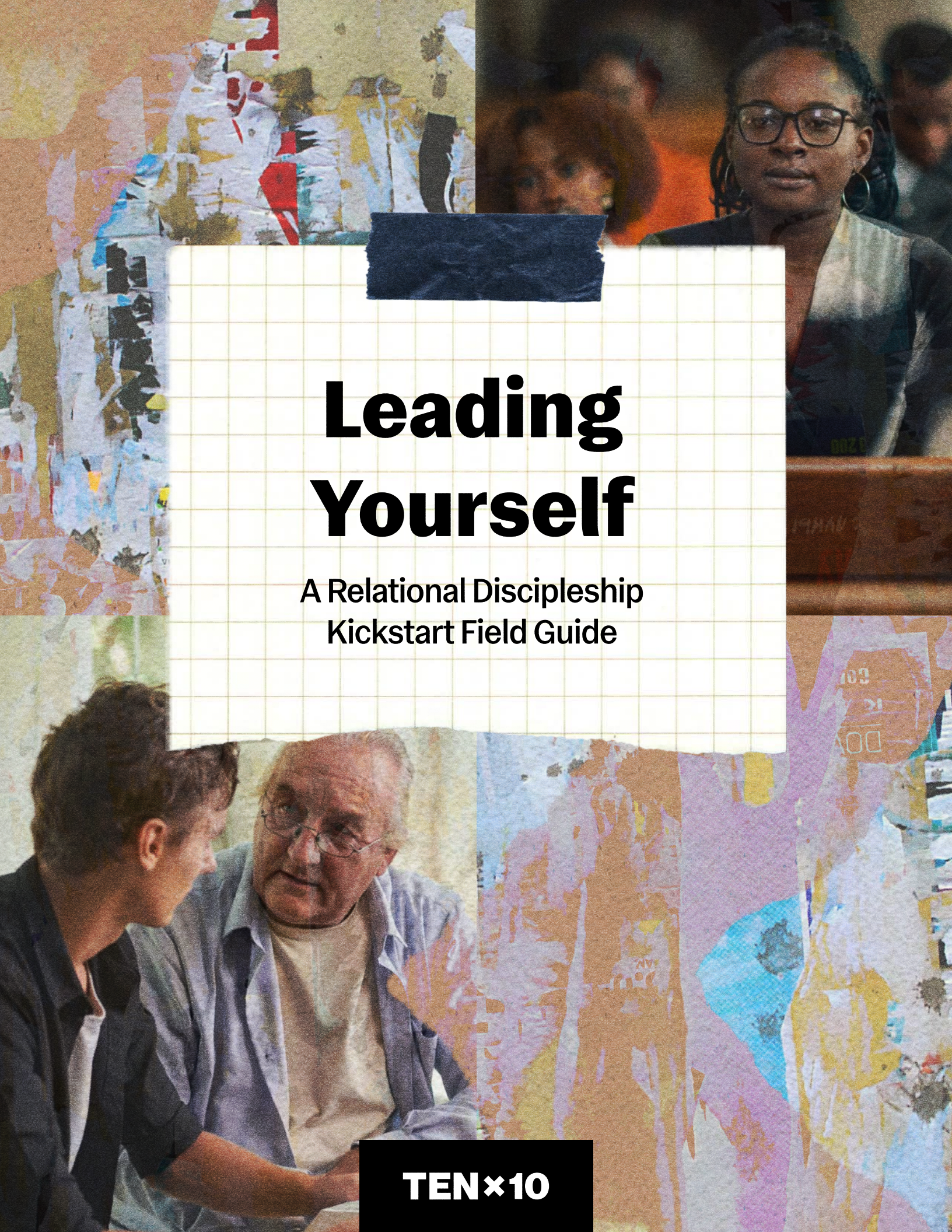




Leading Yourself

A Relational Discipleship
Kickstart Field Guide

TEN×10

**Goal: Leaders intentionally nurture
their own spiritual formation
and relational health**

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.

Prioritized
Faith *prioritized* by the
entire faith community
and leadership.





Introduction and Context





Joy is a youth worker in a small-ish church located in a bedroom community in a major metro area. Although she's technically employed full-time at the church, she quickly qualifies that with two caveats: **1. She wears about six hats at her church (even though youth ministry is what she really wants to do), and 2. She's paid so poorly that she works three other jobs, including delivering food.** Most days, that means she works from the moment she leaves the church until bedtime.

It's ironic that her name is Joy since she's deeply struggling to find much joy these days.

She loves teenagers and very much wants to see the young people in her church and community thrive. Joy has been willing to put up with a lot of hardship to live into this calling. Ministry is draining, but it also gives her life. She's 100% on the struggle bus these days, feeling isolated, underappreciated, and deeply exhausted.

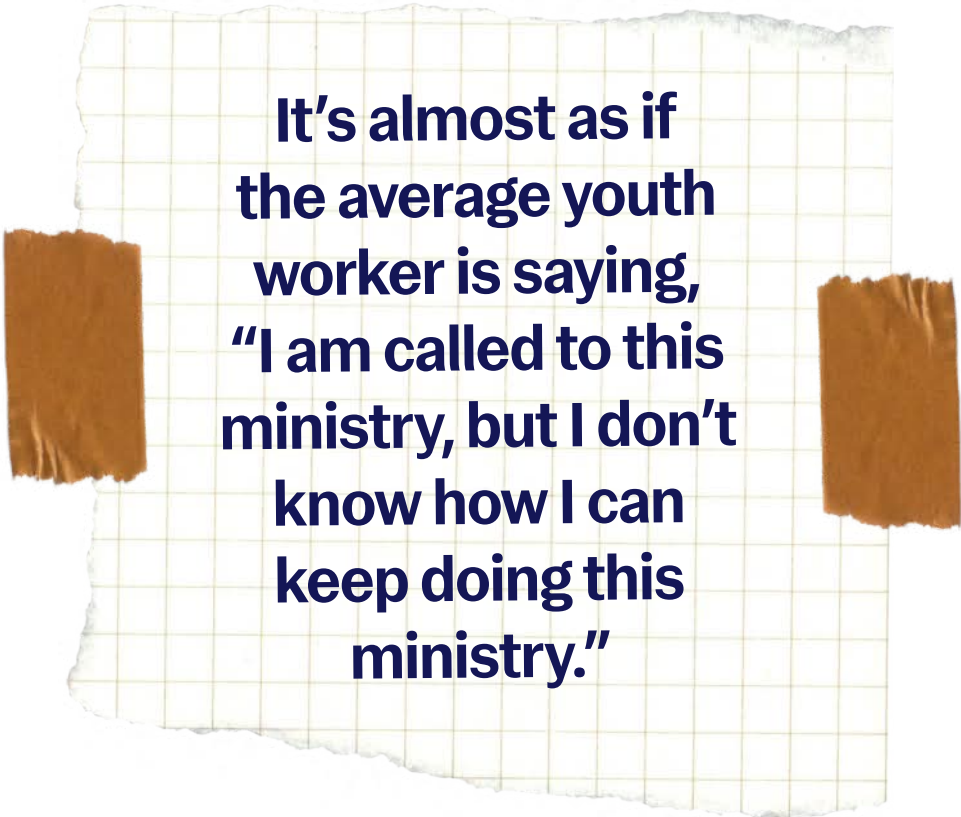
**Joy's story is a true story.
Unfortunately, it's far
from unique.**

Recent research revealed a startling statistic: *nearly half of the youth workers surveyed reported that they'd considered leaving their roles in the past year.*¹ Youth workers cited a variety of reasons, including the unending nature of this sort of ministry, feeling isolated and/or underappreciated, and issues with church leadership. But as we connect with youth workers of all sorts, we regularly hear a combination of statements that seem to be in tension with each other:

"I so deeply want to see these young people thrive in their faith."

...and...

"I'm so tired, so worn out."



**It's almost as if
the average youth
worker is saying,
"I am called to this
ministry, but I don't
know how I can
keep doing this
ministry."**

¹ Fuller Youth Institute, "The FYI Report on Youth Leader Burnout & Wellbeing" (Pasadena, CA: Fuller Theological Seminary, 2025).

Pause for Reflection

Take a moment to pause. Breathe in slowly. Breathe out slowly. Then, jot down some honest responses to these questions.

At this moment, where are you on this scale?



If you marked a 1, 2, or 3, what have you noticed contributing most to you feeling worn out or not thriving in ministry?

If you marked a 4 or 5, what is contributing most to your thriving?





But All Is Not Doom and Gloom



If you didn't care about young people, you wouldn't be reading this.

And, despite the challenges we've named—and more!—we're hoping to help you either move to a place of thriving or create sustainable systems to keep yourself thriving.

We youth workers are not transformation *agents*. That's Jesus's job. But we have the extreme honor of being transformation *assistants*. We have front row seats to see young people come alive, overcome difficulties, and deepen their understanding of how much God loves them.

We at TENx10 love young people, just like you do. We also know youth workers are an essential part of God's dreams for young people to thrive spiritually. But for that to happen, you need to take steps to lead yourself. That's what we want to help you with.

Here are four bold statements for your consideration:

1. **A healthy youth ministry requires a healthy leader.** The youth ministry you're leading might survive if you're unhealthy, but it's unlikely to thrive. Sure, God can work around you, but the more common narrative is that flourishing youth ministries have flourishing leaders.

2. **Healthy leaders are intentional about leading themselves.** Of course, you've likely heard the comparison of an airplane oxygen mask: Put on your own mask before helping others. Just because that comparison is a bit overused doesn't make it any less true!

There's an unfortunate myth that many people entering a ministry role assume to be true, regardless of whether their position is paid, volunteer, or somewhere in the middle. The myth is that being involved in ministry will mean your soul gets, somehow, automatically taken care of. We wrongly assume that the very act of doing ministry will provide all the spiritual nourishment and



buoyancy we need. And we assume that being in a ministry role means our churches or parishes will intentionally and proactively protect and care for our souls. But the hard truth is that the busyness and pressure of ministry work without self-care rarely lead to spiritual nourishment. We hope your experience is an exception, but we know for most of you, it's not. Whatever your unique circumstances, we'd love to help you take steps toward leading yourself. We'll get more into what "leading yourself" (in other words: intentionally forming yourself toward growth) means in a minute.

3. **Effective ministry is about overflow.** When our cup is full of God's love, it can overflow to others. If your cup is empty, you've got nothing to give.
4. **As a youth leader, tending to your soul IS youth ministry.** You know how you need to learn basic math facts like multiplication before you can start learning algebra? Surprise: We're not suggesting that taking care of your own soul is a prerequisite for youth ministry. We're saying that taking care of your soul is the first step in youth ministry. You're a youth worker, and your connection to God's Spirit is central to the work you do.

We've been focusing here mostly on your spiritual health. But truly, God is calling you (because of God's endless love for you) toward health: physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual.



A Bit of Honest Self-Assessment

My physical well-being



My mental and emotional well-being



My spiritual well-being



What stands out to you about the ratings you gave above?





The Example of Jesus



In the gospels, we repeatedly see Jesus pull away, either alone or with some of the disciples, for prayer and the rejuvenation he knew could only come from being with the Father. Here are just a few examples:

- After Jesus heals a man with leprosy early in his ministry, word spreads quickly, and crowds start pouring in. In response, **"...Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed"** (Luke 5:16, NIV).
- Receiving news of the dramatic and traumatic death of John the Baptist, Jesus retreated. Matthew 14:13a says, **"When Jesus heard what had happened, he withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place (NIV)."**
- Immediately following one of Jesus's most well-known miracles—the feeding of the 5,000—Jesus sent the disciples ahead of him, dismissed the crowd, and headed out to tend to his own soul. Mark 6:45-46: **"Immediately Jesus made his disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to Bethsaida, while he dismissed the crowd. After leaving them, he went up on a mountainside to pray (NIV)."**

We could easily list another dozen examples from scripture. And the gospels only record parts of Jesus' life, so there were certainly many, many more.

Again and again, we see Jesus give of himself fully in a ministry context, following which he replenishes himself through spiritual practices and drawing close to the Father.

Maybe we don't need to point this out, but Jesus is God. *And still*, Jesus regularly turned to practices that brought spiritual rejuvenation and refreshment.

Maybe we don't need to point this out either, but we are *not* God. How much more must we need to pursue regular practices of rest, prayer, and refreshment if we hope to have anything to offer the young people we're serving?

The first step in leading yourself—a step we implicitly see in the stories of Jesus mentioned above—is being honest with yourself about your needs. **We find that it's common for ministry workers of all kinds (not only youth workers) to lie to themselves:**

- "I'm tired, but I can push through."
- "It's just a season. Once we get the ____ we need, it'll slow down."
- "If I don't continue skipping my day off, things will fall apart."

- "I'm engaging with the Bible all the time as I prepare for teaching."
- "I know I haven't spent enough time with my own children lately, but they don't need me as much as this young person who is in genuine crisis."

When we get to a place of damaging burnout, it's almost always been preceded by telling ourselves a long series of lies like these.

Jesus was honest about his needs. And catch this: when Jesus withdrew by himself to pray,

- ▶ Crowds went untaught
- ▶ People were left unhealed
- ▶ The disciples were confused about what to do next

Jesus didn't perfectly prepare everything to continue as smoothly in his absence as it did in his presence. **He prioritized connecting with his Father and caring for himself when he needed it—even when it was inconvenient.**



What “Leading Yourself Well” Looks Like



Three things to be honest about if you're going to lead yourself well:

First and foremost, **leading yourself well means being honest about your need for God.** We don't mean theologically agreeing that you need God, but a humble and action-oriented acknowledgment of the reality that God is your sustainer. We mean recognizing that we humans, even though we're made in the image of God, have limits.

As Paul writes in the closing of his epistle to the Ephesians, the ministry we get to play a role in (and everything else that is "immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine") happens "according to his power that is at work within us" (Ephesians 3:20-21, NIV).

It's hard to imagine many Christian youth workers who would say, "I don't need God to get this work done." But our choices and our behavior betray us. When we do not prioritize following Jesus' example and replenishing our souls, we're basically saying, "Thanks, Jesus, but I've got this."

Leading yourself well means being honest about your dreams and desires.

What dreams do you have about how God can use you to be part of the Great Commission? What are your dreams for the young people in your church? In your community? What dreams do you have about co-laboring with God to proclaim freedom for the prisoners, recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, and proclaim the year of the Lord's favor? (see Luke 4:16-21). What do you hope and pray your faith community will be? What are you dreaming of for your own vocation and future?

Being honest about your own dreams and desires is not selfish or sinful (assuming the dreams and desires aren't selfish or sinful!). Being honest with God about your ministry dreams is a way of stepping into God's loving, expansive invitation to take part in the restoration of all things.



Creating a Ministry Purpose Statement

Take a few moments to be with the Lord and name some of your hopes and dreams for your own life (and not just your ministry!). Be honest about what you would like God to accomplish, even if you think it's too big, too much, or too impossible. Pay attention to the unexpected thoughts that come without prompting or surprise you. Write those hopes and dreams here.

Spend some time with God examining those aspirations. What is the Spirit prompting in your heart? What part is God calling you to play in the great commission and the restoration of all things? What worries or hesitations do you have? What God might be trying to draw out? Use this space to note some of the fruits of your prayer time.



Creating a Ministry Purpose Statement

To close your prayer, we invite you to think about what purpose God has for you in this season of your life and in your ministry. Try to distill that sense of purpose into a purpose statement - i.e. one to two sentences which describe the meaning behind your ministry and what you hope God will accomplish. Write a draft of your purpose statement here. Come back to it later in the week after more prayer and reflection to review and revise if you so choose.





Sustainability and Thriving as Our Targets



One of our TENx10 partners leads cohorts of youth workers in a yearlong development program. He shared with us that it's very common for youth workers to ask the group to pray that they will have clarity. And when that request is made, this ministry coach tells the story of Mother Teresa and the successful businessman who traveled to Calcutta to ask for prayer. When Mother Teresa asked how she could pray for him, the businessman said he wanted God to give him clarity. Mother Teresa responded (so the story goes, at least), **"I will not pray that you have clarity. Clarity is the crutch of the Christian. I have never had clarity. What I have had is trust. I will pray that you have trust."**

Americans, in particular, seem to like clarity. We also really like *the idea* of balance.

In just a second, we're going to look at how to lead ourselves well. Before we do that, it's important to think about the context in which we find ourselves. Americans these days seem pretty obsessed with the idea of balance. "Work/life balance" is a common phrase. We're not here to pick a fight; if the concept of balance helps you, go for it. Lead yourself toward balance! That said, we think there's a better framework for youth workers to wrestle with as we take steps to lead ourselves: *sustainability and thriving*.

The Old Testament approach to letting fields lie fallow every seven years (Exodus 23:11) isn't a picture of balance; it's a picture of sustainability. Jesus pulling aside by himself to pray wasn't about him seeking equilibrium; it was about the Son staying deeply connected to the Father.

**Life in youth ministry (or any ministry)
isn't easily compartmentalized
between work and home. Our best
lives are integrated.**

Sure, we need boundaries. Yes, we must turn off our cell phones and intentionally disconnect from the never-ending demands of ministry. We absolutely need to prioritize our own families over the nonstop needs of others. But our best life—the one that gives the most to the Kingdom and provides the deepest satisfaction—shouldn't have us constantly and reactively balancing the scales of our commitments.

This is not about hustling to make sure everything gets done so you have a little “me time” at the end of the day. It's about engaging with sustainable, life-giving rhythms and practices that you know are good for you, even when they're not convenient. Things like sabbath, downtime, prayer and meditation on scripture, time with fulfilling relationships, and hobbies that aren't connected to ministry. It's about pursuing those things regularly, not just when you're at the end of your rope or barely hanging on.

If you're a full-time ministry employee, you *must* ruthlessly practice and protect a day off. If you're a volunteer in ministry, very likely volunteering in addition to holding another full-time job, you should be thoughtful about limiting the number of nights out and other practices of sustainability. If possible, find a 24-hour window that you can take off every week. You'll be amazed at what that does for you.

So, know what boosts your energy. Know what fills your cup. Pay attention to what is life-giving and what is life-draining. **But don't aim for simple steadiness; aim for passion and vitality!**

All that to say: lead yourself toward developing rhythms in your life that will help you experience vibrancy. And think of those rhythms in terms of *daily*, *weekly*, *seasonally*, and *annually*.



Questions for Reflection

1. What are a few things that fill you up that have nothing to do with ministry? (Think hobbies, relationships, time in nature, etc.)

2. What are one or two of those things you know you'd like to focus on more in this season? Write them down.

3. How hard or easy is it for you to regularly practice sabbath? Why is that?



Questions for Reflection

4. Once you have taken a sabbath (i.e., a day for resting, refraining from work, and taking time for personal and spiritual renewal), how do you feel?

5. Can you commit to a sabbath this week? A 24-hour period off. Write it down. And, which spiritual practice and hobby are you committed to engaging on your sabbath? Put them both in your calendar.





Practices for Leading Yourself Well



Thousands of books have been written on developing rhythms (or “practices”) that assist in experiencing the fullness of life Jesus promises in John 10:10, so we’re just going to hit the highlights here. The following are foundational baselines that each of us involved in ministry leadership must prioritize regularly.

1. Interact with scripture. You know this: The Bible is God’s revelation to us. And the Bible is like no other book, in that it is “living and active (Hebrews 4:12).” This truth - which we hope is also your lived experience - is based on the belief that God is present to us in scripture, and the Holy Spirit meets us in scripture to do in our lives all the good stuff the Holy Spirit does!

Does this sound familiar?

At a recent local gathering of youth ministry leaders, Charlie confessed to the group, “I spend so much time every week reading the Bible as preparation for leading my youth ministry that I’ve unintentionally overlooked what God wants to say to

me through scripture. I’m missing out on filling my own cup since I’ve only been studying the Bible through the lens of what my teenagers need.”

We’re not encouraging you to merely read scripture. Reading is *one* way to interact and engage with the Bible, and it’s a pretty good one! But there are many others.

- Read passages out loud.
- Memorize favorite verses or important passages.
- Meditate on verses.
- Read from a translation you don’t normally use.
- Listen to audio versions of the Bible.
- Create or pray with art inspired by a passage.
- Journal your thoughts about a passage.
- Write out passages, word for word.
- Practice “Lectio Divina,” which includes intentionally slow, repeated reading with pauses for contemplation.



Experiment with different approaches, and lead yourself into some lifegiving rhythms as God meets you in scripture.

One quick and fascinating note before we move on: A recent survey of youth workers asked questions about time spent interacting with scripture. It found that the vast majority of youth workers with 10 or more years of experience have a regular practice of engaging scripture. In other words, this rhythm is critical to your longevity in youth ministry.⁵

2. Prayer and meditation. No surprise, right? A regular practice of prayer is important for any follower of Jesus, but for leaders, this practice is absolute bedrock. A regular practice of prayer is, in the words of Henri Nouwen, an act of releasing control, of loosening your grip.⁶ Prayer connects us with our Creator, reminds us of where real power is (hint: not with us), and resets our priorities.

And when we prioritize prayer, we're following the example of Jesus.

Have you heard about the recent neuroscience discoveries of how prayer and meditation directly impact your understanding and experience of God?⁷ A regular practice of prayer and meditation dramatically strengthens a part of the brain called the anterior cingulate cortex. When that part of the brain is strengthened, it helps you understand and experience God as personal, compassionate, and other than yourself (meaning: you aren't God). And, as a bonus, a strengthened anterior cingulate cortex helps you notice the needs of others and be compassionate toward them. Brain scientists discovered that the number one way to grow the strength of your anterior cingulate cortex is through prayer and meditation.

⁵ "2025 Youth Pastor Compensation Report," by The Youth Cartel, Chemistry Staffing, and Download Youth Ministry.

⁶ *With Open Hands*, by Henri Nouwen (Ave Maria Press, 2006)

⁷ *How God Changes Your Brain*, by Andrew Newberg and Mark Waldman (Ballantine Books, 2010)

There are so many creative ways to engage with prayer and meditation. We encourage you to look up some ideas online or ask a ministry leader who is familiar with traditional Christian contemplative practices. We'll share one example we heard described by a TENx10 partner, who has ramped up meditation in his life over the last couple of years. He wrote:

I just wanted to start with a regular practice of 10 minutes per day. Mornings are too distracting for me. I'm constantly thinking about what I have on tap for that day. And in the evening, I'm tired. But I have found that immediately following lunch is a great time for me to pause. I get comfortable and set the alarm on my phone for 10 minutes, so I won't be distracted by wondering how much time I have remaining. But before I hit the start button on the timer, I try to notice what I'm feeling in that moment: anxiety, stress, anger, joy, wonder. And then I quickly create a two-phrase prayer about a characteristic of God that could be present to me in that feeling. Like, if I'm worried about money, I might create a two-phrase prayer like, "God of abundance, help me to rest in your provision." Then, I push start on the timer, and use that prayer as a breath prayer, breathing in "God of abundance...." And while breathing out, "...help me to rest in your provision." Before you know it, the 10 minutes is up, and my entire day feels recalibrated.

Integrating a prayer practice doesn't have to be complicated or even take a lot of time. You can set a timer, practice breath prayers, journal, read prayers or even go on prayer walks.

Remember: We're talking about leading yourself as a critical aspect of an effective, discipling youth ministry. Elevating prayer and meditation to the level of a regular practice, rather than merely a passing thought, will have direct results on your practice of youth ministry. It will also directly impact your own well-being on every level.

3. Rest. This “leading yourself” stuff isn’t rocket science. These are practices Christians have been encouraging and putting into practice since the Early Church. The challenge isn’t in *identifying* what practices you *should* embrace to fill your cup; the challenge is *actually creating a rhythm* and consistently living into it. In our observation, rest is the most challenging of these three steps.

In TENx10’s work with youth workers, we see that the struggle to rest well and regularly is very common, shared by youth workers regardless of employment status, church size, denomination, or theological tribe, age, and racial group. The busyness of youth workers and the difficulty of *regularly* practicing rest is universal. We say this partially because, if you struggle in this area, you are in good company. There’s no need for shame, defensiveness, or excuses. We don’t want you to beat yourself up. We want you to lead yourself to action.

Ironically, the action we’re leading toward is the “action” of rest, which could be considered inaction!

Finding effective rhythms of rest is unique to different personalities and interests. But it could include things like:

- A weekly sabbath: a full day of rest
- Healthy amounts of sleep (at least seven hours per night, and many people need more)
- Life-giving hobbies that have nothing to do with youth ministry
- Spending time with friends and family in a non-ministry context

4. Engage in community. If Jesus didn't do ministry alone, you and I definitely can't! You need deep friendships with people who can pray for you, encourage you, and even ask you difficult questions. You need mentors who can give you guidance and advice. And you need people outside of your youth ministry who love you for who you are, not for what your ministry is doing.

Relational discipleship isn't just for our students. It's for all of us. It's for you! We're all part of the Body of Christ and we need each other. We need to do life together and love Jesus together. This isn't just a healthy leadership principle. It's the heart of discipleship. After all, the first disciple in youth ministry is you.

Who are the people walking with you in friendship and discipleship? Who actually knows you personally and is committed to pointing you to Jesus?

If relationship is at the heart of the Trinity, it should be important to us too. It's ok if you realize you need to invest more in your personal relationships, expand your Christian community, or even work to make some new friends. We all experience seasons of loneliness. That says nothing about your value as a person, but it is a sign to invest in building Christian community.



At the beginning of this Field Guide, we told you the true story of Joy, a youth worker feeling isolated, underappreciated, and overworked with side jobs. Recently, Joy decided she'd had enough. She still wanted to work with young people at her church. But she was done feeling ragged and worn out.

Joy led herself by starting small. She intentionally scheduled 20 minutes in her weekday schedule, immediately following lunch, when she would sit in stillness in her church's quiet and empty sanctuary. After a month of living into this practice, she could see the difference in her stress levels, her connection with God, and even the vibrancy of her interactions with teenagers. Joy also decided to take a step that felt risky, considering her financial struggles. She started taking a "most-of-a-day sabbath" on her day off.

We hope Joy can get to the point where she takes a full day of sabbath, but we're delighted that she's leading herself. She will likely be involved in the lives of young people much longer than if she hadn't taken these steps.

Pause for Reflection & Action Planning

**What is a way you would like to try engaging Scripture this week?
When will you try these?**

**What is a prayer or meditation practice you could engage this week?
(Start small. As you see the impact, expand!)**

How will you lead yourself toward a rhythm of rest in the coming weeks? What specific step(s) will you take?

What is one step you will take this week to invest in your own Christian community, outside of youth ministry? How will you show up for your community, point them to Jesus, and invite them to do the same for you?

If possible, set reminders on your phone and block time in your calendar to set yourself up well.





**Get a Mentor
or Join a Network**



One more quick thought as we draw to a close. Youth workers who spend regular time with other youth workers (what some might call a “youth ministry network”) tend to be healthier and stay in ministry longer. If you don’t know other youth workers outside your church or parish, be courageous by reaching out to some in your area and asking them to meet. A monthly meeting is a great rhythm. Pray for one another, share ideas, and share each other’s burdens.

Reaching out to a more seasoned youth worker (or minister of some sort) and asking them to mentor you is another fantastic step in leading yourself. This is particularly true if you’re newer to youth ministry.

You’re Weird.

Ok, we’re sorta kidding with that word choice (weird). If that feels, well, weird to you, just swap it out with the word “unique.” **You are gloriously unique, a one-of-a-kind, lovingly created being made in the image of God.**

And *because* you’re unique (weird!), the plans you step into for leading yourself to spiritual vitality will also be unique. Lean into the way God has designed you. After experimenting, stick with the things that give you life and drop the things that are not life-giving. Don’t spend a second on shame or “should-ing” yourself.

We want you to thrive (have we said that enough in this Field Guide?). **And we know that the young people you are called to serve are more likely to become disciples of Jesus if you, their leader, lead yourself first.**



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