

The Longest, Deepest Time of Year for Youth Ministry...

Steve Argue and Dave Livermore

We can almost move through the youth ministry year without thinking. We start with fall kickoffs, move into the holiday season and on to winter retreats. Before we know it, it's another season of open houses and pomp and circumstance. About that point, students are ready for summer, parents want a break, and we youth leaders want a long, long nap.

Sometimes the longest stretch in the youth ministry calendar can be that seemingly "dead zone" between the holidays and summer. Ironically, in the Christian calendar, this is the time of the year when everything heats up. It's called Lent and Easter. These days are the deepest, most significant, central part of our Christian existence. Lent and Easter are part of a greater rhythm called the Christian calendar that anchors us in a rich heritage of faith that has been the spiritual metronome of faith communities for hundreds of years.

The Christian calendar gives us context and perspective for life. Since we're reading this together on the cusp of Lent, we thought it seemed like the perfect time to encourage you and your group to step into this rhythm of faith.

We confess. We're relatively "new" to Lent. We have friends in some church traditions who have been making use of Lent for as long as they can remember. But only in the last few years have we begun to appreciate how powerfully Lent can renew our perspective on life and ministry.

Keeping track of schedules, planning activities, organizing small groups, keeping an eye on the bank account, and making sure we get time with our families is enough to make us live as if the death and resurrection of Jesus never happened. But Lent has the potential of changing that. During Lent we're called to put to death the sin and apathy we have in our hearts toward God. We're invited to enter again into the life God intended for us.

Lent isn't something that can just be squeezed in. Our youth ministry schedules won't allow for adding one more thing. But what if we let Lent shape our existing activities this season?

For hundreds of years, Christians have emphasized two primary things during Lent—Turning from sin in repentance through denial of some of the things that so easily distract our attention from God and second, turning to God by studying the Christian story and all it entails.

Consider the following ideas for intersecting Lent with your ministry...

- Be committed to Lent yourself. Study it, understand it, and do it.
- If you regularly practice Lent, instead of the usual "chocolate fast," try fasting from the Internet at home for the next 40 days.
- Read the Christian story that leads up to the cross. Pick readings from the liturgical calendar (available online) or pick your own readings that lead up to Jesus' death and resurrection.
- Give up something together as a community. If it's something you regularly buy, turn in the money weekly and give it to a charity of your choice.
- Give your students a Lent Journal. Have them record their Lenten Journey and give them opportunities to share some of their discoveries along the way.
- Fasting reminds us of suffering. Surf www.persecuted.org, or read *Jesus Freaks*. Remind each other of the sacrifice of Jesus and of others who have gone before us.
- Remember Sunday is never a fasting day because it's resurrection day. Find ways to create Sunday celebrations as a youth group community in the midst of your fasting.

We encourage you to join worldwide Christians in anticipating Easter, the deepest and most central part of our faith expression. This time of year is hardly a down time. It's the pinnacle. The way we treat this period of context and rhythm can radically anchor young followers of Jesus.

He is risen. He is risen, indeed.