



Eastridge Presbyterian Church Lincoln, Nebraska

On-Site Consultation and Mission Study with
Strategic Recommendations

September 12, 2017

Youth Ministry Institute Midwest (YMIM)
Report Drafted by Matt Vaughan, Director



Overview from the Study

Eastridge Presbyterian Church is a vibrant church established in 1953 in Lincoln, Nebraska. Its mission statement reads, “The God of scripture calling individuals into community through Jesus Christ, empowered by the Holy Spirit to worship, learn, and serve.” The church lives out this mission through an abbreviated expression: Worship, Learn, Serve: Christ-Centered. Community Strong. The three action-oriented words in this expression are easy to understand and have become integral in how the Session manages the ministry programming and operations of the church.

Eastridge Presbyterian Church has a strong presence in the community. The campus includes multiple spaces that have been renovated or that will be renovated, including appropriate spaces for worship, fellowship, education, meetings, and staff. There is a campaign underway to renovate the Huxtable Lounge, which is the only space on the main floor that has not been updated in recent years. The church has no debt on the property.

The church is led with a staffing model of two ordained PC(USA) clergy, an interim full-time youth and children’s ministry director, multiple musicians, support staff, and children’s ministry staff.

The staffing model at the church is being evaluated by the Session due to the retirement of its previous children’s director and the departure of its previous associate pastor for youth ministry. The Session has addressed the immediate staffing need with a competent interim solution. The primary purpose of this evaluation is to consider possible future staffing solutions.

Many church members contributed to the findings in this report, including 45 survey participants and 32 participants who engaged in conversation in seven focus group sessions during the study.

Church Data Analysis

- The church sees a congregational average of 250 people in weekly worship. Rev. Dr. Melodie Jones Pointon serves as the church’s senior pastor and head of staff. Rev. Thomas Dummermuth serves as the Associate Pastor for Congregational Life.
- Susan Taylor led the children’s ministry for 17 years; Rev. Mason Todd previously led the youth ministry position. Kris Adler-Brammer currently staffs both roles in an interim full-time agreement. This interim agreement will be evaluated every three months.

- Currently there are about 12 children and 15 youth participating weekly in some aspect of the ministry. A church of this size should see an average of 25 youth from 6th grade through 12th grade attending weekly, and an equal amount of grade school children participating. That number may grow in the future as programming develops and families engage. Research by YMIM indicates that strong youth ministry programs typically have youth ministry involvement that equal 10–15 percent of the worshipping attendance of the congregation (25–38 youth in a possible scenario at Eastridge), with similar numbers for children.
- The church budget is \$600,000. The youth and children’s ministry budget is around \$18,000, including big trips with fundraisers, which is appropriate; the salaries are not included in this figure.

Ministry Strengths

Pastors, Rev. Dr. Melodie Jones Pointon and Rev. Thomas Dummermuth

Eastridge Presbyterian Church is fortunate to have two dynamic and strong pastors that are committed to the mission and ministry of the congregation. They are young, they each have children, and they are aware of the needs of Eastridge and the surrounding community.

Pastor Melodie is completing her fourth year of ministry at the senior pastor and head of staff at Eastridge Presbyterian Church. She understands youth and children’s ministry, and she has experience working directly in ministry with these age groups. Pastor Melodie is collaborative and committed to the ministry and staff, and she is well-loved by the congregation. Members of the focus groups said, “Melodie is a great pastor,” “she is a strong leader,” “she is creative in worship,” and “she isn’t afraid to try new things.”

Pastor Thomas oversees adult ministry and small groups at the church. He is in his fourth year of ministry as the Associate Pastor of Congregational Care. He is energetic, excellent at pastoral care, and is respected by the congregation. One member said, “Thomas has a great gift at connecting with people, especially when they are sick or in need.” Another said, “Pastor Thomas is working with the Confirmation class and he’s doing a great job.” Thomas works very well with Pastor Melodie and embraces his role as part of a gifted team of leaders.

Interim Director, Kris Adler-Brammer

Kris recently joined the staff to take on the responsibilities for children and youth. She brings 15 years of full-time experience to the position, having served similar-sized churches in Nebraska and North Carolina. She has a degree in psychology from Nebraska Wesleyan University. One of the parents shared, “we feel good having an interim director who is competent and creative.”

Facilities

Eastridge Presbyterian Church has a beautiful campus with renovated spaces. The sanctuary is beautiful, the entryway is welcoming and inviting, the offices are easily accessible and well-designed, and there are classroom and meeting spaces throughout the campus that meet most needs. The campaign to renovate the Huxtable Lounge is underway and presents the church with an opportunity to engage the neighborhood in new ways.

Ministry Highlights

Eastridge Presbyterian Church has several ministry opportunities that include children and youth in the congregation. Some of these programs, in no particular order, include:

- Mission trips
- Vacation Bible School
- “Big Event” fall kickoff
- Youth Sunday
- Confirmation
- Music program
- Meeting with other Presbyterian youth groups on occasion
- Retreats at Calvin Crest
- Mission projects in Lincoln
- Christmas program

There is potential to grow the ministry beyond these events, but the current traditions will provide some stability upon which a yearly calendar of programming can be planned. Likewise, it will be important to occasionally discontinue ministry programs that are no longer effective.

Support for Youth Ministry

Eastridge has a small group of volunteers that are involved in the life and ministry of the church with children and youth. One adult said, “I care, and I know all the volunteers want this to succeed. We will do everything we can to help the person we hire to succeed.”

Creativity

One of the responses in the survey shared, “worship is really creative here... our pastors aren’t afraid to try new things, so there’s a spirit of anticipation.” Other members also reflected on worship in a similar way, reflecting how it’s okay if something doesn’t go perfectly because the congregation is open to new experiences.

This openness is wonderful! It is advised that the congregation take a similar approach to new programming and to a new staffing model. The wisdom of the Session and the leadership of the pastors can help shape programs and policy as needed.

Current Challenges

Ministry Identity

“We don’t know what we want.”

“What do we want?”

“We’ve not always known what we wanted.”

“We have to know what we want.”

Multiple members in the focus groups and surveys shared these quotes. Many members shared high expectations of the children's ministry and youth ministry staff. However, the regular turnover of youth ministry staff, combined with a changing staff model, has been challenging.

The church is currently in a good place – a period of “interim time.” This is healthy. This period presents an opportunity to stabilize, try new programs, and empower youth and church members to become leaders in the ministry. It will be very important to utilize this interim time as a period of discernment to provide better clarity about a long-term staffing solution.

Including Children and Youth in Worship

Eastridge Presbyterian Church recently discontinued the Sunday school hour for children and youth and is now focusing on including these age groups more intentionally in worship. Many other PC(USA) congregations have made similar decisions and have experienced success.

It will be vital for the church to both include children and youth in worship and foster relationships between young people and the pastors, staff, and worship leaders.

Stephen Cady, PhD, researched how youth interact and respond to corporate worship in his dissertation, written at Princeton Theological Seminary in 2014. His research advocates that meaningful worship is not achieved by entertainment, technology, or musical style. While churches might mean well with those approaches, his conclusion was that corporate worship services must be at the heart of youth ministry, not services segregated by age. Youth ministry must be connected to inclusive, intergenerational worship or “it doesn't make sense” to teens.

Family Ministry

The ongoing National Study of Youth and Religion found that youth encounter God through intentional faith communities, like youth groups, and transformational experiences, such as mission trips, retreats, and camps. Not surprisingly, the study found that the most important asset in youth ministry is the effectiveness of a church youth minister.

However, the study also found that the most important faith-based relationships in a young person's life were not youth ministry leaders, pastors, or dynamic volunteers. Parents matter most.

Kenda Creasy Dean, PhD, wrote in her book, *Almost Christian*, about parents that interact with their youth in faith-based discussions and actions. This faith-based parental relationship makes a stronger impact than any other facet in teenager's lives. Likewise, churches that are intentional about intergenerational and family ministry tend to have more impactful youth ministry programming.

It will be important for Eastridge Presbyterian Church to continue to innovate new ways to provide programming that impacts families and multiple generations. These programming areas should include worship, Confirmation, meals, task forces, mission opportunities, and music.

Systems and Structure

The Session is reinventing the lay-led structure of the church to de-emphasize committees and instead utilize a commission structure that is supported by task force groups and other volunteers.

Several members had difficulty articulating this new structure. Educating the congregation and its leaders should continue. This structural process can work, but it will take time.

Be Intentional

There will be failures in programming. The staffing model will need to be adjusted. Attendance will wane at times. Energy may rise and decrease.

These are normal experiences for any organization – taking risks must be embraced.

At present, there is some anxiety about how the youth and children's ministry position will be staffed. This report includes several staff-related strategic recommendations to address this concern.

Staff-Related Strategic Recommendations

Embrace Interim Time

Eastridge Presbyterian Church is experiencing a lot of change at the present time:

- The children's director retired
- The youth pastor left
- Sunday school is being discontinued
- An after-school program is being launched
- Other programs are being evaluated and adapted

With these changes, the job description that is relevant today will change in the coming months as programming and the needs of members evolves. There will be more clarity about how a staffing solution should be addressed in the months ahead.

Recommendations:

- Delay hiring a new staff person until Spring 2018 or after
- Utilize Fall and Winter 2017 to try new programming and empower volunteers
- Form a search committee or APNC in early 2018
- Build a job description that realistically reflects the current responsibilities

Consider a Lay Leader

Eastridge Presbyterian Church has had a history of hiring lay staff and ordained staff to oversee the youth ministry. The previous children's ministry director had a long tenure of 17 years. While the previous models were appropriate for the time when these staff positions were filled, it is now advisable to combine these two positions, especially since a church of this size is appropriately staffed with two full-time pastors. Eastridge Presbyterian Church has an excellent pastoral team that is appropriately managing worship and pastoral care responsibilities. Likewise, it is paramount that the children and youth of Eastridge Presbyterian Church see Melodie and Thomas as their pastors – the youth staff person cannot solely cover this role.

Recommendations:

- Assign the Confirmation program to Pastor Thomas' responsibilities; he does not need to regularly teach confirmation but this facilitates a pastor to have oversight of this important ministry
- Include Pastor Melodie and Pastor Thomas in regular youth and children's ministry events and programming so that pastoral relationships with young people can be fostered
- Consider a lay-led staffing solution from one of the following alternatives:
 - Option #1: hire an experienced full-time director of Christian education; this position could be supported by an intern or an additional part-time leader as the programs grow
 - Option #2: hire a half-time children's director and a half-time youth ministry director; one of these positions could grow in hours as the programs grow
 - *Note: effective training and education options exist to support a layperson in these roles, including PC(USA)-related conferences and long-term training and support from Youth Ministry Institute Midwest (YMIM), which would include coaching and monthly classes; more information about YMIM is included at the end of this document.*

Growth Takes Time

Many members reflected on how they love this church "because it feels like home," or "because the pastors really care." There is warmth at Eastridge Presbyterian Church that doesn't exist in every congregation. This warmth is part of the identity of the church, but it also has led to a sense of comfort among its members that makes change difficult.

A strong and healthy youth program usually takes two to three years to build and stabilize; a children's program usually takes less time but requires the same intentionality. It will be important for the church to fully embrace a new staffing solution and to provide patience. A newly hired director (or associate pastor) will likely experience failures. However, this person will also bring great gifts that will enable success. Rebuilding and strengthening family ministry will require grace.

Recommendations:

- Kris, the interim director, will need support from parents (i.e. a youth advisory group or task force) to plan and enact programming through the school year
- The youth should also consider becoming more active in leadership and decision-making of the ministry; church leaders will need to invite the youth to be part of this process
- In this way, the ministry will move away from being a "cult of personality" that relies on the charisma and personality of a paid staff person and toward congregational-focused ministry

Ministry-Related Strategic Recommendations

Note that these are recommendations – not requirements

Youth Ministry Institute Midwest has ideas about how to improve the ministry at Eastridge Presbyterian Church. However, it is the members, the staff, and especially the youth and their families who will need to "buy in" to any

changes and recommendations. It will take time to see progress. However, with intentionality, family ministry with children and youth will become stronger over time.

Student Leadership or Youth Council

In an effective youth ministry, youth should be involved in leadership and in decision-making. Youth can read scripture, help lead games, recruit other students to be involved, and participate in worship. Some of these things are happening and should continue to be encouraged. Student leadership takes time to develop.

Data from the online survey indicated that youth leadership was evaluated at “less than adequate,” or 2.55 out of a possible 5. Additionally, one of the youth said, “we’re usually just there... none of us lead anything.” When asked what she would do differently, she said, “let us make some decisions and help plan some of our events.”

One of the personnel committee members wondered, “could we become a church that invites young people to consider ministry [as a vocation] or being a pastor?”

Youth and children have the capability to rise as leaders. It will be important to invite them.

Recommendations: form a youth council or a group of youth who can actively engage in leadership in all areas of youth ministry. Regularly invite youth to be involved in worship by reading scripture, sharing music, or leading a minute for mission. Future church leaders may be called to vocational ministry through this process. A “youth council” or even an informal leadership group can begin on a mission trip, when students have an extended period of time to try things and learn to trust each other and the process.

Youth Task Force or Advisory Team

The church has created a good annual calendar of events for youth ministry. There was little shared about the committee/council process. One parent said, “we’re trying a new structure of using commissions and task forces so that people aren’t asked to commit long-term.”

While these structures may be healthy, youth and parent volunteers should be recognized and empowered to be strong leaders within the ministry. Creating a team of decision-makers will allow the staff and pastors to be relationship-makers within the ministry, and less of the primary planners.

Eastridge Presbyterian Church is a wonderful faith community that supports its youth and children’s ministry. Since the congregation is so supportive, there may be adults other than parents that would be willing to serve on an advisory team. Likewise, youth who are interested in leadership could be invited to be part of this group.

Recommendations: invite about five key adults and two key youth to participate in an advisory team or youth task force that meets six times during the year to publish an annual calendar of events for the youth. Utilize this advisory group to train and thank volunteers. The vision is to create a team that is more autonomous than relying solely on staff that has limited time to oversee a program that includes infants to young adults. This team would not necessarily be the volunteers that are present every week, but those who are interested in organizing specific events.

It will be paramount for future staff to honor and embrace this model of empowering others to be leaders in the ministry.

Training, Recruiting, and Empowering Volunteers

Several parents and youth focused on the importance of relational ministry. The previous youth leader was beloved by the youth, but often failed to empower volunteers to be part of the process.

Each youth in a healthy ministry should be able to articulate at least five adults in their lives that have been important in their faith formation. This team of adults should not be staff-centered, but instead nurtured by the church. One positive example of how Eastridge Presbyterian Church seeks to provide this relationship is through confirmation mentors that are assigned to each youth.

A clear recruitment and training plan should be established to develop a strong team of volunteers that do more than provide crowd control. It is important to ensure that volunteers feel confident about their resources and skills through an annual training meeting and regular check-ins from the staff. Building meaningful relationships with young people takes time.

Recommendations: invite adults who do not have youth to serve as monthly or weekly volunteers with a one-year commitment. Provide an afternoon or morning training session. Get to know the particular gifts and passions of the adults so those gifts and passions can be matched appropriately to volunteer opportunities. The advisory team should lead this process.

Communication

The church does a great job of publishing and distributing bulletin announcements and a monthly newsletter that has news, articles, and updates. It will be important to fully utilize this communication tool to share an upcoming calendar for youth ministry.

The website shares information about the youth ministry, but it doesn't include pictures or stories. Some of the great strengths of Eastridge Presbyterian Church are that the church is a place where youth will be accepted and completely supported by the congregation. This is powerful in a world of labels and exclusion. It may be wise to lift up these values as a marketing tool in church communications.

Likewise, one or two youth may be great "ambassadors of social media" to share pictures and posts of youth group gatherings on Instagram, which can be easily and automatically linked to Facebook.

Recommendations: publish a youth calendar in every printed newsletter. Update the website with language, pictures, and stories that appeal to prospective members. Consider empowering a youth to create an Instagram page that is linked to the Facebook page so that youth photos and promos can be regularly posted regularly and seen by youth and their parents.

Positively Celebrate Every Win

The youth and children's ministry has many things to celebrate! Here are just a few of the things that are going great at Eastridge Presbyterian Church:

- Attendance is holding steady in the midst of transition.
- The youth express care and appreciation for their ministry. With more investment and leadership they could become more active in weekly and monthly events.
- An after-school program is being launched that will provide additional outreach to the community.

Basic Documents and Systems

The church has many good documents and systems in place to support the youth ministry. In this transition, a staff review of the following practices will be important. Some of these practices may be healthy and in use:

- It will be important for a volunteer or staff member to regularly update the church database (or similar tool) with attendance, visitors, birthdays, and parents' names.
- Use attendance tracking to regularly reach out to children and youth when they have been missing for more than two or three youth ministry events.
- Thank you notes should be sent to volunteers, teachers, and supporters who give their time and resources to the ministry.
- Develop and publicize a calendar of events and trips for the school year and summer, and assign an adult from the youth advisory group to help manage each event.
- A mission and vision statement for the youth ministry is important, and it should reflect the mission and vision of the congregation. It can come as a result of a series of discussions or lessons on these items – how do the youth see their ministry as important?
- Regular communication patterns need to be utilized for parents, volunteers, and youth. The youth can help with some of this, but regular communication needs to be staff-led.
- Some of these systems could be managed by volunteers and in partnership with the youth advisory group and/or youth council.

Conclusion

Three of the strongest cultural messages that Youth Ministry Institute embraces are to “be authentic, be self-aware, and be intentional.” Those who participated in the listening sessions for this report shared that they are willing to take risks. They shared authentic thoughts. They shared their observations and beliefs. And, they shared a willingness to be intentional about working towards a new vision to share ministry with the children and youth at Eastridge Presbyterian Church.

It will be important for the pastors, interim staff, installed staff, and the Session to continue to be intentional in building, guiding, and nurturing youth ministry and spiritual formation. Over time, this will foster better faith development in the years to come. This generation in our culture expects regular innovation and change, so this time of transition is important. The church can provide an added level of acceptance and care that our culture is mission, love, peace through developing faith in Jesus Christ.

This report represents a snapshot in time. It did not include input from every member. Nor did it address all the needs in the community. However, the report does reflect the reality that youth and children's ministry at Eastridge Presbyterian Church has the potential to grow.

Building a strong youth and family ministry will take time because this ministry is relational. The advantage of including a focus on children's ministry is that relationships with children and their parents will be fostered before they enter the youth group.

Therefore, this report is a starting place. It represents a culmination of thoughts from people who care deeply about their church and have great hopes about where God is leading them. In this way, the authors encompass the membership of Eastridge Presbyterian Church and those in the ministry that participated in the process. The writer is a consultant from Youth Ministry Institute Midwest.

Speaking in first person, it was a pleasure to be with you on this journey. I will continue to be available to your pastors and staff to help enact these recommendations, and I will be in prayer for your congregation.

Peace, Matt Vaughan

12 September 2017

About the Youth Ministry Institute

The Youth Ministry Institute was founded in 2005 with the mission of empowering youth ministry leaders to become skilled and effective leaders. Youth Ministry Institute provides meaningful theological and vocational training through various consulting, coaching, and instructional models. Its flagship program provides education and training to youth ministry leaders during a period of two academic years. The program delivers collegiate and graduate-level instructional training, coaching from experienced youth ministers, and support through networking and collaboration within a peer youth ministry cohort. 80 percent of youth ministers who complete the program stay in their ministry setting for five years or more; nearly all double the size of their youth groups.

Youth Ministry Institute Midwest, a Regional Partner

Youth Ministry Institute Midwest (YMIM) desires that a greater number of youth experience the grace and love of Jesus Christ in local churches. We accomplish our mission by providing leadership training and theological education to church youth leaders with the goal of effectively sharing grace, good news, and discernment to enrich the faith lives of adolescents and their families. YMIM is an ecumenical ministry that prioritizes support for PC(USA) congregations in the Midwest; 10 of 14 board members attend local PC(USA) congregations.

At present, 14 churches receive long-term training and support from YMIM – seven Presbyterian churches and seven other mainline protestant churches. 30 additional churches received short-term support from YMIM over the last three years. YMIM-trained leaders in local churches throughout the Midwest lead at least 500 youth, emphasizing the desire to support youth with good leadership.

Matt Vaughan, YMIM Director

Matt Vaughan is the regional director for Youth Ministry Institute Midwest (YMIM) and teaches a youth ministry practicum at Saint Paul School of Theology. He previously served as a youth minister for over 18 years at three Presbyterian churches with varied memberships of 350 to 4,500, including Village Presbyterian Church. The Synod of Mid-America (PCUSA) and three other PCUSA churches support his work through covenant partnerships with YMIM.

Matt received theological education from Saint Paul School of Theology in Kansas City, a teaching certificate from the University of Missouri – Saint Louis, and an architectural degree from the University of Kansas. Matt and his wife, Amy, live in Prairie Village, Kansas with their two sons. When they are not at a basketball game or tennis match, they yearn to hike, camp, or ski in Colorado and Arizona. Matt's hometown is Lawrence, Kansas, where he recently served as interim youth minister at First Presbyterian Church.

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