



Introduction

Scene from *But I'm a Cheerleader* (1999)

What is youth ministry for?

Selection from *The End of Youth Ministry?: Why Parents Don't Really Care about Youth Groups and What Youth Workers Should Do About It* by Andrew Root (2020).

“About two years ago I was days from quitting or, more likely, being fired. It was miserable. I was just a few years out of college, and my only youth ministry experience was a summer at camp. I was pretty good at the whole counselor thing, so I thought, No problem. Youth ministry in a church is just being a camp counselor year-round... The church wanted someone who'd create events and an overall program that kids would find fun. I knew it was deeper than just entertainment. The idea was that if young people were having fun, then they'd have positive feelings about church and stick around.. But nine months into it, it started eating me up... I mean, it's one thing to be the chief counselor of fun for a week, then reboot with totally different kids for another week. But how do you do that in the day-to-day of church life? I knew things weren't going well. And the more I tried to make things fun, the more energy left the youth ministry and me.”

“So what happened?” I ask.

“Well, a few people on the personnel committee started hinting that things weren't working, and my senior pastor took some steps to both encourage me and hold me accountable. But they all just kept coming back to fun: 'Teach them the Bible in a fun way,' 'Connect with them and have fun,' 'Make church a fun experience for my ninth-grade son.' As if fun were freedom instead of a chain around my whole body.”

Intrigued, I ask again, “So what happened?”

“She did,” J says, pointing to Lorena. Surprised by the response, but now clear on why Lorena is sitting with us, I inquire of the teen, “What did you do?”

With a cutting, dry sense of humor that makes her seem older than twelfth grade, Lorena responds, “Oh, I just got some fluid around my heart and almost died.”

I can only hold my breath. J then says, with equal measures of sincerity and sarcasm that nevertheless reveal a deep truth, “Having a kid in your ministry fighting for her life after some freak infection—that will change things for the chief counselor of fun pretty quickly. That will make youth ministry for something very different than just fun.”

Without realizing it, J has referenced the phrase that I’ve been journeying to answer. My heartbeat quickens. I had not anticipated that I’d ask this question so early in our conversation, yet here it is. “If youth ministry isn’t for fun—because you watched Lorena almost die—then what is youth ministry for?”

J and Lorena look at each other and smile. Then Lorena says with bright eyes, “Joy.”

Troubling Normal

Selections from *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life* by Michael Warner (1999)

So the difficult question is not: how do we get rid of sexual shame? The answer to that one will inevitably be: get rid of sex. The question, rather, is this: what will we do with our shame?... If sex is a kind of indignity then we’re all in it together. And the paradoxical result is that only when this indignity of sex is spread around the room, leaving no one out, and in fact binding people together, that it begins to resemble the dignity of the human.

Discussion: What were you told was “normal” growing up? How did that help or hurt?

Tangible Tips

1. **Don’t wait for LGBTQ+ folk** to come out or to find you— do ministry as if not-normal was the normal.
2. **Ask LGBTQ+ youth and families** what they think, want, and experience.
3. **Center non-normative stories:** from stories about LGBTQ+ people and families to other stories about people changing their mind or finding new ways to do things.
4. **Find ways to be sex-positive.** (Find out more information about the *Our Whole Lives* program at <http://bit.ly/owlucc>.)
5. **Interrogate your language** and regular practices

Discussion: What would you add? Further questions & exploring?