

A Time to Celebrate Back to School in the Church

*“For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven.”
—Ecclesiastes 3:1*

Heading back to school each year marks a significant milestone in the lives of our youth. Whether it’s their first day of middle school, the year they will finally get their driver’s license, or the first day of their senior year, youth carry with them a sense of hope, expectation and, yes, a little (or a lot of) trepidation about the start of school.

The beginning of the school year carries with it a great deal of ritual. Whether it’s getting class schedules and locker assignments, shopping trips for the right outfit to wear on the first day, purchasing school supplies or saying good-bye to summer, youth understand the power of ritual. Ritual is important and can be a grounding force in the midst of so much uncertainty.

Ultimately what our youth are yearning for is a place to belong, a place that is certain and sure amid the shifting (and sometimes sinking) sand of adolescence. The church can and does provide a place such as this when the youth know that the church understands where they are and what they’re experiencing.

With all of this in mind, here are some ways your church can help youth acknowledge and celebrate their “back to school” experiences:

Worship together (with the entire congregation or with a youth group).

On the Sunday evening before school starts, make time to worship together. Whether you’re worshipping within your larger community or during youth group, make time to sing and pray, hope and dream, share and experience the presence of God together as the school year begins. Use this time to allow youth to serve as leaders and servants to one another. Offer a safe space for youth to honestly share what they’re most excited about and what they fear most about the upcoming year. Share your own hopes and dreams for them as one who promises to walk beside them regardless of what may come.

You're praying for me?!?!?

Youth like to know that there are people who love them and who are praying for them. At the beginning of the school year, invite individuals in your congregation, adult Sunday school classes, Bible studies, Presbyterian Women's groups or Men's groups to pray for your youth. Give each group a list of names, grades, schools and, perhaps, a hope each youth has for the coming year. Encourage them to pray daily for the youth and to talk to them about the fact that they are in their prayers.

Take up a collection.

Invite the youth (and your congregation) to bring in commonly needed school supplies. The fact that going "back to school" can be expensive is not lost on youth. Help them gain a deeper sense of what it means to serve by helping others (just like them) who are in need. Empower your youth to organize the supply drive by spreading the word and deciding what group or organization they'd like to receive the donations. Then make the donation in honor of your youth.

Write a letter to yourself.

Just after school begins, while their hopes and dreams for the year are still fresh, ask your youth to write a letter to themselves, answering the following questions:

- At the end of the year, what do you hope you have accomplished?
- Where do you hope you will be?
- What will you have accomplished?

Their answers do not need to be unattainable, pie-in-the-sky aspirations. Instead, encourage youth to be honest about their feelings and aspirations. Give youth the option of whether or not you'll ever see what they write. In the end, they have the option of being the only one that reads it.

Midway through the year, around December, mail the letters to your youth, allowing them the opportunity to assess where they are and to adjust their behavior, if necessary. At the end of the year, give them the opportunity to name shortfalls and/or celebrate achievements. Your follow-through on asking where youth are with the things they wrote in these letters is far more important than your knowledge of the specifics of what they wrote. Ultimately, it shows that you care for them.

Bless their backpacks.

On the Sunday prior to the start of school, invite youth (and all of the children in your church) to bring their backpacks to worship to have them blessed. Their backpacks will follow them down school hallways all year long. Hopefully, they will remember that the prayers of their faith community follow them, too. Invite children and youth to bring their backpacks forward at some point during worship. Celebrate the achievements that are to come and honestly acknowledge the hardships that are to be faced as well.

Survival kit

Some days, starting school (or to keep going) is just hard. Acknowledge this with a survival kit that reminds your youth that they are cared for and loved. Your kit might include things like:

- Smarties: To boost your brain power.
- Sharpened pencil: Because you're sharp!
- Eraser: So that you remember that everyone makes mistakes . . . and that's okay.
- Hugs: Because some days . . . you just need one!
- Lollipop: To help you "lick" any obstacle that may come this year.
- Praying hands: To help you remember that your church family is praying for you. We love you.

Have a party!!

When all else fails . . . have a party!! Whether before or after school starts, get together to celebrate! Celebrate the year to come. Celebrate your membership in a group that will always be there regardless of the uncertainties. Include any, all, or none of the suggestions above to help as you form rituals and meaningful experiences that your youth will remember for years.

Unfortunately, it's not always a party . . .

In the midst of any celebration of the start of school, be sure to be aware of those that are not celebrating! For some of our youth, the beginning of school is not something to celebrate because it means reuniting with the voices that may tell them they are stupid and worthless. It means facing their fear of having no one they trust to sit and eat with at lunch. It may mean reuniting with the bully they've been fleeing from for years and don't know how to tell anyone.



Quicksheets

Fast and Fabulous Ideas for Youth Ministry

39

Always remember that for each of us, and especially for our youth, there is “a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance; a time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing; a time to seek, and a time to lose” (Ecclesiastes 3:4–6). This will be true of your youth, too. Just be there in the midst of it all!

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