

 youthfront **NEWS**  
SPECIAL ISSUE



# Rooted & Rising

Youthfront's role in three national initiatives  
strengthening the church



## Reflecting on 50 Years of Ministry

When I was a senior in high school, my mother knew I needed something in my life more substantial than sports. So she made a deal with me that resulted in my going to a Youthfront event, and my life would never be the same.

I soon decided to follow Jesus Christ and started working at Youthfront part time while I was going to college. Before even graduating from college, I was working full time at Youthfront. I loved my fellow staff members, I loved youth ministry, and I loved following Jesus Christ and helping other young people discover life in Jesus.

Back then, as much as I loved being on the staff of Youthfront, I never dreamed that I would one day celebrate 50 years as a staff member and would have the privilege of becoming the President/CEO of a ministry that has impacted the lives of hundreds of thousands of young people through the Great Good News of Jesus Christ. Youthfront alumni serve in ministry all over the world. I am so grateful to be a part of the legacy of Youthfront's 82 years of fulfilling our mission to bring youth into a growing relationship with Jesus Christ.

During my 50 years of youth ministry, I've seen it all. Every generation we've served has been dramatically different. Each has been unique - in the way they see the world, how they communicate, what they value, technologies they use, cultures they embrace and more. Part of the challenge is constantly reevaluating the best ways to communicate the Gospel to each generation. Programs, too, have changed - but the message that Jesus Christ is the Lord and Savior has not changed. From big rallies to clubs in schools, TV and radio shows, mission trips, Bible studies, music/drama groups, podcasts, prison ministry, community development, student clubs, discipleship groups, camp, plus much more, we've tried it all and changed a lot. However, the focus on the Lord Jesus Christ has never changed... and has only grown more deeply into the DNA of our ministry.

We have resisted the pressure to grow beyond the Greater Kansas City area or the Midwest. We have felt called to be deep in our geographical area but provide leadership and resources beyond. Youthfront is recognized as providing world-wide youth ministry leadership through teaching, writing, resourcing, and coaching. In the last couple of years, we have been awarded three significant Lilly Endowment Inc. grants designed to advance theologically robust ideas about the Christian formation of young people, from before they are born through the beginning of adulthood.

Mary was approached by the Angel Gabriel and had her full pregnancy to ponder and prepare for being the mother of Jesus. Pastors acknowledge that few churches are even thinking about what it would mean to begin the spiritual formation of our children with young couples even before they give birth. At Youthfront, we understand that it is critical for young people we minister with to become embedded into a church because that is where they need to be for the rest of their lives. But we've seen for some time now an exodus from church life among emerging generations. We are working with churches along with academic institutions and other partners to address this issue.

The church isn't going away: the church is the body of Jesus Christ at work in the world. But there is a huge need to return to the focus of the ministry of Jesus Christ and away from watered down concepts of the Gospel. Youthfront is committed to Paul's exhortation to focus on the crucified Jesus Christ who comes to us in our impossibilities and despair (death) to bring hope and possibilities (resurrection). We are grateful God has blessed us with wonderful friends and donors who believe in what we are doing. We need you now more than ever to give, to pray and to join us in bringing youth into a growing relationship with Jesus Christ.

Mike King, President and CEO

# Rooted & Rising

## Youthfront's role in three national initiatives strengthening the church

An investment of more than \$7 million is deepening the spiritual experiences of kids, youth and families through a targeted expansion of Youthfront's ministries over the next five years. Funding from Lilly Endowment Inc. through three of its initiatives is enabling Youthfront to come alongside churches in unique ways to strengthen ministry with children, youth and young adults.

The Lilly Endowment initiatives are the Christian Parenting and Caregiving Initiative, the Nurturing Children through Worship and Prayer Initiative and the National Youth and Young Adult Initiative on Faith and Service. Through participation in these initiatives, Youthfront is accessing special training and community opportunities to enable it to work with congregations through our own programs - and specifically those that engage children's/family pastors and youth pastors. One aim of these initiatives is to assist churches nationally through the learnings and outcomes from the efforts of the funded organizations.

"This is an important time for the church - especially for children's and youth ministry," said Mike King, President & CEO of Youthfront and principal investigator for the grant projects. "We were excited to be selected to participate in these initiatives, which give us an opportunity to assist the church in a significant way, through advancing our theological thinking while expanding and replicating some of our most successful programs to a wider audience."

While it is a tremendous honor to be involved in these national learning projects that will help the church at large, King added that it doesn't replace the ongoing need for donors across Youthfront's ministries. Keeping the core of Youthfront's programs fully funded and strong is critical, King said.

"Funding for these initiatives is restricted to the specific expansions or activities of the projects," he explained. "So donor support is needed now more than ever to support Youthfront's core ministry operations, such as our camp ministry and counseling center, as we work on these national projects."

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*Lilly Endowment's Strengthening Ministry with Children focus area has two project initiatives, and Youthfront is involved in both.*

INITIATIVE  
#1

## Strengthening Ministry with Children: Christian Parenting and Caregiving Initiative

In 2022, Youthfront was selected to receive funding through Lilly Endowment's Christian Parenting and Caregiving Initiative, a four-year project designed to help Christian parents and caregivers share their faith values with their children. Youthfront is using its grant to help underwrite and in some cases expand Youthfront resources and events for Children's & Family pastors, parents/caregivers and congregations.

YF Family, Youthfront's suite of resources for parents, grandparents and caregivers, has been expanded through the initiative, which also built a growing network of Children's and Family pastors.

### Other key projects include:

- New parent/caregiver guides for families of elementary children in Youthfront's Day Camp and Kids Camp programs
- Parenting tools and guidance through events, the YF Family blog and via the Youthfront app
- Additional spiritual formation content for kids and families
- Resourcing and training for Children's and Family Pastors



Parent needs are a focus of this project, and one of the key learnings from its early phase is that caregivers feel overwhelmed. While many parents and grandparents desire to take an active role in their the spiritual formation of their children and grandchildren, they report feeling intimidated and unsure about how to do it. Taking up a multi-week Advent or Lent curriculum felt challenging or time consuming to manage, leaving many parents feeling guilt and inadequacy. This kind of feedback helped Youthfront make a significant pivot in how to help parents, grandparents and other caregivers approach spiritual formation with children. Youthfront piloted As You Go, focused on simple ways to engage children in everyday faith conversations, within this initiative and its expansion is being made possible by the other grant project.

### Key learning:

While many parents and grandparents **desire to take an active role** in the spiritual formation of their children and grandchildren, they report feeling **intimidated and unsure** about how to do it.

INITIATIVE  
#2



## Strengthening Ministry with Children: Nurturing Children Through Worship and Prayer Initiative

In 2024, Lilly Endowment invited Youthfront to submit a proposal to participate in a second initiative, Nurturing Children Through Worship and Prayer. Funding is supporting Youthfront's Presence-Centered Parenting and Caregiving Initiative. It is deepening theological work with and training for Children's and Family Pastors.

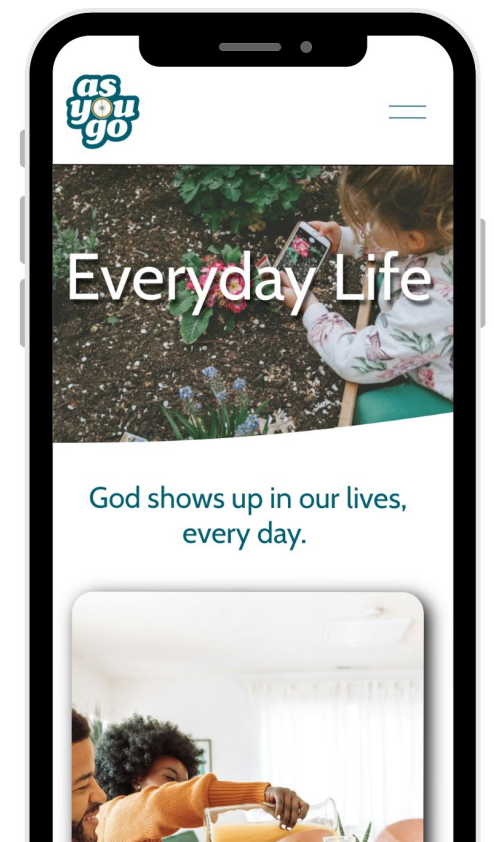
Activities in this project include theological dialogues with pastors and church staff and workshops/trainings that assist congregations in exploring and making a theological turn. Instead of ministry "to," "for," or even "with" children, the theological turn calls for ministry "beside" children. The posture of "mutuality" emphasizes a move away from pushing and downloading content into children's developing minds, and instead focuses on sharing life together and the mutual experience of encountering a living God in Jesus Christ. Instead of children being viewed as "sheep" and children's pastors as "shepherds," the theological turn seeks all to be viewed as sheep with one true shepherd, Jesus Christ. The theological turn calls for children and children's pastors to be viewed as theologians and co-learners.

In addition, this initiative supports an expansion of the As You Go content developed from the learnings in the Christian Parenting initiative. Building on the spiritual concept of the Shema and the teaching practice of Jesus (who didn't develop curriculum but told stories and engaged others in everyday conversation), this approach invites children into meaningful moments of spiritual truth and beauty as you go along the way through a variety of experiences together with them.

Whether visiting a park, art gallery, museum, the zoo, or just driving to the store, As You Go offers simple ideas to turn daily experiences with children into a learning opportunity that is not forced or awkward. These experiences give parents and caregivers a chance to learn from children and grandchildren as well...where did they see God today?



Learn more and choose an experience at the pilot website: **AsYouGo.org**





## INITIATIVE #3

### National Youth and Young Adult Initiative on Faith and Service

In 2024, Youthfront was one of 12 organizations selected to receive a grant through Lilly Endowment's National Youth and Young Adult Initiative on Faith and Service.

The initiative seeks to engage youth and young adults directly in faith-based service opportunities and help them reflect theologically on the meaning of their experiences of Jesus Christ in that service. Youthfront's five-year project includes church and university partnerships along with year-round service opportunities across Youthfront's ministries.

Youthfront was selected to advance ministry and theological thinking about faith formation of adolescents from the age of 13 to 29. Volunteerism - and volunteer requirements - are common hallmarks for this generation, King said.

"Young people often describe how they feel fully alive while they are volunteering or serving others, but they don't necessarily have a biblical or theological understanding of why," he added. "Our passion is to help churches create opportunities for young people to understand that their ministry to one another relationally is actually participation in God's divine life that trumps the shallowness of pragmatic 'do good' focused volunteerism. Jesus came not to be served but to serve, and God created us to serve each other and those in need."

This project seeks to replicate and expand some of Youthfront's most beloved and successful ministry programs. The Teen Staff high school program at Youthfront Camp, YF Neighborhood's ImagineX social entrepreneurship program for youth, Youthfront's Something to Eat initiative, and opportunities for young adults to serve in Youthfront's Arise youth detention center ministry are all targeted for expansion.

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This project also will launch a new suite of young adult and high school year-round service opportunities, along with launching a project originally developed in the UK. The PEEL project is an intensive program designed to build relational trust among a small group of youth while giving them photography and poetry skills that result in them writing about and photographing each other. Pre and post mental health assessments demonstrate an increased sense of wellbeing among participants. Largely designed as an "anti-social media" effort, the PEEL project's success among youth in the United Kingdom and in early testing in the U.S. led to its launch at Youthfront through this national initiative.

"This kind of spiritual formation with youth - relational experiences and encounters with others - is critical for teenagers locked into social media apps alone in the low-lit din of their bedrooms or even in the midst of friends who are all lost in their phones," King said. "I'm on Holy ground in this project when everyone reveals their photographs and reads aloud the poem about another person they've spent time interviewing in depth through the process. The participants offer feedback of experiencing the presence of Jesus Christ - they speak of being really seen and being listened to like they've rarely experienced before."

Author and speaker Dr. Andrew Root of Luther Theological Seminary is serving as staff theologian during the five-year project. Root's latest work, *Evangelism in an Age of Despair*, along with his other body of work on the church in the secular age continues to shape Youthfront's theological approach to ministry and its practices with young people. Youthfront is also partnering with a number of organizations, including Future of Faith, whose research on Sacred Listening and its value for teenagers may redefine the ways that youth ministry practitioners reach young people.

"We're full of hope about what Youthfront and our partners can contribute to this national initiative," King said. "Our learnings could fundamentally impact how the church ministers to and with young people, and we're excited to see where God leads."

#### New in the US:

The PEEL project, initially developed in the UK, will be offered for the first time to teens and young adults in the US as part of Youthfront's National Youth and Young Adult Initiative on Faith and Service.



Want to get your teens or young adults involved?  
Email [info@youthfront.com](mailto:info@youthfront.com) to get started.

# Help us grow.

You can support Youthfront's ministry through your prayers, financial gifts and volunteering.

**PRAY** We believe that ministry is a shared calling – and your prayers are a vital part of this work. Pray for the kids and teens we serve, the neighborhoods we walk alongside, and the staff and volunteers who show up day after day.

**MAKE A GIFT** Your financial gifts make a direct and lasting impact by fueling programs, supporting our staff, and allowing us to maintain and improve our amazing facilities.

**VOLUNTEER** You can also give your time and heart through a wide variety of volunteer opportunities. Whether it's providing a meal, mentoring teens, or helping at camp—there are chances to jump in throughout the week and across the year. However you serve, you'll be helping create a sacred space for the next generation to grow in faith, hope, and belonging.



Visit [youthfront.com](https://youthfront.com) to learn more.