

Goal: Young people belong in, and are an active part of, the faith community.

They are formed through intentional practices that help them own their faith and integrate their faith with their view of themselves.

Faith Formation Framework



Shared Faith shared by adults.

Internalized

Faith *internalized* through spiritual practices and learning.

Applied Faith applied through service and justice.



Catalyzed
Faith catalyzed by
family intimacy and
intentionality.

PrioritizedFaith *prioritized* by the entire faith community and leadership.



Introduction and Context



Janelle thinks that for most high schoolers, friends are their "safest place." But family and church also top her list. Her apartments living room is where she feels safest, with church coming in a close second. She loves her church and feels a deep sense that she is part of the community. Janelle said of one youth leader in particular who has really been there for her, "She's always checking in on me." ¹

Janelle thinks about belonging "all the time... You want to know if you really fit in there, if they really like you coming along, or just invited you because they felt bad."

Belonging is our connection with others. It's how we feel like we fit in with groups of people. We might say we "belong" when we're with those who really know, understand, and accept us for who we are.

Belonging is one of the great spiritual hungers of our day. We are a society marked by an epidemic of loneliness and disconnection. We have so many reasons for telling people they don't belong—because of their personality, neighborhood, income, race, ethnicity, status, or ability. We have friends, followers, and fans on social media, but these connections often only remind us who isn't following us or where we don't belong.

We want to belong so badly that sometimes we'll go to great lengths even hiding or changing parts of our identity or pursuing a false sense of purpose—to feel it. Teenagers, in particular, are desperate to belong. Like Janelle, they think about belonging all the time.

¹ This story and other portions of this Field Guide are adapted with permission from Kara Powell and Brad M. Griffin, 3 Big Questions That Change Every Teenager: Making the Most of Your Conversations and Connections (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2021).

Why belonging matters in youth ministry

Belonging is one of the greatest needs of any young person who walks into your church, parish, or youth ministry. It's already part of their discipleship journey because it's part of their human journey.

When we invite teenagers to follow Jesus, we're inviting them into a community, a family, in which they belong—no matter what.

This is truly good news for young people!

It's also strategic. Within TENx10, we often say "people over programs" when we're talking about relational ministry.

At the heart of relational ministry is the art of cultivating and communicating a sense of belonging in a way that's genuine and not merely a manipulative means to an end.

To say it a different way, most of us belong before we believe. Think back to your own story of faith. Whether you grew up going to church, came to faith as a teenager, or had some other journey, chances are good that you trusted Christ because you trusted someone who trusted Christ. That "someone" might have been a parent, youth pastor, friend at school, mentor, or coach. But you probably trusted them and felt like you belonged because of them, and that likely played a role in your journey to trust Christ.

Young people are asking, Where do I fit?
Who are my people? Where do I belong, no
matter what? They hunger for relationships
where they feel safe and known. Where
they feel like they can be themselves.

The vision for belonging and biblical hospitality

The first step in belonging is safety. It's a basic condition, a prerequisite. A teenager belongs where they feel comfortable being their authentic self and not fake with people who accept them; where they're truly included; where, if a joke falls flat, no one laughs; where they don't question whether people like them. Or if they're having a bad day, they can complain or even just be silent, and no one will judge them.

Real belonging isn't just about fitting in; it's about bringing our real selves to the table, not just the version others want to see.

All kinds of factors impact belonging, including socioeconomics, culture, and race. Implicitly or explicitly, U.S. young people of color often hear the

message that they fit only if they look, sound, or act white. Young people who are really creative and artistic often feel secondary to those who are really athletic. Teens who don't have the financial ability to buy "it" items can feel like they don't fit.

Our goal in ministry is that young people are accepted for who they are and the way they are, which starts by creating a relationally safe environment where diverse teenagers feel welcome. This work is part of the biblical practice of hospitality.

Hospitality is a term we often reduce to mean "having someone over for dinner," or maybe to refer to the hotel or restaurant industry. But in our rich Christian tradition of discipleship, hospitality means so much more. It means making room for others.

Welcoming the stranger.

Saying "you belong here" to someone who doesn't expect it.

Treating outsiders like insiders.



Deuteronomy 10:19 instructs God's people this way: "You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt (NRSV)." And later in the Old Testament, God's prophets remind the people that God will judge them by their care for widows, orphans, and immigrants—in other words, by their treatment of outsiders.

In the New Testament, Jesus both practiced and received hospitality. He ate with "sinners." One of the primary reasons the gospel spread was because Christians practiced a new kind of hospitality—welcoming not just important people, but everyone, even the most marginalized. This was how the early church developed a reputation of love.



Pause for Reflection

What changes, if any, have you noticed about how young people look for and find belonging in our world today and in your context?

Rate your youth ministry on offering an unconditional place of belonging regardless of belief:



Why did you choose the previous question's rating?



Helping Young People Belong Starts With You



So step one in creating a ministry culture that values belonging is to examine your own heart and pray that God would give you tenderness toward teenagers (even the awkward or difficult ones!) who want to belong but might be protecting themselves with apparent ambivalence or toughness.

Terrance is a great youth worker, but by his own admission, he's pretty task-driven. In many ways, this serves him well—he gets a lot done and is good at running a youth ministry with limited chaos. But he's recently become aware of his tendency, when he's in "program mode," to look past the young people he's talking to. Terrance noticed this quite literally in the midst of a conversation with a quiet and timid young teen who asked Terrance a vulnerable question when Terrance was on his way to do something important. Terrance became aware that he wasn't looking the kid in the eyes due to his distraction. The teenager gave up and walked away, and Terrance immediately took inventory of how often he must miss out on opportunities to help young people feel a sense of belonging.

Pause for Reflection

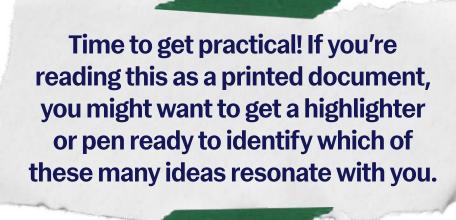
If belonging starts with you, how are you doing at creating belonging for those who encounter you?

If something were happening in the lives of the young people in your faith community, would they come to you? Who would and who might not? Why and why not?

Prayer is your #1 tool to help young people feel safe and belong. If you're not praying for your students, it's hard to help them feel like they belong. Who are a few students that you specifically could be praying for this week?



How Can We Cultivate Belonging in the Young People in Our Faith Communities?



If you're reading this on a screen, be ready to take notes or, if possible, highlight words or phrases in the document. You shouldn't try to activate every single one of these ideas immediately—that approach would likely lead to failure or burnout! Instead, we'd love you to spiritually discern which of these ideas God's Spirit is inviting you to bring into your life and ministry.

Set the tone for belonging

- What you say in front of the group has an impact. This is true in both
 positive and negative ways. In other words, making statements
 about belonging, or verbalizing welcome, have a positive impact, On
 the other hand, diminishing, teasing (even when you think sarcastic
 comments are funny), and shaming in front of others can have a very
 quick and massive negative impact on the sense of belonging young
 people feel.
- How you welcome sets the tone. For example, if you start with an
 insider joke, it can instantly (and subconsciously) reinforce the
 suspicion for newcomers that they don't, or won't, belong here.
 Instead, intentionally choose welcome words that communicate to
 everyone that their presence is awesome and wanted in this place.

One of our TENx10 partners shared a story of how his youth group created a quirky little insider reminder they would use to refocus themselves on hospitality: "Unholster the U," which was always accompanied by a hand reaching up in the shape of a U. The group all knew, because it had been taught and explained so many times, that this was a reminder that "Unity begins with U" (or You). The youth leader would use this prompt as a reminder to love each other, particularly when conversations were turning toward teasing or shaming. The phrases "Unholster the U" and "Unity begins with You" became so common in the group that teenagers would say them to each other.

Structure your youth ministry time and environment to foster belonging

How you organize your time encourages or discourages belonging. This is one component of what educational theorists call your "hidden curriculum." Think of it this way: If your program time is largely spent with young people listening to you speak, an additional message is being sent (and likely not a message you intend to communicate).

The same could be said for the arrangement of your physical space (again, this is – whether you intend it or not—another part of your "hidden curriculum"). Sitting in rows communicates something very different to young people than sitting in a circle does. Think of it this way: If it looks like school and feels like school, it's hard to believe it's something else. (Note: depending on your group size, it might be utterly impractical or literally impossible to change up your seating arrangement; if this is true, find places in your program where you can prioritize physical space that communicates "we want you to belong," like inviting everyone up front during worship, having people stand in clumps for a short interaction, or breaking up into small groups even if the resulting seating options are awkward.)

Think about the first 10-15 minutes of youth group. What is going on as students walk into the room? How are adults engaging with them, especially with those who aren't as relationally connected? Who is paying attention to kids who stand by themselves? What might you do during this time to create connections and a sense of safety? Think about having multiple places for young people to gravitate toward – a snack station, a coloring station, a 4-square game – so those who enter alone don't have to stand around feeling lonely.

Coaching volunteers and student leaders to create safe spaces for young people to be themselves starts with respecting the worth of each person and extends to interactions marked by curiosity, authenticity, and empathy.

Think about attending your congregation's main worship service(s) one week, and pay attention to what the experience would be like if you were a young person. How would you be welcomed? Where would you sit? What would be confusing? How would you see other young people participating, leading, or serving? Even better, do this exercise with a few young people and adults and meet afterward to identify pain points and brainstorm ideas to increase hospitality toward teens.

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Pause for Reflection & Action

Which of the previous points are things your ministry already does well? Which do you discern needs some attention?

What are one or two actions you can take this week to help every young person feel "Safe to be me"?

Create shared experiences that boost belonging

Sometimes belonging is as simple as sharing something in common—liking the same music, working together on a project, holding similar values, or speaking the same language.

Young people often talk about belonging in terms of being together. Time together builds the potential for belonging because memories, jokes, and even struggles form connections. Running on the same cross-country team, being in a school musical, or going on a church retreat can all create contexts for shared stories.

Of course, the very experiences that foster belonging for some can make those who don't share them feel even more left out. It stings when the rest of the team goes out without you. Or when you see on social media that your youth group friends didn't invite you to a party.

It can be helpful to think about the aspects of shared experience like a topography of belonging—a landscape teenagers wander in search of their place. To further complicate things, each young person is usually navigating multiple groups and relationships all at once, whether due to divorce, race, migration, or just the difference between church, family, and school.



They can feel they are hopping around on a belonging map without really feeling at home anywhere.



"Home" is much more than a place. Theologically, it's our sense of shared belonging with others that deeply connects us in Christ. We see this kind of shared sense of home modeled in the early church community described in Acts 2:42-47:

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved (NIV).

Home is where we're all insiders. Creating this kind of home takes time and lots of shared experience. It requires us to be intentional and to curate spaces, events, trips, and programs with belonging in mind.²

2 With teenagers spending so much time online these days, this blog post from Fuller Youth Institute can help you think about that reality: <u>Help teenagers find belonging in a digital world</u>



Here are a few tips for creating belonging and a home within our ministries, parishes, and churches:

Make it easy to feel like an insider.

In your gatherings, regularly explain some of the traditions, rhythms, and inside jokes, so when someone new shows up, they can participate too. This can be as simple as the way you share the week's highs and lows, the way you pray together before a group meal, or the words you say as you send teens out at the end of each gathering.

Create opportunities for one-time shared experiences. Camps and mission trips, weekend retreats, and daylong service activities forge common memories—and often lead to deeper friendships. Look at your annual calendar and plan out when and where you'll schedule different types of shared experiences that require varying levels of commitment and time.

Regular small groups offer more intensive time together, sometimes extending over months or years.

If you don't have the structure or numbers for small group ministry, you can treat your whole group like a small group and make your gatherings opportunities for authentic connection and simple fun. For example:

- Take turns having your group meet in someone's home
- Celebrate birthdays with consistency (not only for the well-known teens)
- Give a gift to anyone who attends for the first time (maybe including a regular statement like, "We want you to belong here").

Tap into the power of prayer as a shared experience that can deeply connect young people with one another and across generations.

Praying together in all kinds of ways, and especially receiving prayer from each other, unites believers in our collective need before God.

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Pause for Reflection & Action

What shared experiences currently boost belonging in your group?

What experiment would you like to try—either an attempt to make everyone feel like an insider, or a new shared experience—that could boost opportunities for belonging in your group?



From Belonging to a Community, to Belonging to the People of God

We've spent a lot of time with the idea that belonging is a prerequisite for young people to engage in spiritual practices, learning, and identity formation. Practicing hospitality is an important part of helping them feel safe and welcome, and a spiritual practice in its own right.

But belonging to a community of friends is also not the end goal.

Ultimately, we want them to encounter Jesus and follow him as a lifelong disciple as part of God's enduring church. 1 Peter 2:9 speaks of the priesthood of believers that we are inviting young people to belong to:

"But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light (NIV)."

That's why we call it relational discipleship, radically focused on Jesus. We want young people to know they belong to Jesus, who brings us into this amazing God-sized family that started at the beginning of time and goes through history!

A Reminder: The Faith Formation Framework

To find wisdom for helping young people move from belonging to a community to belonging to the enduring people of God, to believing in and having a relationship with Jesus, we need to look again at TENx10's Faith Formation Framework. If we look at the components of a ministry doing relational discipleship radically focused on Jesus, we have 5 important drivers:

- · Faith shared by adults.
- Faith internalized through spiritual practices and learning.
- Faith applied through service and justice.
- Faith catalyzed by family intimacy and intentionality.
- Faith prioritized by the entire faith community and leadership.

The way young people internalize faith is informed by multiple aspects of the Faith Formation Framework, but particularly by the second of those elements: faith internalized through spiritual practices and learning.



What are Spiritual Practices and Learning?

Spiritual practices are activities that help us connect with God and grow spiritually - things like prayer, journaling, fasting, meditation, nature walks, retreats, or pilgrimages. Spiritual practices have been part of Christianity since the time of Jesus himself. They are practices which help us encounter the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit within Christian community, and better understand how to be disciples. They can engage our whole person - body, mind, and spirit - in coming to know and love Jesus as our Savior and friend.

We see Jesus demonstrating many of these spiritual practices throughout the gospels. Jesus spent time praying by himself and with others. He taught us how to pray. He took time by himself to be with God. He observed the holidays, feasts, and ceremonies prescribed in Israel's covenant with God. He fasted. Even as a young person, Jesus devoted himself to hearing God's word taught in the Temple, to asking questions about the scripture, and to learning.

Spiritual practices and learning help young people discover and experience the words, ways, and character of God.

Helping young people learn about Jesus, God's word, theology, and shared Christian beliefs and practices is an essential part of their faith and identity development.



Spiritual practices and learning help all of us understand who God is, who we are in Christ, and how God wants us to live.

It is about understanding both in our heads and our hearts the good news of Jesus Christ for our lives.

As we consider how to incorporate spiritual practices and learning into our ministries, it's important to remember that every young person in our ministry is different. How they learn and how they connect with God will be different and unique. Which is why:

Young people need to experience many forms of spiritual practices.

Desiré had been going through a season of questioning her faith. It probably started when her favorite auntie died of cancer in the same week her best friend moved away. It all felt so unfair. She'd prayed and prayed that God would heal her auntie, and none of it made sense to her.

But during this dry period in her spiritual life, her youth leader introduced her to the idea of lament, and to the Psalms of Lament specifically. Desiré couldn't get enough of reading and studying these Psalms. She'd never considered that an active faith might include that sort of expression. Things really started to shift for Desiré when she started writing her own "psalms of lament." She knew they weren't Scripture, but they were prayers that helped her find a tether to God.

In addition to having opportunities to voice what they are thinking and wondering young people need to engage with many forms of spiritual practices to develop an identity in Christ. Why?

- The Bible teaches us to engage multiple forms of spiritual practices that help us 'have the same mindset as Christ Jesus' (Phillippians 2:5, NIV). As we saw in Jesus' own example above, God expects us to adopt a range of practices, from prayer and fasting, to gathering as the Body of Christ for worship, to studying scripture, to hospitality and caring for the poor.
- We are all different. One teaching style doesn't work for everyone, and one style of worship won't always work for everyone, either.
 When we let young people experience multiple forms of spiritual practices, they get to see what resonates with them and are more likely to find practices they will carry into adulthood.
- Connecting to God through multiple forms of worship can help young people when they face changes and challenges. Sticky Faith's research shows that young people who connect to faith through only one type of worship often disengage when that structure is no longer available.³
- Within Christian traditions that maintain ancient ritual practices, exposing young people to additional ways of prayer and praise often serves to enhance their experience and understanding of ritual.
 When paired with ongoing teaching about the rituals of weekly worship, it allows them the opportunity to assess and internalize the meaning of those ancient practices in their daily lives.

3 Kara Powell and Chap Clark, Sticky Faith: Everyday Ideas to Build Lasting Faith in Your Kids (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011).

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26

Invite young people into different forms of worship, prayer, and spiritual practices

For centuries, followers of Jesus have drawn closer to God through practices like reading the Bible, prayer, fasting, confession, worship, journaling, solitude, silence, serving, and lament.

Find ways to integrate these practices into your youth ministry's gatherings so that young people can engage with them together. Then challenge them to continue practicing these elements on their own throughout the week. Here are some ideas you can use to start your creativity:

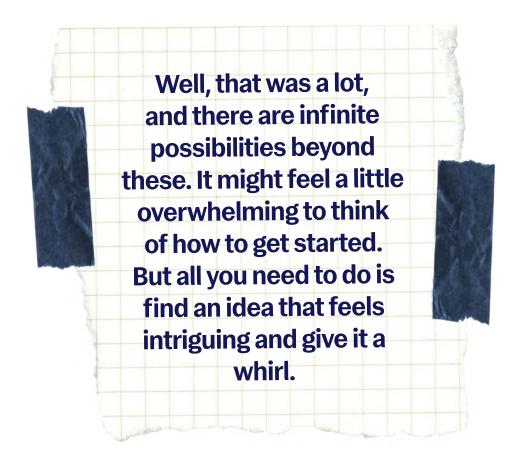
- Have teens write prayers in response to a recent discussion (anonymously). Have someone type them up, and while you play worship music, display their prayers for everyone to read, pray through, and reflect upon.
- Lead teens through a breath prayer, where they meditate on a phrase while inhaling, and a related phrase while exhaling.
 - Examples:
 - (inhale) "Jesus..." (exhale) "...have mercy on me."
 - · (inhale) "Spirit, fill me..." (exhale) "...with your love."
 - (inhale) "Help me rest..." (exhale) "...and give me peace."
 - (inhale) "Be still and know..." (exhale) "...that I am God."
- Move your gathering to a different space: maybe the sanctuary if you normally meet in a youth room, outside if the weather is cooperative, into a prayer chapel, to someone's house, or to any other out-of-theordinary space. See how it changes and deepens your time together to pray in a different setting.

⁴ You can learn more about the concept of Practicing Together in Faith Beyond Youth Group: Kara Powell, Jen Bradbury, and Brad M. Griffin, Faith Beyond Youth Group: Five Ways to Form Character and Cultivate Lifelong Discipleship (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2023).

- Take your group to visit a different congregation in your community.
 Gather afterward to talk about what was similar and different from your usual gathering and what they liked, disliked, or wondered about as a result.
- Provide supplies (magazines, scissors, glue, paper) for young people to make collages about themselves, God, their hopes, or another topic. Invite them to share what they made and why. This can be a good small group activity.
- Host an art gallery. Invite any teen who wants to create visual art based on a theme that you'll display and walk through as a group.
- Invite young people who like writing poetry or music to share it at your gatherings.
- Offer response stations where teens can respond in a variety of active ways, such as: lighting candles, writing prayers of lament, praying with a leader, doodling, making something out of clay, planting seeds or flowers in a pot, walking a labyrinth, moving through different prayer postures, etc.
- Take young people on a guided meditation walk.
- Practice visio divina for a guided meditation on visual art.⁵
- Encourage teens and leaders with similar interests to engage in meaningful activities together. Ideas: sewing, hiking, mountain biking, swimming, visiting an art gallery, or taking a yoga or pottery class. Encourage them to think and talk about why these activities are life-giving and how they can express a posture of worship in addition to what happens in a sanctuary.

5 See The Upper Room website for ideas: https://www.upperroom.org/resources/visio-divina





When you set up a new experience for young people, let them know ahead of time that it might feel a little awkward or out of their comfort zone. It might also feel just right. Not every new thing we try will resonate with everyone, and there will certainly be bumps in the road. But sharing these opportunities is so important because it communicates to young people that they are each unique children of God, and there are unique ways each of us will connect with God's Spirit. The things that feel meaningful to them today will likely influence or remain part of their faith in adulthood.

This topic is important enough for youth faith formation that we broke it into sections. The next Kickstart module continues our discussion of spiritual practices and learning, with more great ideas to consider to help young people develop a faith that matters.



People Over Programs

Carlos is a passionate youth worker, gifted at connecting with teenagers and creating awesome shared experiences. People regularly assume he must have grown up in a great youth ministry where he learned everything about his approach to youth ministry. But Carlos's story sometimes surprises people. He says:

"I grew up in a tiny church. Maybe 50 people on our biggest Sundays. There was no youth ministry in the way most people think of youth ministry. My youth ministry was Stu, this grizzled old dude who came up to me every Sunday morning and said the same thing (but I could tell he really meant it). He would say, 'Carlos! I have been looking forward to seeing you all week! I'm so glad you're here. I have been praying for you. Tell me how you're doing.' To which I would normally mumble something like, 'I'm fine.' Other than Stu's weekly question, I was treated like a regular participant in the life of the church by everyone there—I read Scripture, I 'passed the peace,' I sang a super-wobbly solo once. No one thought of me as the future of the church; they made it obvious I was a current part of the church. And I always felt like I belonged."

We close with this true story because we want to remind you that, while creating healthy community and meaningful experiences for young people with their peers or in the context of a youth program is great, you do not need to feel limited by church or parish size, the quantity of your resources, or the slickness of your program. God's family comes in all shapes and sizes.

In other words, we're encouraging you to focus less on *programs* and more on *people*. Because no program is perfect. No structure works without fail. But most importantly, because Jesus is about young people and we think we should be, too.

Reflection & Action

This section includes a lot of suggestions for reflection and action! Re-read it and circle or highlight areas where you think it might be most important for you to start or take a next step.

What kind of support might you need to take these next steps? Who can you talk to this week about getting that support?

Write out your vision for what a loving community of belonging could look like in your youth ministry and at your broader church or parish. Who would be involved? How would people relate to and care for each other? What would be the indicators or outcomes that would signal the fulfillment of this vision? What might it take to get there?

We learned a bit about the importance of Spiritual Practices and Learning for identity formation and discipleship. We will continue that exploration in the next chapter as well. In the meantime, what are 1-2 spiritual practices you would like to invite your young people to?

Additional Reflections: How to Foster Belonging in Your Own Life and Ministry

We've been talking about young people's experiences of belonging, but in order to truly help them belong, we first need to be secure in our own sense of belonging. We want to model a life that belongs to God, knowing that our belonging is never conditional. It doesn't depend on how anyone evaluates our worth, success, or status.

This might take some introspection and personal work.

Maybe you were left out a lot as a kid or teenager at school. Or perhaps you grew up in a family where you never quite felt like you belonged. Maybe you have often felt like an outsider at churches you've been part of - even your current congregation. Maybe you've struggled with your own worth and belonging in your relationship with God.

Start by exploring some of these feelings and experiences. This might involve journaling, talking with a close friend or partner, or seeing a therapist. Then evaluate your current sense of belonging and your active social support system. If you aren't experiencing belonging, it's hard to be a secure source of belonging for young people. How could you deepen or expand your social support?

Depending on your context, this might involve developing additional Christian community outside of your local church, especially if you are a church staff member. What matters is finding relationships with other disciples where you can feel safe to be authentically yourself.

Additional Reflections: How to Foster Belonging in Your Own Life and Ministry

Explore your own spiritual practices as well. Are you taking time to foster your relationship and belonging with God? Are you fostering intimacy with God in prayer and reading God's word? You can always go back and spend time in the Leading Self module.

Consider as well ways you can foster friendship and belonging among adult volunteers in your ministry so that young people experience the overflow of this health. Prioritize time to connect with leaders yourself in one-on-one and group touchpoints, ideally for fun informal activities beyond ministry work.

To whatever extent you can, influence your broader church to be a community of belonging for all people, across ages and differences. When young people like Janelle, whom we met at the start of this Field Guide, see hospitality, inclusion, and warmth across the life of the church, they feel it. Church starts to feel like family. And that cultivates a sense of home.

At the end of the day, when young people feel at home, they're more open to the work of God's Spirit and transformation. **This is relational discipleship radically focused on Jesus.**

