathizing with their stories and perspectives.

## LISTENING PREPARATION CHECKLIST

- ☐ Schedule a time to meet with your volunteers interested in developing an innovation team and walk them through these listening exercises.
- ☐ Check with your leadership to clarify whether you need parental permission to meet with teenagers and for any protocols on appropriate ways to meet with them.
- ☐ Invite and schedule meetings with a wide range of students who vary by age, gender, and background.
- ☐ Bring what you need to take notes immediately following each conversation.
- ☐ Set up a time to check in with your team after each team member has completed their interviews.

## LISTENING AND CONVERSATION TIPS

- Start each conversation by thanking the teenager for getting together. Remind the young person that your ministry is working to better understand

teenagers and that you think he or she could offer a helpful perspective.

**Before we launch any new programs for teenagers in our communities, we invest time with them, listening and empathizing with their stories and perspectives.**

- Let the student know there are no wrong answers and that you will only share what you hear with your leadership team, who is also meeting up with students.
- Be aware of your posture. Think of your interview as a conversation—not a Bible quiz or Q&A session with an expert.
- Pay close attention. Save note-taking for when the conversation is finished.
- Be prepared to ask clarifying questions. Don't assume you know what they mean. For example, if a student says, "Yeah, friendships are really hard sometimes." Follow up with, "Tell me more about that. How are they hard? Can you give me an example?"
- Lastly, resist the urge to give advice, a challenge, or explanation for responses teenagers give, even if you disagree or have a different perspective. This isn't meant to be a mentoring session; it's a learning session for you and your innovation team!

## LISTENING QUESTIONS

Use some of these questions, all of them, or make your own!

1. Tell me a little bit about a typical day in your life. What do you do, where do you go, who are you around? That kind of thing.
2. Who would you say are one or two of your closest friends? Why do you like being with them? What do you do together?
3. If I asked a couple of those close friends to describe you, what do you think they'd say?
4. What's it like to be a teenager today? In other words, what's something most adults don't know about people your age, but you think we should know?
5. Can you think of any particularly important moments in your faith that stand out to you? Maybe a time when you really experienced God (or felt God's presence)—what was that like, and why was it meaningful?
6. Do one or two people come to mind who have impacted your life or faith? Tell me a little bit about them and why they've been important to you.
7. What do you love most about our church? Is there a particular story that comes to mind or a specific example?
8. What do you hope or dream for the future of our church? What do you wish was different?
9. Where do you really feel like you belong, no matter what? Who are the people with whom you feel the most yourself?
10. When someone asks you, "What do you want to do with your life?" or "What do you want to be when you grow up?" What kinds of reactions do you have? What do you feel or think about?
11. Can you describe some of the hardest or more challenging parts of your life? What is stressful, hard, or confusing to you? [Follow-up question: How do you deal with that?]
12. How can we as a church be supporting you and other teenagers right now?
13. What's one thing about you that's important to know, that you think I may not have asked about or you didn't get a chance to say?

## COMPARING NOTES AND DISCOVERING THEMES

Once you and your innovation team members have interviewed students and recorded their notes, your team will meet back together to share what you heard in your conversations. Remember, when you share your notes with each other,



you are NOT interpreting your students' responses. You are only trying to capture and summarize what they shared with you.

1. Once all innovation team members have taken turns sharing their observations, start to find common themes you notice across all your interviews. Try answering the following questions and take notes about your answers. Your work here will set you up to connect these themes to teenagers' identity, belonging, and purpose in the next step.

- Were there any common themes your students shared?
- What confirmed what you already knew of teenagers?
- What surprised you?

2. During the meeting, take some time to pray together for the teenagers you each interviewed. How might God be speaking to you and your church through these teenagers' stories and perspectives?

- Pray over the emotions your students are holding (fear, anxiety, hope, anger, etc.).
- Pray over the concerns they raise (friends, family, work, school, neighborhood, future, etc.).

- Pray over the hopes they have.
- Pray that God would foster more empathy in your church for young people.

### NOW...

You are listening to teenagers.

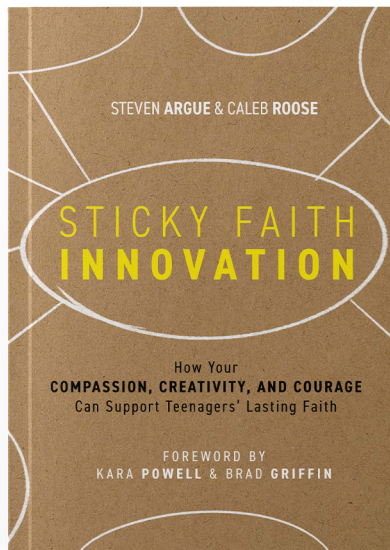
You are seeking to understand them from their perspectives.

You are preparing to accompany them as you step closer and put them first.

Great job!

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## WHAT YOUTH LEADERS ARE SAYING ABOUT STICKY FAITH INNOVATION:

*"The Sticky Faith Innovation process has allowed us to dream and make those dreams a reality in our ministry. Now, we are continually reimagining how to creatively serve our young people."*

—BRAD HAUGE, DIRECTOR OF STUDENT MINISTRIES, FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, SPOKANE, WA

*"Through compelling stories, practical steps, and scriptural grounding, Sticky Faith Innovation will coach your team through the innovation process and inspire you to experiment in your ministry in ways that leave it—and you—changed."*

—JEN BRADBURY, MINISTER OF YOUTH AND FAMILY, LUTHERAN CHURCH OF THE ATONEMENT, BARRINGTON, IL

*"I don't know of many resources like this that are theologically-grounded, research-based, and at the same time both accessible and contextually applicable across denominations, congregation sizes, budgets, and resources. Reading this made me excited for the future of ministry as a whole and encouraged me to continue innovating in my context."*

—KYLE LAKE, HIGH SCHOOL AND FAMILY LIFE DIRECTOR, MARS HILL BIBLE CHURCH, GRANDVILLE, MI

Get your copy of *Sticky Faith Innovation* at [StickyFaithInnovation.com](http://StickyFaithInnovation.com).