



# TIME OUT FOR

# LIFE TOGETHER

**One youth group's bold experiment in creating a community of grace.** ERIK STROM

**T**he high-school students I work with have an incredible array of opportunities. They take Advanced Placement courses, compete in state championships, and participate in arts programs that perform at the highest levels. They learn, compete, and grow in environments that are rigorous and well-resourced. Most would call them privileged.

But many of the adolescents in my community struggle to find their place in a fast-paced world. A wealth

of opportunities can translate into intense pressure to perform. Some of our students average five hours of sleep per night. Participation in athletic competitions requires a year-round commitment from an early age. Their days are time-crunched. Adult relationships can be defined by agendas and high expectations.

While the students I work with are grateful for the resources they have access to, they also long for more life-giving rhythms. "For most young people the Christian life is just as stressful



high-school junior, and I were tossing a Frisbee back and forth in the church parking lot one sunny afternoon last fall. As we relished the gift of a few minutes of down time together, Sam talked about how much he craved

ideas quickly enough. Our plan was to carve out three days to share life together. Our shared space would be at church where we would begin and end our days together.

It would be a risk. We were choos-

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such unstructured time and space. We began to ask each other why such spontaneous encounters were so unusual in our own community of faith. Why did our connections—even within youth group—tend to be limited to programmed gatherings?

I remembered a conversation with a fellow youth pastor, Julie Musselman, who had guided her high-school ministry at the Evangelical Covenant Church of Princeton, Illinois, through a week of intentional living after CHIC 2009. Encouraged by her cre-

ing to make space for our young people’s desire to create and imagine with their faith rather than simply consume it as a Sunday-school lesson. I have to admit that at first I thought they were simply enticed by the idea of an epic lock-in. Were they envisioning three days of nonstop games, junk food, and fun? I’m not a big proponent of that classic youth ministry event—perhaps my reluctance had starved our youth group of lock-ins to the point that they were willing to do anything to make one happen!



**Students not only ate together, they prepared the food and cleaned-up afterwards.**

as the rest of modern life—harried Sunday mornings, clock-run worship services, program-packed youth meetings,” writes former youth pastor Mark Yaconelli in his book *Growing Souls*. He continues, “Today’s young people are being raised in a time-famine. There are few adults who have the time to sit, listen, talk with, and be amazed by young people. How are young people to mature if they are virtually never given unstructured time among adults?”

It was in such a context that Sam, a

activity, I wondered if such an experiment would be possible in our own community.

When I mentioned the idea to Sam he was enthusiastic, so we decided to see what the rest of the group would think. What if we decided to try to live intentionally as a community for a few days, centered on Christ and his kingdom values?

The response from the rest of the group was telling: once we began dreaming, I couldn’t write down their

Maybe they didn’t care at all about this counter-cultural kingdom of God stuff. Maybe the buzz would fade as soon as I pushed them to consider not only *if* we could make an experience like this happen, but *why* and *how* it would connect to being lifelong followers of Jesus.

But to my delight, their excitement

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# HER

not only persisted—it grew. Our ministry’s committed group of volunteers were enthusiastic as well. Our high-school ministry has a team of eight counselors, a mix of young marrieds, singles, college students, and seminary students who give immense amounts of time to the kids. I knew I would rely significantly on their help in all areas of planning—before and during the event.

For months leading up to the event, the whole youth group—students and volunteers—prepared for the experience by considering various aspects of our culture and delving into the wisdom of Scripture. Watching a film about bullying helped us consider the

like to be people who are radically welcoming, even though all around us we see evidence of hostility, verbal and physical violence, and reasons to create boundaries for who’s “in” and who’s “out”? Have we become convinced that we are destined to be blind consumers? What if we already have all that we need—and instead need to learn how to steward the abundant resources among us? Gradually we came to share a common spirit regarding what we were setting out to do, or better yet, who we were setting out to be.

As we began to create a plan, I challenged our group to think about how the kingdom of Jesus intersected

Our goal was to create space for our students to build relationships with older adults and listen to the stories of their walk with Christ.

We asked each host to think of an activity that was unique to who they are or what they love that could help the students actively engage in listening to their stories. About ten participants were at each home, and groups did everything from constructing golf putters, to playing ukuleles and guitars, to playing games and sharing food. This wasn’t the first time we had gone into church members’ homes—but it was the first time we had connected such an activity with a larger event like the life together experiment.



need for the church to be a place of welcome to the outcast. During our Sunday evening meetings, we focused on Sabbath, slowly reading Scripture together and learning how to expect God to be present in each moment of our lives. A documentary on the big business of marketing to adolescents challenged us to consider how our conformity to this world can hinder Christ’s work in us to transform it. We talked about the uniqueness of our gifts, and the reality that we each have a vocation in God’s kingdom—connecting our deep longings and the world’s deep needs. In all of this, we regularly returned to the question of *what would be different* when it came to our life together experiment.

We asked a lot of questions. How could we be a community of grace and Sabbath when our culture draws so much of our attention to success and performance? What would it look

with each element of our experience. It quickly became clear that living as a community would require some structure. To ensure that everyone had the time to accomplish daily homework, get enough sleep, and still make space for down time and conversation, prayer and worship, meals and play, we would need a plan.

### Planning a “Life Together” Experiment

First, we did not want to schedule lots of activities or a big event during our experiment. We decided to begin the experiment on a Sunday evening, our usual meeting time, and we would conclude as we joined the rest of the congregation for soup dinner and our Ash Wednesday worship service.

Rather than starting out at church, we divided into small groups and went out into the homes of three different older members of our congregation.

I consistently hear students say that this was one of the more memorable experiences of their years in youth group—I’m sure, because of the gracious and loving welcome they may have been surprised to receive from an adult in the community whom they didn’t know very well beforehand.

Afterward, each group returned to church with a palpable excitement. We welcomed one another into the next step of our set-apart time with a simple worship gathering in the sanctuary. We adapted a prayer from Shane Claiborne’s book *Common Prayer*, praying in unison that the God of creation would “create in us a new rhythm of life.” Then we took time to bless one another by naming gifts we saw in each other. We read Colossians 3:12-17, which we had chosen as the theme to focus our time together: “And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of

**In the evenings,  
students gathered to  
do their homework.**

the Lord Jesus” (v. 17, TNIV). And we settled in for our first night of sleep.

Details—like where to sleep and eat and do homework—were a significant aspect of this project. While we tried to keep things as simple as possible, there were still quite a few logistics in planning for forty people to live together for a few days. For one, I worked closely with church staff to reconfigure church spaces. We had rooms designated for sleeping, homework, spiritual disciplines, eating, and common space. The church community had to be flexible enough to alter meeting areas for our many activities for a few days, and the youth group had to be ready to help meet the needs of groups we were displacing because of our presence. Our volunteers gathered supplies, coordinated carpools to school, planned meals, and mobilized families to provide ingredients. My wife and three small children were also excited to fully immerse themselves in the community.

Our earliest discussions with students quickly turned to the question of “Where will we shower?!” Yet when we reconsidered the purpose of the experience and considered the realities of brothers and sisters throughout the world who go without conveniences that we enjoy each day, most agreed that forgoing a daily shower was a small and rather easy luxury to give up. Others who had sports practice after school simply used the school facilities or made a quick stop at home.

We spent lots of time as a youth group beforehand thinking through each element of the week. I tried to give as much ownership as I could to the students, letting them discover and work through the details. Mealtimes were especially important. We thought about how much Jesus emphasized eating together in his daily life and the fact that he made it a sacramental act with his disciples. We wanted to make our meals with our own hands, yet we wanted them to be simple enough to



not take all our time. So we made up a menu for the week, with ingredient lists, and designated items for each student to bring. We also identified cooks and cleaners beforehand, so we could all enjoy mealtimes together.

Since some students had to travel quite a distance and others had to get to school very early, we set breakfast for 6 a.m. Though groggy, students made their way down to breakfast each morning without complaint. We shared a meal together that inevitably brought out some laughter and encouragement. We ended breakfast with a devotion led by a student or leader. Several students commented afterward that starting their day together with Scripture was a powerful part of the experiment. The stories and the passages they shared together in the morning stayed with them throughout the day and became a source of encouragement that drew them back together in the afternoon. Dinner each night was like a mini-reunion, as each of us arrived back “home,” welcomed back into life together. We’d check in, tell stories, laugh, and talk about what homework and group plans lay ahead for the evening.

Privacy and alone-time was another consideration that we tried to address in our early conversations. We didn’t want to make this an extrovert-only event, so we talked about our needs for space and time alone (of those in need of this, I was surely one!), and made it clear that finding

that sort of time was important. One way was to engage in the spiritual disciplines stations that we set up in the church narthex. This was a set-apart area where students could be still, spend some directed time in solitude, read Scripture, respond with art, or journal a story of God’s work in their lives. Additionally, there were plenty of nooks and crannies throughout the church for students to find a place for reading or some personal space.

As part of our desire to be better stewards of God’s creation, a number of students and adult leaders helped build a wood and wire compost bin for the church’s many vegetable and fruit scraps, egg shells, and coffee grounds. Most of all, we tried to spend our time just being with one another.

### **Getting Everyone on Board**

Because this was a more unconventional youth ministry experience, I knew from the beginning that getting both parents and the broader church on board would be important steps, requiring care and clear communication. While most students were immediately enthusiastic, responses from parents and other church members initially ranged from supportive to more reserved to pretty skeptical. I can remember a few early reports from students whose parents were concerned about how and when homework and sleep would happen. On the other hand, some parents were very excited and immediately loved

the idea, wanting to know how they could help.

Seeking to address parents on a range of enthusiasm levels, I drew on the trust established over the past four years as their youth pastor, as well as some carefully drafted communications to parents to help win them over to the concept. The students had discovered early on that we would need some structure in order to live in community, so we spent time developing a schedule and plan that would allow adequate time and space for all involved, and I made sure to send that off to parents well enough in advance to allow room for questions. In my letters to parents, I also made sure to talk at length about why we were doing this, what it had to do with the students' formation in Christ, and I invited them to drop by at any time.

Finally, it was important to me that participation not take on a legalistic feel in any way; to that end, we talked often about encouraging presence to the degree desired and possible for each individual. We wished to acknowledge that we all come with a different set of demands on our lives and we hoped for a common acceptance of one another's limitations. For example, some students stayed one night or two, while others stayed all three nights. Some students had practice after school, so they came late, ate leftovers, and caught up with us when they were able. Most students chose to set aside personal technology, but a few needed to make a call or two during the week. The idea was to encourage full participation at each person's ability and desire.

### **A Different Way of Living**

Everything about our experiment went smoothly on the surface, but I wasn't entirely sure if it had all been just a lot of fun or if it had been something truly formative. My own personal attempt to slow down wasn't exactly a success. In fact, it was one of



**The life together experiment included time for sharing, singing, and worship.**

the most exhausting stretches of days I'd had in a long time. Getting three small children to sleep in their own beds can be difficult as it is—let alone being in a different place with gobs of cool high-school students around who wanted to play with them all the time! I struggled to manage all my other responsibilities and still be fully present with our community in the way that I wanted to be. In the midst of my tiredness, I began to doubt that God was doing much of anything lasting among our group.

So on Tuesday night during our evening worship I asked the group to reflect on how they may have grown over the past few days. I was humbled by their responses.

"I learned how to live in community with Christ at the center."

"I'm really busy, and it was so hard to slow down."

"I liked living more present to the little moments, like making food."

"Living together made me realize that I want to work on my relationship with my parents."

"I noticed my days were so much longer since I wasn't on Facebook or TV."

"It seemed like everyone was my sibling."

"I loved starting my day with God's word—and how it would stay with me."

"I enjoyed hearing others' testimonies, and that people were honest enough to be real about what's hard or how they're hurting."

"This taught me how to mesh my two worlds."

"I liked being part of something larger than me."

"I loved sharing average time."

"It felt good to be responsible for someone beside myself."

"We should stay the rest of the week too."

In youth ministry (and in the larger church) we often succumb to the need to be purpose-driven, high-energy, slick, and entertaining. We so long for our young people to experience the reality of Christ's love for them that sometimes we think they'll bristle at the suggestion that Jesus conceived a radically different, upside-down, counter-cultural way of living together. We grow anxious that our children will leave the church if things aren't fun enough or if each moment isn't programmed with excellence. We are tempted to fabricate for them a passion for Christ that has more to do with entertainment than real encounter with their Creator.

Our life together experiment challenged our students to learn how to mesh the world of their faith with the world of their daily life. It served as a sort of "everyday faith" foil to the mountaintop and landmark experiences of youth retreats and Bible camp.

In my work I see young people who long for authentic relationships with adult believers, not programs to inspire them. Our teenagers do not ultimately want the largest youth group in town, the coolest youth room, or a charismatic and funny speaker as their youth pastor—instead, they deeply hope for someone who can help them tend to the often-unseen work of becoming themselves, to welcome them into their own God-created identity and purpose. The adolescents I talk with are tired of performing for empty accomplishments and long to be given permission to rest in grace. I walk alongside eager, passion-filled teenagers who want to know that following Jesus has something to do with the practical healing of our world, the sort of kingdom "on earth as it is in heaven" that we pray about each week. And I'm struck that most of us adults probably feel the same way. ■