

Youth ministry isn't about fun

How one youth leader stopped being a chief counselor of fun and discovered something better.

by [Andrew Root](#) in the [March 25, 2020](#) issue



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I am sitting in a nondescript church fellowship hall, attending a gathering of the church's youth group. Over the next hour, three people—a man in his fifties, a woman in her early thirties, a boy in tenth grade—get up and tell stories. Their stories all are in response to the same text—Matthew 19:16–30, the story of the rich young ruler—and the same prompt, “Tell about a time when the good was a difficult or confusing surprise.”

As the stories unfold, music, laughter, tears, and friendship encase the stories as much as the four walls of the fellowship hall. It's a beautiful example of a youth ministry that is much more than an adolescent religious holding pen.

In the final 15 minutes, the youth group leader, whom I'll call J, laces these three stories together, drawing people deeper into the biblical text. She focuses in on the rich young ruler calling Jesus "good" and Jesus telling him that only God is good. She then invites the room to gather into groups of three or four, making sure each group has at least one young person and one not-so-young person. In the groups, participants end the night by praying for one another.

J and I have agreed to talk afterward. She motions me to a table. To my surprise a young woman joins her. As we sit, J says, "This is Lorena. She's in twelfth grade." I'm not sure why Lorena has joined us, but I'm happy to meet her.

I start with the obvious, asking, "What made you think of this kind of gathering?"

J starts by giving me context. "About two years ago, I was days from quitting as youth minister 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.* I'd been the chief counselor of fun that summer.

"And so this church seemed like a perfect fit. The church wanted someone who'd create events and an overall program that kids would find fun. The idea was that if young people were having fun, then they'd have positive feelings about church and stick around."

"I could see that," I say.

"But nine months into it, it started eating me up," J continues. "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.

"'Make it fun,' they said. As if fun were freedom, not a chain."

"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."

"So what happened?"

"*She* did," J says, pointing to Lorena.

"What did you do?" I asked Lorena.

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

J 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."

"If youth ministry isn't for fun—because you watched Lorena almost die—then what is youth ministry for?" I ask.

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

Youth ministry is for joy, I say silently to myself. Over the past 15 years of teaching and writing, I've focused on the cross and the experience of suffering. Lorena almost died, and J nearly burned out, but when they say what youth ministry is for, they don't say *support* or *commiseration* but *joy*.

"Youth ministry is for joy," I repeat. "Why did you use the word *joy*? Clearly you've talked about it. And I know it's a biblical word, but it isn't a word we usually use, particularly connected to youth ministry."

"It's the best word we have for the experience of transformation," Lorena says.

J takes up that theme. "The more I was failing at youth ministry, the more people were sending me to popular youth ministry sites and conferences, which took me farther away from this deep sense of transformation. Some even talked about transformation, but it was really all about what you did and what you got kids to do . . . which only made me *more* burned out and tired."

"*That's* when I came in!" Lorena interrupts, with a fragile confidence, breaking the tense moment with some silly humor.

J laughed. "It is! When Lorena got sick, everything changed. And not only with our youth ministry, but with me, with the whole church. We started to witness real transformation."

Moving to the edge of my seat, I ask, "What did your youth ministry look like? What did you do? What changed?"

"We didn't *do* anything, really. That's why it was joy, because it came as a pure gift, not as something we did," J responds. "We had a sick kid, not a program or strategy."

"You didn't do anything?" I ask, not sure that could be true.

"No, you're right," J says. "We did start doing a lot of things, but that wasn't the point. We could only get to joy when we focused more on receiving."

Trying to push the conversation forward, I ask her how intergenerational storytelling had become part of the youth group. She takes me back to the day she found out that Lorena was sick.

"I remember when Lorena's mom called and told me she was in the hospital. Lorena had been sick for over a week and a half. Her mom was keeping me up to date because this big, fun youth group outing was coming up. I'll never forget that, because I was so stressed about the buses and just making sure everything was fun. I felt like that event would make or break me at the church. If kids had fun, I'd keep my job. But then, after that phone call, I just didn't care anymore."

"We just thought it was flu or something," Lorena adds. "I could barely even walk into the doctor's office. I just felt so dizzy and weak. Next thing I knew, two doctors were there. They did some other stuff to me. Finally, one doctor said to my mother, 'OK, Mrs. Martinez, we're going to have an ambulance take your daughter to children's hospital; we need to go very quickly.'"

Jumping in, J says, "I met them at the hospital. Finally, the doctors came out to give us an update. They said they hoped they caught the infection just in time, but they wouldn't be sure for the next few days. They'd need to keep Lorena unconscious to see how she reacted and allow her body the ability to respond to the meds. And it could be as much as a week or so before they knew if Lorena would recover."

“Youth ministry is for joy. It invites young people to focus on the good. Joy is finding it.”

J continues, “What I’ll never forget is Lorena’s mom repeating back to the doctors, ‘If? If? If she recovers?’ The doctors told us even if things took a positive turn, it would be months until she was well enough to go back to school. We were now stuck waiting. Lorena’s mom was kind of furiously defiant; she sat down and said she wouldn’t leave the hospital until Lorena did.”

“And that’s when I stopped doing youth group,” J adds.

I’m moved by the story, and it gives me important perspective, but I really can’t see how it shifts things from happiness and fun to joy and transformation. So I ask, “How is this all connected to joy?”

“Maybe it was the stress of the moment or all the Diet Coke I was drinking,” J says, “but I started to notice how often people were referring to ‘good.’ The doctors and nurses used the word many times: ‘It’s not a good situation,’ ‘It’s good we caught it now,’ ‘We’ll see what her blood tests show; then we’ll know how good our chances are.’ Lorena’s mom just sat in a chair holding my hand for the first hour, repeating, ‘This isn’t good.’ And when we finally did get to see Lorena through the window, unconscious and all covered up and hooked up to machines, I found myself saying, ‘This isn’t good.’ When I said that, all these Bible verses started coming to my mind. ‘And God called it good’ ‘It isn’t good for the human to be alone,’ ‘For every good and perfect gift comes from above,’ and Jesus saying, ‘Why do you call me good?’”

“That’s the text you used tonight,” I insert.

“It is,” J says. “Focusing on the good has become central to our ministry. I’d actually say that youth ministry is for joy, because youth ministry invites young people to focus on the good, and only God is good. *Joy is when you find the good.*”

At the hospital, J wrote an email to all the parents, called her youth ministry board, and sent a group text to all the kids. With Lorena’s mom’s permission, she informed them of what Lorena was facing, asked for their prayers, and said if they needed her, she’d be where God had called her, sitting next to Lorena’s mom.

Within an hour Lorena’s two closest friends and their moms showed up. When they arrived, J explained the situation and asked them all to simply sit with Lorena’s mom

and pray silently. They did so for a few hours. Then, after getting Lorena's mom some food, they left, only to be replaced by others. By the next day, every young person who'd signed up for the big fun event—and more who hadn't—made it down to the hospital to sit and pray, feeling the pull of the Good to be together.

What was even more amazing is that not only did the high school kids show up but other people from the congregation did as well. Kids and adults were now sitting together in the waiting room, praying and talking. Together they were following Jesus to the cross, seeking the good by sharing in the ministry of God, who comes near in a death experience, calling us into communion through it.

To J's surprise, on the afternoon of day two, Bernard showed up. As a matter of fact, over the next week Bernard was as present as anyone. It was beautiful but weird. He was a member of the church. That's how he found out about the custodian job there. But besides making it to worship once in a while, he wasn't around the community much. J would only later learn that he was a faithful member of a Tuesday morning Bible study and a committed participant in the church's AA group. However, none of the young people except Tannon really knew him.

Tannon was a senior who worked five to eight hours a week at the church, helping Bernard move tables and prepare the Sunday school rooms on Sunday afternoons for the coming week of preschool. Tannon was a good but direct kid. He had no problem asking difficult questions and pointing out things he found odd or misdirected.

When Tannon made it to the hospital, Bernard was in the middle of his second six-hour stint in the waiting room. He hadn't said much but just quietly sat across from Lorena's mom, listening in as kids and other church members talked and prayed. He'd become the soda runner those first few days, intent on keeping Lorena's mom and J fueled on Diet Coke. J would be lying if she didn't admit that she'd wondered more than a dozen times why Bernard was there.

But soon that all became clear. And when it did, it changed everything for the next few days at the hospital, and from that point on, for the whole church. When Tannon arrived and saw Bernard, he sat down next to him and respectfully but loudly asked, "Why are you here?" Tannon and Bernard had spent enough time together for Bernard to not take offense. The two had built their relationship around direct talk. More than a few times Bernard had pushed Tannon to work harder and take more

responsibility, even calling him back to church twice after 10:00 p.m. to redo his inadequate work from earlier in the afternoon.

Nevertheless, when Tannon asked Bernard why he was at the hospital, it sounded confrontational. Everyone seemed to freeze, holding their breath, not sure what would happen next.

Bernard looked at Tannon and said, "Twenty years ago, my baby girl died of something like this. And I wasn't there. I was high."

The vacuum created by Tannon's question was now filled with something else. Already frozen people froze stiffer, not knowing how to react.

Then Lorena's mom, who had been in a kind of dazed state, snapped back into the moment, looked directly at Bernard, and said, "What happened?"

And so Bernard told the story—all of it. When he finished, something remarkable occurred. For the next two hours different people, mainly adults, shared stories of loss, regret, forgiveness, and hope that most of the young people had never heard. People cried and people laughed; young people hung on every word. Tannon's direct question created an opening that was now filled with a spirit of communion, in and through the confession of the cross.

J tells me she remembers vividly thinking to herself, *Now, this is good*. "It wasn't good, like, *Oh, good, this will distract people! or It will be good to get some happiness and fun back in this hospital waiting room!* It was just stand-alone good. It was good to be together. It was good how the stories revealed and connected us. It was just good." She pauses and then says, "I looked around at everyone's faces while people were telling these stories, kids and adults sharing in each others' lives, experiencing God's work together. I remember this was the first time I thought to myself, *Youth ministry is for joy.*"

After Bernard talked, a woman named Kathy spoke up. Kathy was the mother of Nikki, one of the girls in the youth group. She was also the most vocal critic of the youth group. J said she couldn't help thinking that Kathy had come to the hospital to offer another criticism of the program. But Kathy said, "I had an experience like that."

Kathy went on to share a story of loss and Jesus' presence in it. Two years before Nikki was born, Kathy had a miscarriage. Rushing to the hospital while working late one night, she tried to save her unborn child. But it was too late. "Crushed, I sat in an empty waiting room not unlike this one, waiting for Nikki's dad to come pick me up. I was overwhelmed, not only because I had lost this baby but also because it was such a struggle for us to get pregnant at all. I was sure it would never happen, and my dream of being a mom was turned into a nightmare."

Everyone was now hanging on Kathy's every word. It was the first time J had ever seen anything close to vulnerability in her. Bernard's story somehow awakened her to share.

Kathy continued, "When that all hit me, for some weird reason I stood up, covered my face, and started sobbing really hard. Next thing I knew, I felt some stranger touch my shoulder and comfort me. It was an old woman. She said, 'Sweetheart, truly, truly, I say to you, you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice. You will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will turn into joy.' That just made me cry harder, because it was a verse my grandmother used to quote when she talked about my mom being born. She struggled with infertility too. My knees buckled and I almost fell to the ground. I caught myself and sat down. I couldn't believe she quoted that verse. I asked her how she knew I needed to hear that verse, how she knew how precious those words were to my grandmother. She said, 'I don't know, the Holy Spirit just led me. I guess Jesus wanted me here; I thought I had some blood clots, so I came to the hospital, but it looks like Jesus wanted me to be with you.'"

"Whoa!" Tannon said.

Stepping out of the story, J says to me, "I remember feeling so drawn to Kathy's words about joy. 'Sorrow turned to joy.' I realized, sitting in that hard chair, that joy comes from the sharing of sorrow. Joy is this incredible experience of sorrow being shared, leading us into a community of love. That's what I was experiencing, the pure gift of sorrow being shared. I remember thinking to myself, *Yeah, it's true. Youth ministry is for joy because youth ministry is about creating a space for stories and moments of sharing that open us up to something big.*"

We sit in silence for a few seconds, and I think about the ramifications of J's words. I then ask, "What happened next with Kathy's story? I'm with Tannon—it's wild that the old woman used that verse."

J continues, “Kathy then told us the old woman sat with her, holding her hand until Kathy’s husband showed up. Kathy said, ‘We exchanged numbers. I don’t know why; it seems weird now. But she started to call me, and then we started to meet to pray together. When I got pregnant again, she was the first person I called, because I was both so happy and so scared. We prayed together every week through the whole pregnancy. I just had this sense that God was leading me through. I’ll never forget when Nikki was born, seeing her hold Nikki, crying and praying for her. That’s why she’s Nikki, because in a waiting room like this God sent me Nichole Hunmurray, to pray for me, to see me through and bless us with our Nichole Marie Mattson.’”

J tells me that a silence came over everyone. After a minute, Kathy breathed in deep and said, “That’s why I came today, why I wanted Nikki to be here. In a very weird way, waiting rooms are holy places to me. I’d somehow gotten myself disconnected from that experience, but when I heard Lorena was in the hospital, I knew I needed to be here.” Kathy paused and then said, “I never intended to tell that story until Bernard told his, but I know it’s why I’m here.”

J says to me, “I thought to myself, *I want my youth ministry to be a waiting room like this one. A place where we share stories and are open to something bigger that ushers us into joy.*”

So what happened after Lorena was released from the hospital? How did the experience in the waiting room continue, or did it?

“Oh, it continued; it continued by waiting. One of the kids—I can’t remember who—actually started calling our midweek gathering the Waiting Room. Actually that’s now its official name. That’s what you were at. One of them even made up some T-shirts. Like I said, I stopped doing youth group in the waiting room, but I wanted to continue having young people wait with adults, sharing their burdens with one another as an experience of joy.”

“But what were you waiting for?” I find myself asking.

“Well, at the start we were waiting for Lorena. When she left the hospital, she was still pretty much bedridden for the next almost ten weeks. That was super hard for her. She was missing a bunch of school activities and other important stuff. But it was even harder on her mom, who needed to work. She’s a single mom, and it just wasn’t an option to take more time off. She pushed that as far as she could when Lorena was in the hospital. So we thought of ourselves as gathering together to wait

for Lorena to return to us.”

J continues, “But in a crazy way that waiting moved us to do something: the more we were directly waiting for Lorena, thinking about her, the more we felt we had to do something for her. Next thing we knew, kids, parents, and a bunch of other adults from the church were helping Lorena and her mom out. Waiting for her together moved us into action, to do ministry. It was like the waiting ordained so many in our church to share in Lorena and her mom’s life by being there for them, by sharing in their burdens. Joy started to spread across our congregation. And that really changed our whole church.”

We pause for a second, and J continues, “But the Waiting Room became something else as well, which I guess is what really gave it its name. Right after Lorena went home, we all had this feeling that we’d experienced something important together. We just wanted to be together. But I had no time to plan anything, so I decided we’d just hang out. But the crazy thing is we just kept talking about Bernard’s and Kathy’s stories.”

J’s last comment intrigues me. I’m glad to hear that I wasn’t the only one who couldn’t shake those stories.

“The young people wanted to explore further what the stories could mean,” J explains. “We became detectives in mystery. We had these amazing deep discussions about the meaning of life, purpose, and God in and through trying to discern what these stories meant for us, what they said about life. As the weeks passed, I started to read a biblical verse or two, and we’d connect it to these stories.

“Finally, one of them suggested we keep the Waiting Room going by inviting other people to come and tell their stories. It was like the young people now thirsted for stories, to get inside them and wrestle with them. It was like they needed more stories to figure out what made life worth living, who they could be in this world, and how God was acting. And since then it’s now become a whole church thing. So I started inviting other adults from the church to tell their stories. The Waiting Room is now a multigenerational storytelling time when we together seek for God, experiencing something good together through trying to find meaning and purpose inside our stories.”

“Man, that’s cool” is all I can muster in response. Pausing, I add, “I bet that has changed your own sense of your job.”

“One hundred eighty degrees,” J quickly responds. “It actually felt like an amazing liberation. In the hospital waiting room, I quit being the lead counselor of fun and trying to build a successful youth group. So it’s kind of amazing that we now have the Waiting Room every week. It reminds me of what I’m called to, of how God came to me and put one vocation to death, giving me the amazing joy of another. So the waiting room was not only the place where I buried J the lead counselor of fun, but the Waiting Room was also where I was given a new youth ministry life, a new vocation.”

“What’d that look like?” I ask.

“I found myself spending more time with adults, coaching them in storytelling. I started learning about storytelling, both its mechanics and its theological importance. I started reading more, looking for stories, aware that the stories that connect us to something bigger often start in loss that’s shared, leading to joy. I found myself spending more free time just being with young people, listening more than talking. Rested more than exhausted. I found myself in spiritual direction, being kids’ and adults’ spiritual director. Someone who set the table and invited the whole congregation into reflecting and probing for God’s work in our lives.”

We pause again. An odd, potentially tangential question comes to my mind. “What about Nikki? What happened to her?”

J’s eyes grow wide. Then she shoots back, “Oh, that’s crazy. She started showing up like every week. I couldn’t believe it. When it was regular youth group that was about fun, she wanted nothing to do with it. But once the Waiting Room started, she’d show up early.”

“Did you ever ask her why?”

“I did, mainly because I was worried that she felt weird about people talking about her mom’s story. And then because we invited both Bernard and Kathy to come to one of those early Waiting Rooms so we could talk deeper about what they experienced. So I asked Nikki if this was all OK, or if it felt weird.”

“What did she say?”

“She said it felt weird but good.”

This article is adapted from Andrew Root's The End of Youth Ministry?, just published by Baker Academic. A version of it appears in the print edition under the title "Youth ministry isn't about fun."