



Youth workers in both community-based and faith-based settings are entrusted to focus on young people's successful development by addressing their gifts, needs, strengths and challenges. Yes, youth workers in each setting approach these issues from somewhat different vantage points, but their shared commitment to young people provides fertile common ground for strengthening their capacity to make a real difference in the lives of the young people in our communities, states, nation, and world.

Is There Common Ground? explores both the challenges and the benefits of finding this fertile common ground between community-based and faith-based youth workers. What emerges from information gathered from a series of focus groups, two Web-based surveys of youth workers, and a two-day consultation of national thought leaders is a remarkable degree of alignment around many youth work priorities as well as exceptions that leave room for unique accents and learning across differences.

By examining faith-based and community-based youth workers perspective side by side, some core questions about where there might be shared and divergent interest, needs, and priorities for professional development merge. It also surfaces priorities and needs of youth workers in the field based on the National Collaboration for Youth approved core competencies for front-line youth workers (plus two additions on religious diversity and spiritual development).

Faith-based and community-based youth workers see eye to eye on many of the competencies. This commonality appears to hold true across a variety of settings as well as when we compare directors of both religiously affiliated and secular camps. This finding suggests that, at least in the area of competencies, there is significant common ground across sectors and settings. At the same time there are important differences. The greatest is on “helping young people develop spiritually.” In both surveys this competency that had been added to the list had the widest gap (62-63 points) between the two groups of youth workers.

Knowing priorities is an important starting point for finding common ground. It also helps to frame potential training and professional development that might most engage yourh workers in educational opportunities.

Highest levels in learning opportunities

- Involving and empowering youth
- Interacting with and relating to youth in ways that support asset building
- Developing positive relationships and communicating with youth
- Caring for, involving and working with families and communities

Faith-based youth workers were more interested than community-based workers in professional development in the area of spiritual development—mirroring how they rate the importance of this added competency.

What role does spiritual development (and moral development) play in thinking about and building bridges between community-and-faith-based youth workers? Though the survey or focus groups only brought up spiritual development, the national thought-leaders began speaking of both moral and spiritual development together and a recommendation was made to focus on developing a framework that could be used to think about both of these as we proceed to find common ground. In the process of different organizations working in this area, a shared understanding of spiritual and moral development may help increase the interest in and comfort with the issue among community-based and faith-based youth workers.

To say that youth workers are interested in cross-sector learning opportunities does not imply that they do not also see significant challenges and barriers.

Summary of Obstacles in Finding Common Ground

- Exclusiveness, proselytizing, and dogmatism
- Perceived differing goals and training
- Fear of judgment
- Discomfort with religious/spiritual issues
- Legal issues
- Lack of mutual respect
- Too little time
- Different languages (definitions)

Although there are significant and important challenges in finding common ground, the opportunities are just as significant—particularly given that most youth workers say they would value cross-sector learning opportunities.

Summary of Benefits

- Enrich the lives of youth
- Tap into the unique strengths within each sector
- Increase opportunities through shared learning and resources
- Develop a community-wide approach

Even with the challenges and relative lack of knowledge about what models may already exist, participants in this work expressed widespread interest in building bridges to provide professional development opportunities across sectors. The recommendations are relevant for a range of audiences. Whether you work on the local level and can begin the dialogue and work across faith-based and community-youth organizations; as a local intermediary who wants to begin to work across the organizations; as a national organization that wants to begin to look at the broader picture of the workforce; or a funder who sees the need and opportunity to increase this work across these two important sectors that work with youth, there is work that is recommended and can be done.

Thread throughout all of the recommendations is the focus on and engagement of young people. This was repeated over and over throughout the collection of recommendations. It is through this focus and engagement that there may truly be a place to find common ground. Youth workers also recommend that further discovery on the existing models and networks already doing some of this work is an instrumental first step.

Summary of Recommendations

Work Locally

- Build relationships and communicate openly
- Create places and spaces
- Work for shared understanding and goals
- Share knowledge and opportunities

Create a Framework for Moral and Spiritual Development:

- Determine how moral and ethical development relate to spiritual and religious development
- Support youth workers to be better prepared with each other and with young people
- Find shared meaning through narratives

Integrate the Discussion about Qualifications and Preparation:

- Create definitions, common language, and understanding together;
- Define successful work with youth;
- Deepen the work on core competencies
- Understand more about professional development
- Create credentials, certificates and degrees together

Conduct Additional Research:

- Learn more about youth workers
- Explore the relevance of contexts, particularly nature

Develop Practical Tools:

- Create a tool kit
- Develop the needed materials
- Recommend a beginning bibliography

The exploratory work begins to lay out an agenda for dialogues and action aimed at strengthening youth work practice in both community-based and faith-based settings. It is only a start like the greeting and introductions in a long, significant working relationship. There is energy, enthusiasm and much work to do to build these bridges. All of us together can make the difference. Join in being catalytic in finding common ground.



Two groups of youth workers—community-based and faith-based—appear to operate in parallel universes. Both groups play significant roles in young people’s lives, but they generally have distinct professional development systems and opportunities, distinct peer networks, distinct credentialing and accountability systems, and, perhaps, distinct priorities and frameworks for their work.

At the same time, both groups of youth workers struggle with some of the same issues: retention through middle and high school; reaching marginalized youth; and attending to young people in ways that help them grow holistically. They also share professional concerns around inadequate support systems; inconsistent professional development opportunities; and needing clearer standards for effectiveness. Both groups can benefit from training, mentoring, peer support, and other methods of developing their skills as youth workers.

Perhaps they could learn together—and from each other.

On the other hand, there are reasons for caution or skepticism. Aren’t the goals, priorities, language, approaches, and training really quite different? How could you overcome barriers such as a lack of mutual respect, dogmatism, exclusiveness, and judgmentalism? Aren’t there legal issues (separation of church and state) that make keeping an arm’s distance necessary?

In 2006, with support from Lilly Endowment Inc., the National Collaboration for Youth and Search Institute began exploring these possibilities and challenges, asking questions such as:

- Can faith-based and community-based youth organizations find common ground in how they might prepare staff and volunteers to most effectively work with youth?
- What are the priorities, core competencies, and professional development interests and needs of both groups of youth workers? Where are they similar and different?

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY . . . ?

YOUTH WORKERS

Adults who work directly with young people in non-formal settings. They may be professionals or volunteers.

COMMUNITY-BASED YOUTH WORKERS

People who work with youth in organizations in communities (independent as well as affiliates of national organizations) that do not have a religious charter.

FAITH-BASED YOUTH WORKERS

Youth workers who work with youth in organizations that are religiously affiliated, including congregations (churches, mosques, synagogues, temples, etc.), para-church or para-congregation organizations, or faith-based social service organizations.

- What role does spiritual development play in the overall holistic development of youth?
- Are these groups of youth workers interested in finding common ground? What are any critical barriers that may interfere with building bridges? What do they see as the advantages?
- If there is interest, what might be done to facilitate mutual support and enhanced opportunities and systems for improving youth workers' competencies and effectiveness?

Is There Common Ground? explores these questions, building on a series of focus groups, two Web-based surveys of youth workers, and a two-day consultation of national thought leaders. (Figure 1 describes these activities.) What emerges across these learning projects is a remarkable degree of alignment around many youth work priorities of both community-based and faith-based youth workers—with important exceptions that leave room for unique accents and learning across differences. And though there is widespread interest in collaborative learning across sectors, there are also significant barriers, ranging from priorities for youth workers and, most significantly, mistrust and misunderstanding across the sectors.

Despite the challenges, the interests, benefits, and opportunities that emerged through this process merit full exploration. This publication seeks to unpack what we heard and learned, setting the stage for further dialogue, research, experimentation, and action. Our hope is that it will:

- Open up a new conversation among leaders in youth development, religious youth work, and related fields about a possible opportunity and resource that may not have been previously considered;
- Help to guide coalitions, partnerships, professional development providers, scholars, and researchers as they set their agendas and design portions of their work; and
- Encourage strategic leaders, funders, and policy makers to consider these opportunities and challenges as they set priorities and directions.

Thus, *Is There Common Ground?* seeks to bring together in conversation and action people from many different places and perspectives that touch the lives of young people. It is designed for senior leaders, policy makers, program planners, and staff development providers in national, regional, and local youth organizations, networks, and denominations; professors and students in youth development, youth ministry, and related fields; and other thought leaders and advocates in both community-based and faith-based organizations and networks.

The publication is organized as follows:

- **Youth Worker Preparation**—We look at how youth workers are currently prepared in both sectors as well as in camp settings (including camps that are religiously affiliated and secular). We focus here on the core competencies of youth workers, what they emphasize and where they see needs for ongoing professional growth and development. This section builds on the National Collaboration for Youth's approved framework of core Youth Development Worker Competencies (Appendix B). By examining the perspectives of community-based youth workers and faith-based youth workers side by side, we begin to

address some of the core questions about where there might be shared and divergent interests, needs, and priorities for professional development. This section includes a wide variety of information for people engaged in youth worker training and development in both community- and faith-based organizations. It also provides a helpful starting point for those engaged in youth worker preparation to gain perspective on the priorities and needs of youth workers in the field. Youth work practitioners will find it helpful to examine their own experiences, priorities, and competencies in light of the experiences of other youth workers who participated in this project.

- **Seeking Common Ground**—Even though youth workers may have overlapping priorities and needs, is there any interest in or benefit to building connections across sectors—particularly given some of the barriers? Building on survey data, focus group data, and findings from the national consultation of thought leaders, this section explores whether there is potential in building connections, highlighting the opportunities as well as the challenges or concerns of seeking common ground. This section is particularly relevant for scholars and executive leaders who set organizational direction. It also can stimulate a new set of conversations within and across faith-based and community-based settings about what each is doing to strengthen communities with and for young people.
- **Recommendations for Moving Forward**—Though the challenges in seeking common ground are real, the findings point toward significant opportunities and ideas to strengthen connections across sectors. This publication concludes by suggesting strategies and priorities for moving forward, based on the combined findings from the focus groups, survey, and convening. Recommendations include national agenda items as well as strategies to work across organizations locally. The focus remains on young people and how to tap into potential opportunities to do a better job of building highly skilled staff and volunteers to work with them. The recommendations have implications for youth worker preparation and development, community coalitions working with youth, funders that seek to support youth work in faith-based and/or community-based settings, and national religious and secular organizations that prepare, develop, and support youth workers.

Youth workers in both community-based and faith-based settings are all entrusted to focus on young people’s successful development by addressing their gifts, needs, strengths, and challenges. Yes, youth workers in each setting approach these issues from somewhat different vantage points, but their shared commitment to young people provides fertile common ground for strengthening their capacity to make a real difference in the lives of the young people of our communities, states, nation, and world.

FIGURE 2 Overview of Project Activities

Survey of youth workers— The broadest information base for much of this report is data from an online survey that was conducted between November 20, 2006, and January 9, 2007, through www.surveymonkey.com. Overall, 1,322 people participated in the survey. This report focuses on results from the total sample and from those from local youth development organizations (n=569) (“community-based youth workers”) and those working in either a congregation or other faith-based or parachurch organization (n=404) (“faith-based youth workers”). Thirty youth workers in the total sample indicated that they worked in both sectors, and 313 indicated that they work in public institutions, such as public schools. These latter two groups are included in data on the total sample, but are not reported separately in this report. *Though fairly large and unique, the sample is a convenience sample and should not be interpreted as nationally representative.*

The online survey that was conducted can be found in Appendix A. Detailed information on the sample as well as additional findings are provided in Appendix C.

Survey of camp directors— One of the challenges in the broad survey of youth workers (described above) is that the sample is from a very broad array of settings (congregations, youth recreation programs, mentoring programs, social service agencies, after-school programs, and more). That diversity limits the value of comparison, since there are so many variables that could be influencing findings. Thus, the camp community, through the involvement of the American Camp Association, provided insightful data using a survey of camp directors (n=305) who represented both community-based (or secular) camps (n=214) and faith-based (or religiously affiliated) camps (n=89). The camp directors completed an online survey between April and May 2007 through www.surveymonkey.com. Highlights of the camp director survey and comparisons with the youth worker survey are provided throughout this report.

A summary of the camp study findings is provided in Appendix D.

Focus groups— We conducted a series of seven focus groups in four cities: New Orleans, Indianapolis, Minneapolis, and Tucson. Most of the groups were a mix of faith-based and community-based workers. Most groups included three to six participants.

More information on the focus groups is provided in Appendix E.

National consultation of thought leaders— Finally, the information gathered above formed the basis for a two-day dialogue among two dozen national leaders in April 2007 in Indianapolis, Indiana. The faith-based and community-based sectors were equally represented at the consultation offering a spectrum of perspectives throughout the gathering. Through panelists, small group dialogues, and other discussions, these national leaders helped to frame the issues and recommend possibilities for future action.

An overview of the consultation and identification of all the consultation participants is provided in Appendix F.