

YOUTH PASTOR

Who You Are Matters: Combating Trafficking Every Day

Jason is a youth pastor at his church. His church has recently become aware of human trafficking and is exploring how different ministries within the church can engage the fight. Jason wants to educate the youth group about the issue, but he knows there are more ways get involved. Jason's church is medium sized with not much in the budget to start a brand new initiative. Jason first ensures that anyone working with youth at the church are trained on the warning signs that a youth might be at risk. He also ensures that youth ministry workers are trained on how to report suspected abuse and what to do if a youth confides in them about a dangerous situation.

For his youth group, Jason seeks out curriculums and programs that specifically address the issue of human trafficking. He finds that there are programs specific to youth groups and programs that educate about internet safety, healthy relationships, and exploitation. He has also considered reaching out to the local law enforcement to have them share information with the group on a Wednesday night.

Jason knows that several of the youth in his group do not come from homes where there is a strong example of a healthy relationship or marriage. He recognizes that by sharing with the youth skills and concepts like setting boundaries, communication, and self-worth, he can help guard against some of the unhealthy relational habits that students often find themselves in.

Jason also looks at programs within his church. Once a month the church hosts a meal and teaching for single parents and their children. He discovers that the program offers childcare for children through elementary school. Jason recognizes that several of the children are middle school age and could benefit by having a safe place to go while their parents participate. Jason works with the church staff to expand the program to include middle school students. After speaking with the parents in this group, he learns of the need for regular afterschool care for this age group, allowing those who are in vulnerable situations to have a safe place to come after school until their parents return home. It would also allow the youth to build positive lasting friendships, creating a community they can turn to when crisis occurs. He makes notes to present this information to his church's leadership for consideration in the church growth plans.

Additionally, several of the youth who attend the group have shared they have little to no relationship with their father or that their father is not a role model for them. Jason recognizes that is a strong vulnerability factor. He works to set up bi-monthly events where the men in the church participate in activities with the youth, such as a BBQ with flag football and other games, volunteering together, and opportunities for older men in the church to mentor younger men.

Jason did not start a new anti-human trafficking ministry, create a new budget, or change the focus of the youth group. Instead, he was able to enhance what the church was already doing by integrating the topic into their existing strengths.

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Human trafficking disproportionately affects youth. Teens are vulnerable to human trafficking for many reasons outside of their control. Teens lack experience in navigating potentially dangerous situations, they are dependent on the resources of others, they may belong to families with fractured safety nets, and they long for approval, acceptance and love. Youth pastors are uniquely positioned to equip teens with the skills and information they need to stay safe. Additionally, youth may confide in ministry leadership when they need help or are concerned for a friend or family member. Remember, a youth pastor may be one of the only positive role models that a teen has, so do not be afraid to educate and empower the youth in your program as if you were!

Consider how you can incorporate the following with your youth groups and children's ministries:

- Learn the signs of sex and labor trafficking. Know what to look for to identify human trafficking of women, men, girls, and boys.
- Program the National Human Trafficking Hotline (888-373-7888) into your mobile devices, and include a link to www.humantraffickinghotline.org on your church website and social media pages so that you and your congregation can quickly and anonymously report any suspicious activity.
- Mentor vulnerable youth in your community formally or informally, and let youth know that you are a safe adult to talk to if they need help.
- Identify vulnerable youth and families who could use extra support, and find discrete ways to wrap around those in need.
- Include information about digital citizenship, internet safety, and how to report an online predator in your teachings. Utilize materials for youth at www.netsmartz.org.
- When you have new students transition from the children's ministry to the youth group, ask children's ministry workers if there is anything you should know or look out for about the youth moving up regarding the youth's safety or wellbeing.
- Explore with your youth group what the Bible has to say about caring for those in need. Empower them to be justice advocates on behalf of others in their school and in their activities.

When we engage together, miracles happen. Eradicating human trafficking will not be an easy task, but the steps to engaging the fight are simple. For more information about combating human trafficking and protecting vulnerable populations as a business, individual, or organization, visit www.engagetogether.com.