

SAVED BY THE

THE SIX PRACTICES OF EFFECTIVE SALVATION ARMY YOUTH MINISTRY

SALVOS YOUTH AND YOUNG ADULTS





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INTRODUCTION: WHAT IS GOOD SALVATION ARMY YOUTH MINISTRY

When we talk about youth ministry, what do we mean? What makes ministry to 'youth'¹ unique or even necessary?

While there are debates around the necessity of specialised ministry to youth, we argue that young people are a distinct group in our society. They are identified through language, legislation and culture as being in a unique phase of life. They have specific social and developmental needs that mark them as different from other age groups. They also are experiencing their adolescence at a particular time in history, facing issues and social contexts that other generations before them have not.

Because of these factors, they require a specialised expression of ministry to address their needs and help them grow and develop as followers of Jesus. This is what youth ministry is.

But what does 'good' youth ministry look like? Youth ministry has taken different forms across history, especially in response to times of great social change.² At times, as in the original Sunday School movement of the 1800s, youth ministry has focused on moral instruction to keep Christian young people 'safe' from the temptations of the world.

At other times, youth ministry was a response to the disengagement of young people from mainstream church settings, attempting to engage young people with something more relevant.

Following the 1960s, as less people in society identified as Christian, youth ministry focused more on outreach through relationship and attractional youth groups. More recently, there has been a turn in youth ministry from ministry to young people towards youth ministry *by* young people, empowering them in leadership and discipleship.

If youth ministry has changed and developed over time in response to social conditions, how do we know that what we are doing today fits the times we live in?

Recent research has provided evidence-based indications of what is effective. In the American context, the work of the Fuller Institute has been influential. Their recent publications *Growing Young* and *Faith Beyond Youth Group* provide a framework for effective youth ministry practices that help young people's faith grow and develop beyond their attendance at church activities. These include how youth ministers relate to young people, how they teach and model faith and how they help young people live their faith and engage with the modern world.

In the UK, Youthscape has examined the spiritual lives of young people inside and outside the Church, providing insight into how they may best be engaged with the Christian story.

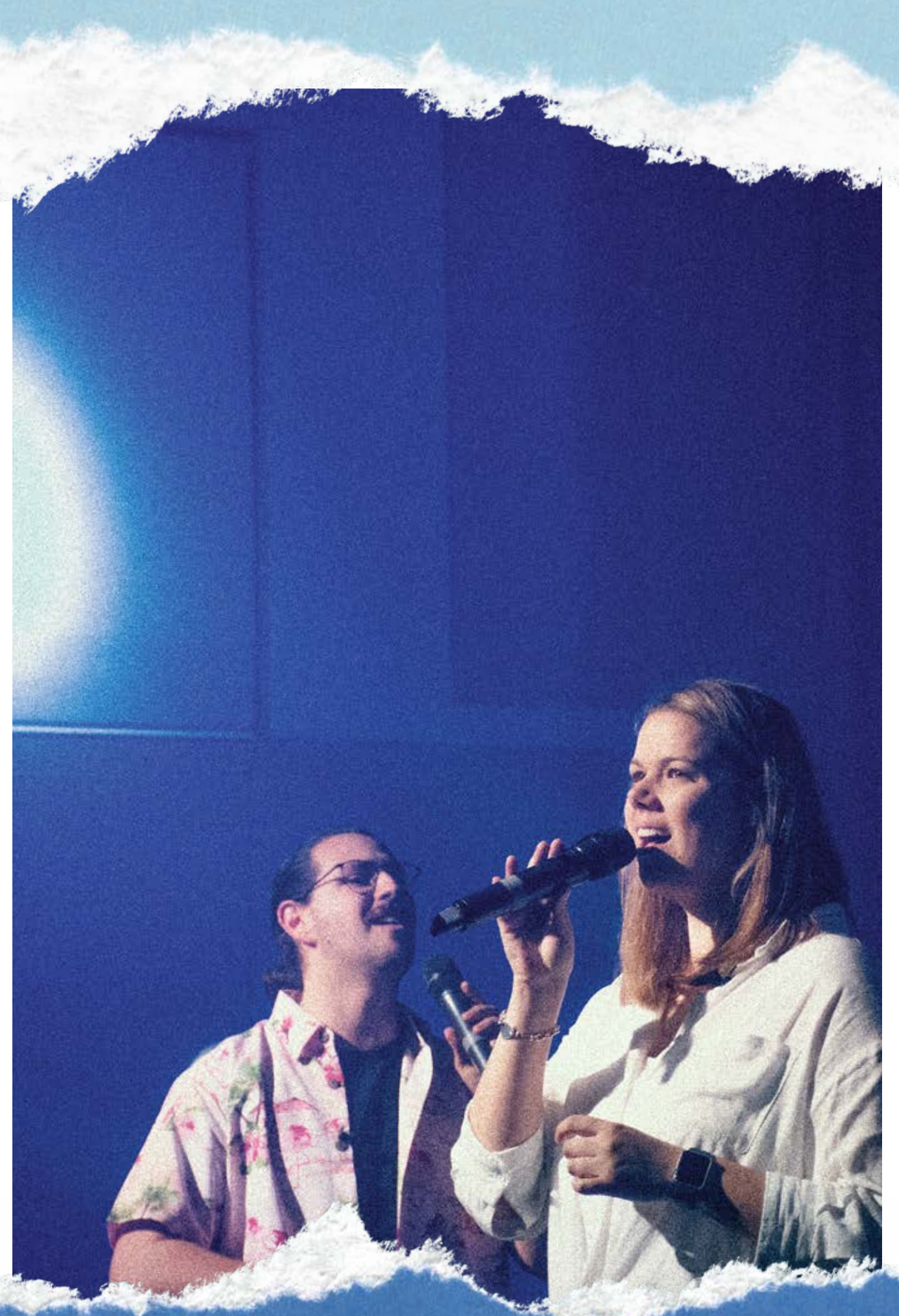
In Australia, the groundbreaking *Your Story* research examined how the faith narratives of young people had changed over the course of their adolescence. They found that the faith of young people is best understood not as a static state but as a narrative with trajectory, and that these faith narratives are supported or challenged by a range of factors in a young person's ecosystem.

For those ministering to young people, the right kinds of ministry relationships and activities provides tools for young people to navigate their lives and faith journeys.

While this research provides a framework for understanding what good youth ministry is, what does good *Salvation Army* youth ministry look like? Within the wider Christian Church, the Salvation Army has a unique theology and mission, with a dual focus on service and evangelism to those on the margins of society.

This focus means we work with young people with complex needs, who often come from families that have little engagement with churches in generations. In Australia, the Salvation Army is concerned with its future viability as a Church, with less people identifying and attending than in previous times. This has implications for ministry to young people, who are seen as the future.

In the context of these factors, how does international research from other Christian contexts apply? What distinctive beliefs, values and practices does effective Salvation Army youth ministry have? That is what this research sought to determine, and in doing so, help to provide guidance, language and principles for those ministering to young people in Salvation Army contexts.



¹ In this report, when we refer to 'youth' or 'young people' we are typically referring to those who are high-school aged (12-18 years old).
² M. Senter, *The Coming Revolution in Youth Ministry* (Victor Books, 1992).



THE RESEARCH

To explore what good Salvation Army youth ministry looks like, the Youth and Young Adults Ministry Team engaged in lived experience research. We engaged in interviews with 16 youth leaders, asking them about their ministry practice, journeys and values.

The 16 participants were selected based on meeting some or all of the following criteria:

- **Led or worked in ministries that have achieved the vision of The Salvation Army (lives transformed in the context of hardship and injustice)**
- **Longevity of leadership, at one or multiple ministries**
- **Recognised by their peers (or the Youth and Young Adults Ministry Team) as being ‘experts’**

Frontline workers were also invited to express interest in being a part of the research through advertising on our website.

These participants came from a diverse group of settings, including large corps and youth ministries, and some from smaller corps.³ There was a geographic diversity, with youth leaders working in city, regional and rural contexts, from five states. The participants included paid youth leaders, volunteers and Salvation Army Officers.⁴

In qualitative research, the sample is not designed to be representative of all Salvation Army youth ministries, but instead using cases of interest to provide insight into the research question: **What do youth leaders in effective Salvation Army youth ministries do and why?**

FINDINGS: SIX PRACTICES OF SALVATION ARMY YOUTH MINISTRY

By listening to the stories of these youth leaders, we were able to identify some common themes. For these youth leaders, youth ministry was a **vocation**. For some, this meant a specific calling on their lives to work with young people. For others, this reflected their mission to meet the needs of their community. Because of this, most of these youth leaders had been engaged in their settings in the **long term**.

Historically, research has suggested that paid youth leaders had an average tenure of 18 months, and in a Salvation Army context of the appointment system of officers, moving on after five years is normal. However, these youth leaders bucked that trend, with many being present in their communities for over a decade. They told us that this allowed them to develop long-term relationships with young people, families and organisations.

Given the diversity of our sample, it is not surprising that **there is not one model or method of doing youth ministry**. Some ministries looked like a ‘typical’ youth ministry—youth groups, small groups and engagement with worshipping congregations. Others looked like drop-in centres, social services, or mentoring young people to live their faith out in the world. As such, this report does not propose a silver bullet or prescribed activity of youth ministry.

Instead, we were able to identify common themes of practice from the stories we heard. These practices were based on the values and beliefs that were common, despite differences in application. Not every practice was emphasised equally in all settings, but they encompassed expressions of effective Salvation Army youth ministry.

We identified six categories of effective youth ministry practice. Effective Salvation Army youth ministry:

- **Knows its purpose**
- **Focuses on young people**
- **Prioritises wellbeing**
- **Is missionally responsive**
- **Builds resilient disciples**
- **Activates and develops leaders**

In the final section of our report, we will explain each of these headings, providing an example from our research, digging deeper into specific practices and suggesting first steps for youth leaders who want to implement them in their corps.

³ ‘Corps’ is a word used to describe Salvation Army churches.
⁴ ‘Corps Officer’ is the Salvation Army term for pastors.

KNOW ITS PURPOSE

One characteristic of effective Salvation Army youth ministries we identified was that they know what their purpose is. This is exhibited as:

- Leaders and young people articulating why the ministry exists
- Activities of the youth ministry achieving their purpose
- The ministry's values reflected in their behaviour
- Their strategy is regularly reviewed so that it meets the needs of young people

EXAMPLE: PARTICIPANT 16

This participant shared about how the youth ministry had a clear and concise motto:

"We are about fun, family and faith."

Every week at youth group and in leaders' meetings this was repeated. This creed shaped their strategy, with programs planned and evaluated on how they made young people feel excited and connected, and how they explored what it meant to follow Jesus.

These values shaped how they interacted with young people, including authenticity and safety, as well as a framework for addressing challenges and problems they encountered. They would ask "how is this fun?" or "how do we be like a family?" in these circumstances.

When a youth ministry knows its purpose, people can **articulate why the youth ministry exists**. This includes youth leaders, young people, families and the wider faith community. For example, here is how some youth leaders explained the purpose of their youth ministries:

"The way I simply put it is that we are trying to help people become better people. More godly people, more honest people. More Jesus-like, but just better."

— Participant 2

"It is our core business to help young people experience Jesus in a way that's relevant for them, native for them as much as we can."

— Participant 5

Participant 8 described how they had printed the youth ministry vision statement in business cards, which allowed them to share it widely with all of their partners in the church and community.

In effective Salvation Army youth ministries, the **activities of the youth ministry achieve its purpose**.

Participant 4 said: "our terms are based around our core beliefs...and they're there to go along with what our church/youth group is trying to achieve. So, when I think we're working the best, is when our church and our youth ministry are looking at the same thing". Effective youth ministries can clearly link what they do to what they're trying to achieve, whether it's a high school program, youth group, bible study or community activity.

For effective youth ministries, their **purpose and values are reflected in their behaviour**. Participant 5 told us:

"We take great care of young people. Not because we have to, but because it's our privilege to and because they deserve it. But also, when we come [to Youth], we give our best."

Others talked about how their actions and message were aligned, especially when it came to showing God's love:

"It's just making sure that [young people] know that they're loved and that Jesus loves them, that's all. I say it to some of my other leaders all the time. [They say to me], 'we didn't get through much material today'. And I say, 'but do they know that they're loved and they know that Jesus loves them?' That's my go to — that if nothing else, do they know that they are loved and that Jesus loves them."

— Participant 3

In effective youth ministry the ends do not justify the means, they express them.

Finally, effective youth ministries **regularly review how their strategy is meeting the needs of young people**.

A common theme of the interviews was how youth leaders had changed their practice and activities over time:

"A lot of the old guard moved on and we didn't get a lot of kids in, so numbers went down. So, we rethought how we would do Youth..."

— Participant 6

"I'm like, 'alright, this is gonna be interesting coming back from COVID and the high school being moved, I'm gonna have to do things differently here'..."

— Participant 1

"It just came out that fortnightly [youth group] wasn't satisfying the young people. So, we kicked it up a bit more."

— Participant 12

Participants also talked about how failure was a great teacher in youth ministry:

"So, let's learn from our mistakes, learn from our success and make the space the best space possible for young people."

— Participant 6

"I was probably doing the right thing without always knowing what I was doing, and I'm happy for that to go on record that I was a youth pastor that didn't always know what the right move or call was. You needed people around you. You needed to trust people around you. You may make mistakes. You may not. But I think being in youth ministry and leadership is being willing to say, 'actually, I don't always know what it's gonna look like.'"

— Participant 16

Young people are dynamic and always changing. It is a phase of life where changes are happening, and youth culture moves quickly. So, it is no surprise that youth ministry must change too. Effective youth ministries recognise this and review themselves to make sure they stay engaging and relevant.

FIRST STEPS...

If you are starting out in youth ministry, here are some simple things you can do to help your youth ministry know its purpose:

- Have conversations with your leadership team, young people and corps leadership about what your values are. What are the most important things you will do? What won't you do?
- Write down all the things that your youth ministry does. What are they trying to achieve? Do they line up? How will you know if they have achieved them?
- Who is a youth leader you admire or respect? Ask them what their key values are and how they play out in their ministry.

FOCUSES ON YOUNG PEOPLE

The second characteristic of effective youth ministries we will examine is that they focus on young people (as opposed to institutional agendas). What this looks like:

- Young people have fun and invite their friends
- Young people are listened to and involved in decision-making
- They allocate resources to invest in young people
- They celebrate young people and advocate for them

EXAMPLE: PARTICIPANT 7

"They're honestly just an amazing group of kids, just really looking to build a relationship with Jesus, which is amazing. I have this spiel that I say every time we have a new person come to youth and it's always: 'This is a safe space for you. It will be whatever you make it and what you want it to be'. At the beginning of each term we sit down and say, 'how was last term? What do you wanna do again? What's something new?' It's my favourite part of each term because they speak honestly about it and it just shows that they have so much [responsibility] and they just have this pride [in the youth ministry]. 'Yeah, this is our space', and this is actually what they wanna do."

Participant 7 went on to describe how the young people not only share their ideas for activities but are purposefully involved in running each session. Sometimes they run the games or lead the discussion times. Other times they are responsible for welcoming new young people. The youth ministry has a real "for us, by us" feel.

When a youth ministry is effective **young people have fun and invite their friends**. When the research participants talked about 'fun' they described it in many ways. For some, fun is relational: "[Being] here to have fun together as a family is the priority" (Participant 14).

Many emphasised that because young people are all different, youth ministries should have different ways that young people could have fun. Ideally, this would be driven by young people, as Participant 11 describes:

"[It's about] not forcing people together. So they can come, and they can just stand in the kitchen while I'm cooking dinner, or they can go sit by the fire pit or they can go to the music room and hang out in the sound studio. Or there's an art space upstairs. They can go to the art space or they can just hang on the couches. [The program] hasn't changed because it's actually driven by them. That's what they want."

It is this sense of fun that brings new young people into connection with the youth ministry. Participant 3 shared a story that was a common theme of the interviews:

"And we have everything from kids that come to church regularly through to kids that have never set foot in church before. A lot of them are invited by other members of youth group. So, we haven't had a lot of just spontaneous coming along to youth group, most of them are invited to it. So, they're all friends of someone that's already attending."

In youth ministries that focus on young people, **young people are listened to and involved in decision-making**. Almost every youth leader we spoke to shared an example of some kind of feedback method or way of finding out from young people what they liked and wanted from youth ministry.

This is reflective of a *consultation* model of youth empowerment. However, some went further and engaged in *co-production* of youth ministry. In these settings, young people were involved in the planning and running of activities, as partners alongside youth leaders.

Focusing on young people means **allocating resources to invest in young people**. As a starting point, this was reflected in the availability of someone from the youth ministry to speak with us. They were often a staff member. However, when faith communities prioritise young people through resources, it communicates their importance.

As Participant 5 shared, "One of the key pillars of our whole church is that we deeply care about the young people of our city. And so that means, as a whole church, we will mobilise people, resources, financial resources, whatever we've got to help young people live holistically, [and] experience Jesus as well."

While this is a practice of effective youth ministries, we also heard that financial resources remain a challenge in many settings.

Finally, youth ministries focus on young people by **celebrating them and advocating for them**. Many participants shared about how the wider faith community connected with the youth ministry, including Participant 9, who told us about the "youth takeover", where young people run the church service and are celebrated by older members. We also heard about the importance of advocating for young people:

"When you see a young person who is trying to work out who they are themselves while also trying to work out where the next meal is coming from, they need someone to fight for them and they need to be able to be seen for who they are."

— Participant 13

FIRST STEPS...



If you are starting out in youth ministry, here are some simple things you can do to help your youth ministry focus on young people:

- Have a conversation or take a survey of your young people about the youth ministry. Find out what they like, what they enjoy and what they want changed.
- Ask your young people about what it would be like to invite their friends. What do they notice about what it would be like to be new to the space?
- Create a 'wall of fame' to remember and celebrate what happens at your youth ministry, to encourage young people and share the stories with other people.

PRIORITISES WELLBEING

The next characteristic of effective Salvation Army youth ministries we will examine is that they prioritise young people's wellbeing. They know they do this when:

- Young people are safe in their youth ministry
- Young people are supported with all aspects of their wellbeing
- Leaders have the skills to confidently respond to issues
- They have a system to ensure that young people's pastoral care needs are met

EXAMPLE: PARTICIPANT 11

For Participant 11, they want their youth ministry to feel like a family where everyone belongs and is safe.

Many of their young people have experienced significant challenges and need a place where they can begin to heal. The youth ministry is informed by psychological principles to be welcoming and accepting, where young people can feel comfortable and secure.

Through genuine and consistent connections, young people are encouraged to explore what is meaningful for them, to come out of their shells and find hope and joy.

Every participant told us that one of the most important things was that **young people are safe in our youth ministry**. Many described their aim to create a "safe space".

This phrase was used to encompass a range of practices and behaviours. It was sometimes meant literally — that youth ministries were physically safe and promoted safeguarding principles. It also meant that youth ministries were emotionally safe spaces, where young people felt welcomed and accepted to be themselves.

Finally, youth leaders wanted their youth ministry to be a safe space to discuss, explore ideas and even disagree.

In effective youth ministries **young people are supported with all aspects of their wellbeing**.

This meant holistic care of young people, caring about their physical, social and emotional wellbeing. Sometimes it meant food parcels, referrals to mental health services or help navigating friendships.

Participant 12 described the importance of supporting young people in their ministry:

"It's about collaboration and I think that one is something that we work well with here because I am not the expert. I'm not the knight in shining armour who can fix all. But when a young person comes in and they have everything going on for them, it's about being able to say: 'Oh yeah, that's a lot on your plate. Let's look for resources. Let's look for help together'. And helping them to be able to find what they need and if that means that we're banging on doors for however long to find the right resources, then that's what we do."

For youth ministries to prioritise wellbeing, **leaders must have the skills to confidently respond to issues**.

For some larger or more professional youth ministries, this meant having leaders who were trained in qualifications like social work, counselling or teaching. For youth ministries where this was not available, it meant finding people to help and giving leaders confidence to listen and refer.

Two leaders shared their approaches. Participant 10 told us that it was important for "leaders [to] be available and ready to talk to young people about issues in their lives or things that they're going through that they really need advice for or just a listening ear or a shoulder to lean on". Participant 16 noted that when working with vulnerable young people, training helped young people and leaders: "We would try and do as much training as we could to make sure that our leaders were aware of how they could keep young people safe but also keep themselves safe".

Finally, when youth ministries prioritise wellbeing, it means **having a system to ensure that young people's pastoral care needs are met**. This was rarely a highly formalised process. Instead, it was a general disposition and awareness of the need to check in and engage with every young person to understand what was going on in their lives.

One leader shared how they communicated this practice in their team:

"I said to leaders, 'get to know these kids, their stories'. And I said, 'there's a fair bit of stuff that's going on for these kids. Get in their lives, by asking some questions, find out about them'. And once they know their stories it grows their relationship with them. 'I need you guys all to get to know these kids and be part of their story, be part of their journey and hear what it is that's going on for them'. And then that will create that space for empathy cause you know it's not gonna be the leader's story, but that doesn't mean it's not the story for these kids, and they need investment and they need love and care, and we can do that for them."

— Participant 1



FIRST STEPS...

If you are starting out in youth ministry, here are some simple things you can do to help your youth ministry prioritise young people's wellbeing:

- Think about every young person in your ministry. Do you know what is going on in their lives? Is there space in your youth ministry for them to express that?
- Think about your physical space. Is it welcoming and inviting? How can you make it feel like 'home' for young people?
- Are there any issues your young people face that you do not know how to support? Identify these issues and then find resources or people who can support you. If you need advice, reach out to the Youth and Young Adults Ministry Team.

MISSIONALLY RESPONSIVE

The fourth characteristic of effective youth ministries that we examine is that they are missionally responsive. That means that:

- Young people are involved and contribute to mission
- Leaders and young people understand the needs of their community and look for ways to serve
- They engage with the community outside of their program/church
- They welcome and include all young people and their ministry reflects the community they are in

EXAMPLE: PARTICIPANT 9

This youth ministry is in a regional area. Like many regional communities, young people face significant hardship and need.

By building long term relationships in the community, the youth leader has been able to build trust with local families who were initially wary. They discerned what young people needed and provided activities and outlets for young people to have fun and develop skills, like cooking, surfing and farm work.

They have built community by listening in culturally appropriate ways (including visiting Aboriginal elders) and hosting gatherings and meals. By consistently showing up, they have been able to be a presence in young people's lives as they grow and develop, whatever the circumstances.

For youth ministries, being missionally responsive means **engaging with the community outside their program or church**. Almost every youth leader we spoke to described how they were in their community, making connections, serving others and being a force for good.

Given the history and mission of The Salvation Army, it is not surprising that this is the norm. Youth ministries were connected to high schools, social services, community meals, outreach vans and other organisations like clubs. For youth leaders, being in the community was not just a means to an end, a way of bringing people into the church. It was an expression of serving young people where they are and of how God is moving in their community.

To be missionally responsive, youth ministries must **understand the needs of our community and look for ways to serve**. Talking to each youth leader, it was clear they understood their neighbourhood and what issues young people faced.

Through their conversations with young people, work with community partners and, for many people, living in their communities, they knew what it was like to be a young person in their community. In responding to these needs, youth leaders emphasised the importance of long-term relationships and trust-building with partners.

They recognised that they did not know everything and could not do everything, so worked with others.

For many youth ministries, responding to the needs of young people in their community was at the heart of why they existed. For example, Participant 2 told us that:

"Our Church was originally based out of a high school. It was a social worker and a youth worker at the high school who were part of The Salvation Army who decided to plant it. And so, youth work has literally been the core of this church since the start... We are community based."

A reflection of youth ministries that are missionally responsive is that **they welcome and include all young people and their ministry reflects the community that they are in**. Youth leaders told us about the importance of creating welcoming spaces, where new young people feel comfortable and can be themselves.

One leader explained it like this:

"I'd like to say it's very like inviting and open. I think young people, I don't know if it's a culture thing, but they've just been really intentional about making sure everyone feels included. We do have young people that don't identify as male or female. We do have young people that have different sexuality and stuff like that, and actually just making sure that they know that they are loved and included in this place."

— Participant 4

If youth ministry is reaching out and engaging, they will be meeting the people who live in their neighbourhood. One participant told us about how they engaged with the culturally diverse young people of their community:

"We've also got a really good connection with two of the boarding schools [including a] boarding school which is an Indigenous college. And so, because of that, we do have quite a high Indigenous population in our youth congregation. We've also got quite a high refugee population as well because of the changing demographic of [our town]. So, in [our town] 27 per cent of all people identify as either Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, or both. So that is very well reflected in our youth congregation."

— Participant 15

Participant 15 also shared about how this cultural diversity in their youth group helped everyone feel like they could belong.

Finally, as we have noted elsewhere, youth ministry is not just what youth leaders do. In effective youth ministries **young people are involved and contribute to mission**. For many youth ministries, this means young people are the main evangelists, as described above. Other times it is about providing an avenue for young people to serve and contribute, and to show them what following Jesus looks like in practice.

Participant 11 illustrates this:

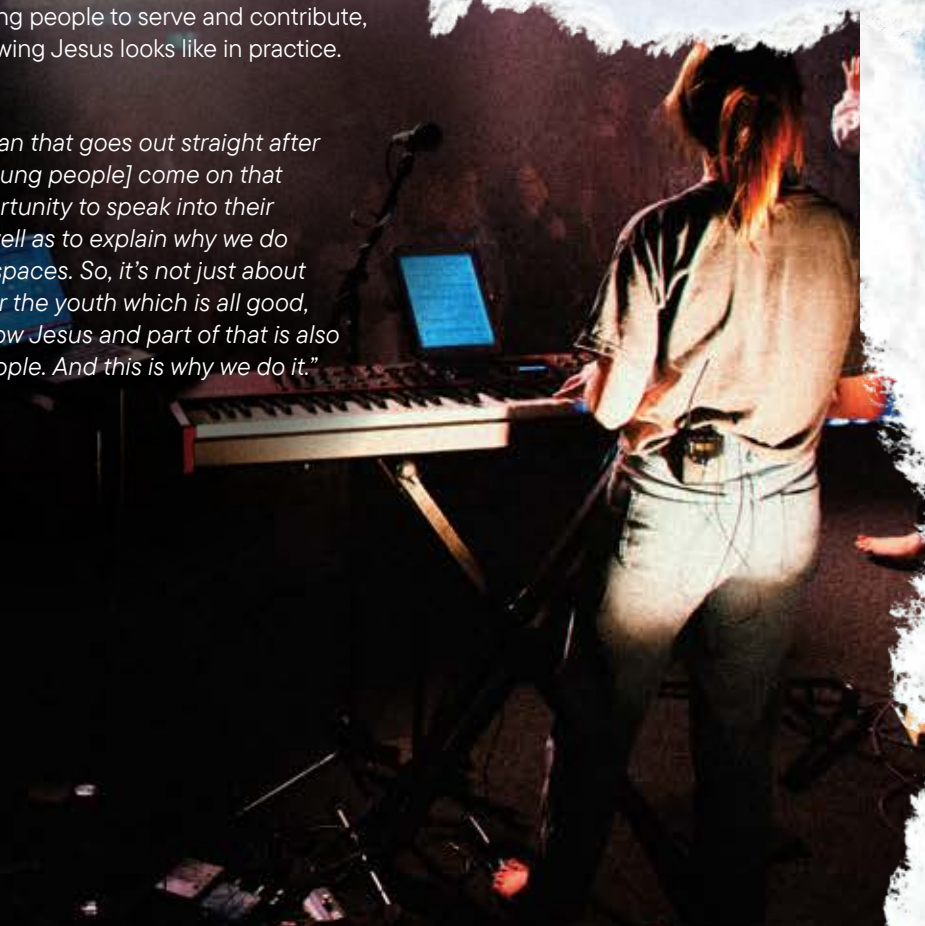
"We have the outreach van that goes out straight after youth group. A lot of [young people] come on that and that's another opportunity to speak into their lives about service, as well as to explain why we do what we do in all these spaces. So, it's not just about creating a safe space for the youth which is all good, but actually we also follow Jesus and part of that is also going to serve other people. And this is why we do it."

FIRST STEPS...



If you are starting out in youth ministry, here are some simple things you can do to help your youth ministry be missionally responsive:

- Who in your local community can help you understand the needs of young people? Often local councils have youth services that can provide insight. Arrange a catch up.
- Contact your local school wellbeing team to find out if there is any way you can support them. The Salvos Schools team can help with this.
- Who are the young people in your local community? What do you know about the cultural makeup of your community?



BUILDS RESILIENT DISCIPLES

The fifth characteristic of effective youth ministries is that they build resilient disciples. This looks like:

- Young people engaged with the story of God in Scripture
- Young people with a sense of connection with God and engaged in spiritual practices
- Young people making decisions in their lives based on their faith
- Young people with connections to leaders and the wider faith community

EXAMPLE: PARTICIPANT 4

The goal of this youth ministry is to see young people's lives transformed. Participant 4 described how they had aligned their strategy and activities to help achieve this.

They put real thought into how to share the message of Jesus with young people who had never heard it before, and how to help young people grow and develop deeper. Their preaching and bible studies were aligned to the wider corps, helping to build connection and foundations. They focused on developing young people's gifts into service and mission and helping them express their faith in their day-to-day lives.

They are confident that by the time a young person has aged out of youth ministry, they have heard and experienced enough to know what it means to follow Jesus.

In youth ministries that build resilient disciples, **young people are engaged with the story of God in Scripture**. Because many of the young people that The Salvation Army meets have not grown up as Christians, this often begins through what participants described as “gentle evangelism”. This meant working with young people in the long-term, being open about faith but not pushing agendas and trusting the Holy Spirit to work in young people's lives and prompt them to engage further.

Participant 1 articulated this principle well:

“I play the long game. My experience with a lot of those that we've seen find God is it's not making it too heavy, too early, just love them where they're at and know that you're genuine and through that genuineness the other stuff comes organically. Whereas I find if you try to have an agenda to push then they can go: ‘Oh yeah, no I'm out’. Just let them come to it in their own their own time... I think that they feel comfortable, they're gonna be the ones to be asking the questions. And then that's where I put my trust in God to go: ‘Hey God, I know you wanna work in these kids, you'll probe those questions for them to go, “hey, I feel comfortable enough to ask [my youth leader] this”, and we can chat it out.”

For this approach to work, it is important that the youth ministry and youth leaders embody what faith and God's love is like.

“For us it's love them until they ask why... And so for them to understand the love of Jesus, we have to be showing that. We can't just be like: ‘Oh here's what it is’. And then they go: ‘Well, we don't experience that’. So we try to make sure that they experience it through us; through our actions, through our words and just making sure that we love them until young people go: ‘What is different about here?’ and we go: ‘It's Jesus. This is what he's done for us and what he can do for you’.”

— Participant 6

This reflects the findings of the Your Story research, which suggested that young people are more willing to engage in faith conversations in the context of trusting and accepting relationships.

Finally, youth leaders described the role that engaging with Scripture played in helping young people understand God's story. Youth ministries looked for opportunities to share Scripture through short messages or by helping young people explore texts in groups or on their own.

To build resilient disciples, youth ministries help **young people have a sense of connection with God and engage in spiritual practices**. Youth ministries described how important it was for young people to be introduced to prayer as a normal practice of their youth group. They encouraged young people to participate and taught them how to pray when they were on their own.

Youth ministries also talked about the importance of communal experiential practices, like worship music written for young people. Given the resources of most youth ministries, this often occurred at camps or larger events, though some youth ministries held youth-focused worship services.

Finally, youth leaders told us about reflection activities like prayer stations or guided meditation that helped the presence of God feel tangible for young people.

A reflection of youth ministries building resilient disciples is that **young people make decisions in their lives based on their faith**. This means that young people's faith is not only expressed by their attendance and participation in a youth ministry, but is reflected in how they live their lives during the week and see the trajectory of their lives.

Participant 14 talked about how they geared their ministry around this principle:

“So on a Friday night it's reminding them where they're at and what tools they've got. And when they're working through something or telling me a story, I'm going: ‘OK, how are you? How is this impacting you? How's your faith a part of that story or part of that situation that you're going through?’ And it's really just about giving them the reminder that their faith is theirs and they know what to do with it.”

Other youth leaders spoke about the importance of helping young people put faith into action. Discipleship started to make sense for young people when they served others. Others talked about how they sought young people's spiritual transformation, but also transformation in their lives and relationships.

As young people were encouraged to follow Jesus, they were also supported with the challenges they faced, helped with school and work and guided in how to relate to family and friends. Following Jesus changes every part of young people's lives.

Finally, effective youth ministries help **build connections between young people and the wider faith community**. Many youth leaders reflected that this was a challenge, as the main gathering of the congregation was often not designed with young people in mind.

However, youth leaders found creative ways to build connections, like a prominent photo wall of what happens at youth ministry, sharing stories with the congregation, finding ways for young people to serve alongside adults and working to involve young people in worship services.

Even though it was sometimes difficult, youth leaders recognised the importance of building these connections:

“I'm of the firm belief that you can't grow your church in an intergenerational sense without young people. And an intergenerational church is a healthy church, in my opinion. Also, youth ministry in terms of wider church setting helps bring in new families. So it's not just teaching the youth about Jesus and about their relationship with God and discipling them, but it's getting their families discipled vicariously, both through them sharing what they've learned with their parents or their caregivers. But bringing them to church on Sunday as well.”

— Participant 15

FIRST STEPS...



If you are starting out in youth ministry, here are some simple things you can do to help your youth ministry build resilient disciples:

- Spend time in personal prayer. As we have discussed, evangelism often means listening to the prompt of the Spirit, so prepare yourself to hear.
- Add simple prayer practices to your youth ministry activities. These can look like times of silence, prayer requests or saying grace. Introduce young people to connection with God through practices they can do at home themselves.
- Check out the resources the Youth and Young Adults Ministry Team offers for discipling young people — Life Labs, Valere and PLP for High Schools. If you are looking for worship music written for young people, check out SYU (Salvos Youth United).
- Think of the next opportunity you have for young people to be involved in service or mission. How will you prepare the young people? How will you explain how these activities connect with what it means to follow Jesus?

ACTIVATES AND DEVELOPS LEADERS

The final characteristic is the area that youth leaders told us was the most difficult part of youth ministry — finding and developing leaders. For effective youth ministries this means:

- Young people have opportunities to develop their leadership skills
- They plan for new leaders and leadership transitions
- Their ministry has clear expectations for all leaders
- Their leaders are connected to a community who encourage and support each other

EXAMPLE: PARTICIPANT 5

This youth ministry has a focus on reaching young people who have been marginalised because of poverty, disability or trauma. Because of this, they have high expectations of their leaders.

“We take great care of young people. Not because we have to, but because it’s our privilege to and because they deserve it.”

They have clearly articulated values and expectations, driven by their desire to treat young people with the dignity and respect they deserve. They also have a clear plan for training and developing new leaders. They help young people to identify how they want to contribute then give them supervised opportunities to practice and develop their skills.

Using an action and reflection model, they help young leaders learn both the skills and the values of youth leadership. The team regularly gathers to support each other, as well as spending social time together. They are a community on mission.

For youth ministries, activating leadership often starts with young people. **Young people have opportunities to develop their leadership skills.**

Almost every respondent talked about the pathways for young people into leadership. This reflects a desire to help young people serve as followers of Jesus, as well as a desire to empower young people into the leadership of youth ministry aimed at them. They found ways for young people to contribute whatever their age so that they could start to develop their skills.

It was also a reflection that young people carry the culture of youth ministries as they move into the future. It is a reminder that when we consider leadership recruitment, it is not that youth ministers produce youth ministries — healthy youth ministries reproduce youth ministers.

Effective youth ministries **plan for new leaders and leadership transitions.** They have a method for recruiting and training new leaders when they arrive. Here’s two approaches:

“So we have done in the past many leadership days. So I think we’ve done three with the whole team together. Once a year, we’ll have a refresher leadership, some training or someone coming out and running some training, some values stuff with us. We have four younger leaders. I don’t like using the word younger, but fresh renewal leaders that I have done leader training with them, once every three months. We try to meet and go through this leadership curriculum I found which just goes over basic principles about how do we learn and why do we lead.”

— Participant 10

“I think development- wise, I think there’s two key areas here. There’s the spiritual development. How do we do that as a leader and what does that look like? Sometimes our guys read a book, sometimes we would read a Bible passage and then we’ll share about it or do a devotion or whatever. And then the other side is the practical development. What do you do if a young person discloses to you? How do you deal with this? What are our processes in place for this?”

— Participant 16

Effective youth ministries should also have a plan for the future. From our experience, even thriving youth ministries can be vulnerable when the youth leader changes, if there is no plan for what comes next.

One youth leader we spoke to described how they had asked a younger leader to step up and take more responsibility, with the plan that they would take over one day. By recruiting from within they were able to continue the relationships with young people and the healthy culture of the youth ministry.



When activating and developing leaders, it was important for youth ministries to have **clear expectations for all leaders.** Leaders talked about how this was necessary when working with vulnerable young people and helped them ensure they were embodying their faith (as described above).

It also made it clear what leaders were being recruited to do, as Participant 3 described:

“[I’m looking for] willingness to engage with the young people. I’d want to see someone who just naturally gravitated to having a chat with the youth and wanting to love on them, do life with them. That can make the commitment. Someone who can say: ‘Yep, I can be there’ and I can rely that they will be there. That’s a big one. And obviously, some leaders actually being able to get kids to follow or to be able to listen. So they have that level of respect among young people that they actually want to go along with whatever, or the confidence to be able to step up and give it a good go. Sometimes it’s not 100 per cent. It’s not always easy and sometimes it doesn’t matter what you do, the kids don’t [listen], but to have that level of confidence to go: ‘I’m going to give it a go and persevere and am trying to learn those skills.’”

— Participant 3

Finally, effective youth leaders were **connected to a community who encouraged and supported each other.** Youth ministry can be challenging, and working alongside others helps. Those youth leaders we spoke to who were more on their own reflected this too.

Participant 4 shared an ideal scenario:

“So at the start of every term we do have a leaders’ meeting. So our leaders generally meet every Friday. I’ll say the one really good thing is the leadership team now is actually, legitimately all friends. So at the start we will meet and just talk and hang out, grab dinner and just kind of look through the term that will be when the writing team kind of comes forward with the idea of what we’re looking at this term. And then at the end of it, we do a social event. So we’ve been to music festivals together, we’ve been to paintball, we’ve done movie nights, we’ve done restaurants, just going out for dinner.”

FIRST STEPS...



If you are starting out in youth ministry, here are some simple things you can do to help your youth ministry activate and develop leaders:

- Think about your personal expectations of yourself in youth ministry. If you are part of a team, share these with each other. Come up with a shared list.
- Imagine that you have a person keen to volunteer to help. What do you need to do to bring them on board? What do they need to know and learn?
- What training opportunities for youth leaders do you know about? Ask the Youth and Young Adults Ministry Team about what is available in your area.



O PRAISE THE NAME OF THE LORD OUR GOD
O PRAISE HIS NAME FOREVERMORE

CONCLUSION

In this report we have examined six key characteristics of effective Salvation Army youth ministries, as described by frontline practitioners:

- Knows its purpose
- Focuses on young people
- Prioritises wellbeing
- Is missionally responsive
- Builds resilient disciples
- Activates and develops leaders

It is important to note that while we have separated these characteristics to explore them, they often overlap and work together. For example, youth ministries that are responsive to the needs of their community will often act to assist young people's wellbeing.

Ministries that know their purpose are better able to recruit and develop leaders, because they understand what their essence is. Similar connections can be found for all the characteristics. As you seek to develop each characteristic in your youth ministry, others will grow as well.

We would encourage you to think through how these characteristics are expressed in your youth ministry.

- What do you do well?
- What do young people appreciate about your space?
- Where are you seeing God move?
- As you seek to develop and improve, what from this list is an opportunity to grow?
- Who can you learn from?

The final pages of this report are a reflection tool to help you and your team work through each characteristic and the practices that reflect them. The Youth and Young Adults Ministry Team can help you use this as a tool to evaluate your youth ministry and remain accountable for the goals you set.

We conclude this report by expressing our thanks to the youth leaders who participated in the research and shared their stories. We also thank everyone who is ministering to young people in The Salvation Army. We know that it can be difficult and challenging work. But we also know the difference that youth ministry can make, as expressed by participant 14.

"Young people have drastically changed the outlook that they thought they had. They grew up seeing their parents be one way and because of youth group, because of their faith, because of church or the relationships they have here at the Salvos, they've moved onto higher things. They've aimed higher than they were. We had some kids go through some pretty traumatic stuff as high schoolers, and now they're really functioning adults living and supporting themselves. And at this time in life, at this time of the world, that's pretty impressive. So youth ministry makes a huge difference. It gives them the tools to rely on God and drive a little bit bigger and have a say in the things that they want in life. So it's pretty cool to look back at who came through youth ministry with me and graduated and moved on and go: 'Where are they in comparison to where they were or what they were thinking their life would look like?'"

We know that Salvation Army youth ministries all over the country are making this kind of difference, and hope this report will be an encouragement.

PRACTICES OF EFFECTIVE YOUTH MINISTRY

FOCUSES ON YOUNG PEOPLE

Rate your youth ministry on how it 'Focuses on young people'	weak1234strong5					Support your responses with specific stories or examples:
Young people are listened to and involved in decision-making						
Young people have fun and invite their friends						
We allocate resources to invest in young people						
We celebrate young people and advocate for them						

Vitality marker index	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Give a value out of 10 as an indication of the youth ministry's demonstration of how it 'Focuses on young people'										

KNOWS ITS PURPOSE

Rate your youth ministry on how well it 'Knows its purpose'	weak1234strong5					Support your responses with specific stories or examples:
Leaders and young people can articulate why the ministry exists						
The activities of our youth ministry achieve our purpose						
Our ministry's values are reflected in our behaviour						
We regularly review how our strategy is meeting the needs of young people						

Vitality marker index	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Give a value out of 10 as an indication of the youth ministry's demonstration of how well it 'Knows its purpose'										

BUILDS RESILIENT DISCIPLES

Rate your youth ministry on how well it 'Builds resilient disciples'	weak1234strong5					Support your responses with specific stories or examples:
	1	2	3	4	5	
Young people are engaged with the story of God in Scripture						
Young people have a sense of connection with God and engage in spiritual practices						
Young people make decisions in their lives based on their faith						
Young people have connections with leaders and the wider faith community						

Vitality marker index	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Give a value out of 10 as an indication of the Youth Ministry's demonstration of how it 'Builds Resilient Disciples'										

PRIORITISES WELLBEING

Rate your youth ministry on how well it 'Prioritises wellbeing'	weak1234strong5					Support your responses with specific stories or examples:
	1	2	3	4	5	
Young people are safe in our youth ministry						
Young people are supported with all aspects of their wellbeing						
Leaders have the skills to confidently respond to issues						
We have a system to ensure that young people's pastoral care needs are met						

Vitality marker index	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Give a value out of 10 as an indication of the youth ministry's demonstration of how it 'Prioritises wellbeing'										

IS MISSIONALLY RESPONSIVE

Rate your youth ministry on how well it 'Is missionally responsive'	weak 1234strong 5					Support your responses with specific stories or examples:
Young people are involved and contribute to mission						
Leaders and young people understand the needs of our community and look for ways to serve						
We engage with the community outside of our program/church						
We welcome and include all young people and our ministry reflects the community we are in						

Vitality marker index	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Give a value out of 10 as an indication of the youth ministry's demonstration of how it 'Is missionally responsive'										

ACTIVATES AND DEVELOPS LEADERS

Rate your youth ministry on how well it 'Activates and develops leaders'	weak 1234strong 5					Support your responses with specific stories or examples:
Young people have opportunities to develop their leadership skills						
Our ministry has clear expectations for all leaders						
We plan for new leaders and leadership transitions						
Our leaders are connected to a community that encourages and supports each other						

Vitality marker index	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Give a value out of 10 as an indication of the youth ministry's demonstration of how it 'Activates and develops leaders'										



Scan for more information