

# Episode 6: Still Abiding

## Part One—Rockin’ the Suburbs

**Megan DeWald:** Northern Virginia—or NoVA, as it is sometimes called—is a large swath of land stretching south and west from the Potomac River, just on the other side of Washington D.C. There’s a lot of complex American history in the area—some of it good, some of it...not so great—but there are many historical markers, landmarks, homes, etc. Today, though, it’s really a giant suburb of D.C., with over 3 million people residing there—predominantly white, although with a sizeable Black, Asian, and Hispanic/Latinx population—and predominantly wealthy, with two of the richest counties in the nation and one of the seven counties in America where Black households make more than white households. There are a lot of malls and shopping centers, a ton of restaurants, and some of the best public schools in the country. Crime rates are low, educational attainment is high, good jobs are available, and good salaries abound. Just an overall good-quality, quintessentially American place to raise a family and live a good life.

Of course, it’s not really as idyllic as it sounds—perhaps especially for young people. Anyone who has been working with teenagers in any capacity in the United States over the past decade knows that there is a mental health crisis that has swept across the country, and many of us are fearing that COVID has accelerated the crisis into a catastrophe. Rates of anxiety disorders, depression, self-harm, suicide—these things are skyrocketing for young people, and while there is no clear or quick solution to any of it, it’s worth noting that some research suggests that there is a troubling correlation between the high-stress, high-achieving, highly-competitive and perfectionistic culture fostered in affluent suburban communities like NoVA and increased rates of anxiety, depression, and suicide in young people. Screens, social media, video games—these things are often blamed and may indeed also contribute to poor mental health outcomes. But the dangerous elephant in the room seems to be the widely accepted belief that childhood and adolescence are for resume building. Instead of being encouraged to play and learn and grow and figure out who they are in the process, our children have become our projects. And we’re all paying the price for how this dehumanizes them.

In Burke, Virginia, a small suburb in Fairfax County, the congregation of Abiding Presence Lutheran Church has decided to name this elephant in the room and do something about it. Recognizing the abundance of their resources and gifts, this church is striving to create space for young people—and really, all people—to be who they truly are, beloved children of God.

Welcome to *Disrupting Ministry*, a podcast from the Institute for Youth Ministry at Princeton Theological Seminary. I’m Megan DeWald, your host. In this podcast, we bring you stories of faith communities who are disrupting the status quo in the Church by developing innovative forms of ministry with young people. In this episode, we introduce you to Abiding Presence Lutheran Church in Burke, Virginia, and tell the story of how a pandemic created space for deep connection and real relationships across generations.

## Part Two—The Gift of Honest Feedback



**Abigail Rusert:** I think that there's this burden that a lot of ministry leaders feel of, of sort of taking on, um, the perfection of Jesus in some way, shape, or form. Because we're the ones who are helping point people to a God, who is beautiful and does all things in the time in which they need to be done, you know... all things in God's time. Um...I think because, I think because ministry leaders deal, you know, are, are telling people about a God who saves, they too, feel that pressure to sort of save all things, including the perfection of, of programs that long ago should have died. (*Mmmmm*) And um (*Sorry, that was just a prophetic word* [laughter] *I felt it deep in my bones*) Yes. I mean, it's true though, right? That, and there's this pressure, so then what we do is we work and we work and we work and we work, and we create sort of new versions of an old program, call it innovative, and then, you know, try to sell it—our perception of its success until we burn out. And that, and so this, this capacity to look at your programs and to look at your ministry and to look at your work and say, 'this thing isn't working'—is just not found in a lot of people. And so, I think that's one of the things that we saw clearly in Meredith was just this willingness to, um, call a thing what it is, Douglas John Hall, theologian Douglas John Hall would say. Um, she's willing to call a thing what it is. You know, uh, another old saying is a Rose is a Rose is a Rose, right? And so, she's able to own, own a program in her congregation not working which gives her the ability to be creative about that.

**Megan:** This is the Rev. Abigail Visco Rusert, Director of the Institute for Youth Ministry, in a conversation with me about the Rev. Meredith Keseley, Senior Pastor of Abiding Presence, and Design Fellow for the Log College Project, the IYM's grant initiative that has helped 12 churches from around the country design, test, and implement new forms of youth ministry in their contexts. With Meredith, we were excited to work with another senior pastor who is passionate about youth ministry and recognizes the essential role that senior leaders in congregations play in their church's youth ministry.

**Abigail:** And having that senior lead pastor be the one applying definitely stood out to us. We wanted a handful of our congregations to have that. Um, and Meredith is really just kind of, um, how can I describe her? —vibrant unshakable in her, um. Meredith is full steam ahead. She is optimistic, she is not afraid to say when the congregation is going, um, in "a wrong direction" in any way, shape or form. And she is just unwaveringly committed to serving young people, just a deep and abiding passion for her congregation to be a place where young people and their faith journeys thrive.

**Megan:** In my conversation with Meredith, she shared how she first felt called to ministry at a young age, and she now credits a large part of that sense of calling to the fact that the adults she trusted most in the world were her youth leaders at the time. Admiring them and wanting to mirror their own discipleship journeys, she felt fairly certain that God was calling her to become a youth pastor. But while God had other plans for her vocational journey, Meredith has remained steadfast in her love and commitment to pastoring young people.

**Abigail:** Here's the thing about Meredith's context. It's a really large, for a Lutheran church, it's a very large Lutheran church. So, I think the other thing that was interesting to us was, how can we learn from this incredible senior pastor in a mainline congregation? That's a big engine with a pretty traditional—quote, unquote traditional for the mainline, um, in a white, you know, mainline context—how can we work with this church who is going to do look at youth ministry as something that, like a space where youth group needs to live? You know, when we first set out to do this project, you know, one of our hunches was that we really needed to pay attention to youth group being the dominant model in the mainline tradition of youth ministry. And how could we help the mainline leaders inside of our cohort wrestle with that reality, address it, and essentially move congregations beyond that particular model, as



the one that had to be the be-all and end-all, and we saw and see in Meredith this incredible, intense passion toward that very end, just knowing that this was not the model, but also needing to a really large ship in a different direction around youth ministry, and that is no small task and it takes no, you know, small amount of leadership. So yeah.

**Megan:** One of the gifts for us in working with a senior pastor like Meredith has been the gift of walking alongside a leader who clearly knows her gifts and her context and how those two things align. She has a real clear perspective and vision for her work, and she has provided us such rich feedback during every step of the process—even, or especially, when she just knew that our hypothesis or assignment or requirement simply was not going to work in her context. So, although we set out in many ways to challenge the youth group programmatic model that has tended to rule much of the youth ministry landscape over the past hundred years or so, Meredith was clear from the outset that, in her context—affluent, predominantly white, suburban—people live by schedules and routines and programs. And whatever form or fashion it was going to take, some semblance of a youth group was gonna need to be a part of the equation.

**Abigail:** You know, this is one of the things I loved about Meredith along the way, because I think she really took me seriously when I said, ‘tell me if it doesn't work for you. We are innovating alongside you. Princeton does not have this figured out. We are not perfect.’ She resonated with that, she was able to go—she would call me, she would text me, she would email me, you know, she would go through and say, ‘here's how this first activity worked for us; here's how it didn't.’ Oh. And just the gift of that transparency?.....

Ultimately, I was just so blessed by it—our project and our program has been so blessed by it—because we were able to say, ‘Oh my gosh, yeah, we shouldn't do it that way again, we should do it this way.’ You know, we were also able to pick our heads up and say, ‘well, some churches want us to do it this way. Other churches want us to do it this way.’ But Meredith was always just clear, upfront, um, giving us feedback at every single step of the journey and, and unafraid to tell us, ‘Hey, we got this box in the mail with all these activities. I did three of them myself, because you didn't give us enough time. And then I, I assigned it this way and this way and this way to my team. I mean, the amount of influence that that has had on how we are going to iterate in our design is incredible. It's such a gift. And so, having innovators who are willing to point out to, to give that truthful feedback, that honest feedback, um, is really a gift. And we found that in Meredith.

**Megan:** When I spoke with Meredith, she explained that her church had already been in the process of re-visioning what its youth ministry programming should look like, and how—if youth group is going to remain a centerpiece—how could the team reimagine that space around the young people's needs and experiences—rather than just double down on what they've always done and expect a different result. But the process that Meredith began with her church and the process of the Log College Project—were very different from one another, as Meredith explains.

**Meredith Keseley:** Our team would meet Sunday afternoons after church. We knew we had to feed them, and we spend a lot of hours sitting over pizza or subs. We alternated back and forth, um, talking and dreaming and feeling like we were pushed out of our box. So, right, I told you that we had already started this process, and the process that I had started looked nothing like the process that it was, um, the Log College Project. It really pushed us far beyond, um, you know, I would've, I would've spent the whole time sitting with statistics. I pulled the Search Institute's 41 characteristics. We were going through them. Um,



I would not have had imaginary games with dog poop bags. [Laughter] Um, bless you all. [*That one's going to need some context...*]

It's going to need some context. Um, but we still joke about it.

You know, like Princeton seminary sent us a dog poop bag, and I opened the box, and I was like, 'You've got to be kidding me.'

**Megan:** So, a little context here. Did Princeton Seminary really send dog poop bags to 12 congregations around the country? Why yes, yes, we did. It was part of a game that was teaching the intergenerational Design Teams in our Log College Project churches about human-centered design thinking, which has been a centerpiece of our process. As part of an ideation exercise, we wanted the teams to really think outside of their ordinary contexts and situations to practice the skills of coming up with solutions to address tangible problems. So, with all the tools, resources, and knowledge under their belt... how would they solve the problem of people not cleaning up after their dog... you get it. Anyway, the teams received occasional boxes of this kind of gamified curriculum throughout the process with us, and they never knew quite what to expect!

**Meredith:** But really, Megan, I said, I opened this box and I'm looking at the people on my team, right? And we're in the Washington area. I mean, I've got some really high-powered people on my team [*sure*], and I'm going, I'm going to sit with them in our fellowship hall and tell them that we're all gonna look at this and do you, and I'm like, 'You have got to be kidding me.' [Laughter... *Oh, I love it...*] That's my honest moment, right? Um, but out of that process, out of that process came, um, one, a giving up of our control. So, we did not have control over what the boxes contained. We are good type-A Washingtonians, so, we do the assignments when they're given to us.

So, we knew we had to do the assignment, um, and kind of stepping back and releasing that control and saying, you know what, we're going to jump into this. Occasionally, we're going to tweak it 'cause we need to for our context, but really we're just along for the ride.

**Megan:** I've been thinking about the high-powered people that Meredith mentioned who were on the Design Team at Abiding Presence and are part of her church. The church is in the suburbs just outside of Washington D.C. as I said earlier, a place that is home to the Pentagon, the CIA, the DEA, the TSA... lots more governmental acronyms. And I keep thinking about how that kind of environment, those kinds of workplaces, foster a culture—or sometimes a *perception* of a culture—of expertise, power, influence, control. Putting a dog poop bag in the hands of some of these folks might have seemed funny, weird, inappropriate... maybe even insulting. And look, full disclosure—I thought it was a foolish idea when we conceived of it, and my colleagues will tell you that I had the same reaction as Meredith—but after talking to her, I get it now.

Many of the youth ministers we work with at the IYM come from these kinds of affluent, suburban, predominantly white communities—to the surprise of probably no one, and we've often observed youth ministers trying to innovate or change directions or kill dying programs to make room for something new. And we often see them trying to convince their congregations using the language and tools of expertise culture—things like statistics and data and reports and spreadsheets. Even Meredith indicated that this is what her initial revisioning process was looking like. If we can just figure it out using our powers of expertise with these facts and figures, then maybe we get to stay in control. But here's the thing about the Holy Spirit—we aren't in control of where she goes or how she moves in the world. Any maybe

playing an imaginary game with a dog poop bag has a way of humbling us and reminding us of that fact. This was Meredith's takeaway, too.

**Meredith:** We have absolutely nothing to lose. And so, it was a time that we could play and laugh and have fun and some days share some frustrating moments of like ugh, um, but, but really that process, um, that process, I think the most valuable thing it did was it made room for the Holy Spirit. We, um, we were on a path that we thought we knew how to do, and we needed to have that, have that pushed so far aside that there really was room for the Holy Spirit to come in and do something new. And that's what wound up happening. I mean, even what we're doing now is nothing that came out of, I mean, it's nothing of the pieces that we put down on paper of that process and everything of the spirit of it.

### Part Three—Making Room

**Megan:** Truthfully, Meredith has had lots of practice listening and making room for the Holy Spirit.

**Meredith:** I felt called to be a pastor when I was in the seventh grade. Throughout my teenage and young adult years, the trusted adults in my life or my pastors, my youth leaders, um, the church was the place where I found my home. And when I heard that call to ministry early on, I thought that I was going to be called to be a youth pastor. And my own pastor wisely pulled me aside one day and said, 'you know, Meredith, you keep articulating this very clear vision that God is calling you to be a youth pastor. Um, but I want to encourage you to leave a little room for the Holy Spirit in that, that God may indeed call you to that, but you need to leave room for the Holy Spirit to use you as the church most needs you.

And I took that to heart, but I still had this real passion for youth ministry, and I've never lost that. And so, when I got to what I call my dream job, my dream call, which is to be the senior pastor of this growing vibrant congregation, um, youth ministry, still tugs at my heart and is in my blood and is my passion. Um, so I really wanted to create a model at Abiding Presence where the senior pastor is engaged with the youth. Just this morning, actually before this, one of my senior high youth, where I was texting back and forth with them. Um, I want to be the senior pastor who my youth can text, who they have my number we're in contact. Um, I am not just somebody who sits up high in the pulpit who you see when your family has a crisis. *(Right)* I'm the person who you text on a random Tuesday morning, because you're really excited that your friend's going to come to youth group Friday night.

**Megan:** While feeling free and comfortable to text their senior pastor is certainly a rare gift for young people today, Meredith's desire for opening that avenue for connection went even deeper than the surface level uniqueness factor. Meredith and her Design Team actually began to notice that the thing the young people in her context were missing was precisely this kind of deep connection, not just with a spiritual leader, but with, well, anybody.

**Meredith:** The problem that we identified early on in our Log College Project was authentic relationships. So, we felt like our students were lacking authentic relationships. And for us, we always defined that as face-to-face relationships. You know, our students were texting, they were on video games, they were Snapchatting. They were communicating in all of these ways. They had all these people with whom they were communicating, but what we heard from them and from their parents when we did the research and when we did our neighborhood walk around, all those things, was that there was a real lack of authentic relationships, these face to face, um, deep kinds of way of being together in community.



**Megan:** And so, how could the team cultivate the kind of space where this could happen? To consider that, Abiding Presence drew upon their history of understanding the needs of their community and aligning their resources with those needs.

**Meredith:** And one of that quick, really fun stories about the church is that they built the original building, it was a sanctuary, and the plan was always to use that as a multipurpose room in phase two. In phase two, they were going to build a big, fancy sanctuary. The original one was cinder blocks, and it was meant to be able to kind of double as a gymnasium, and what happened was, a couple years into things, the congregation was filled with kids, and the wise people of Abiding Presence looked around and realized that they didn't need a big, fancy sanctuary, they needed classrooms. And so, they continued to worship in that multipurpose room for years because phase two turned out to be a whole classroom, uh, wing.

**Megan:** In other words, the church's relationship to its resources—and even its physical space—has always been centered on the needs of its community. In the early years of the church, they realized that the need of the people in the church was not a brand new, flashy sanctuary, as they had intended to build after the first few years but was instead physical space that could be used to form and educate the church's young people. In this same way, when the Design Team from the Log College Project began to envision how it could leverage the church's resources to meet the needs of the young people today, they went into building mode once again.

**Meredith:** This is really funny, given the day and age we're in right now. We were going to create a physical space. We were going to create, um, physical space in the church building for students to be able to come to build those relationships with one another and with caring adults in our community. And we were going to create some sort of mentoring type experience, where—mentoring may not be the right word— but some sort of experience where youth and adults would work together on something. Um, we wanted to create those opportunities, and that was going to be kind of the bulk of our piece. And then we were going to do some education for the whole congregation around what does it mean to be a community in which we, um, we don't just value our students for being students, but we value our, our students for being part of our community, and integral of where their voices are heard, their ideas are welcome, and that we are ready to change, to be changed, by their presence among us.

**Megan:** So, the team got to work on making plans for this physical space, where the young people and these caring adults could nurture these authentic relationships. But of course, as we have seen with every one of our churches in the Log College Project—and as we've seen with every church everywhere—the COVID-19 pandemic threw a wrench into those best laid plans.

**Meredith:** So, to begin with, our problem is that we think there's a lack of authentic face-to-face relationships, and now it is not safe to be face-to-face with people. So, that's a bummer. What are we gonna do? Our whole project—our whole premise—was based on this idea that our students need to get away from screens, and now we're thrust into this world. So, um, we kinda sat, I'll be honest, we kinda sat dormant on our Log College Project... We don't know what we can do with this.

But then, heading into the end of that spring semester, I started to hear from several of our college students that they had lost their summer internships or their summer camp jobs weren't happening. Did I have anything at the church that they could do? And so literally, over a weekend, we dreamed up this idea that we would launch a summer internship program for our college students.



So, Thursday, Friday, I kind of pitched it to a couple of staff members. Over the weekend, I threw some stuff on paper. Monday night, I went to our council and I said, 'look, here's the deal. I think we should launch this summer internship program. I'm hearing from some of our college students, you know, that, um, that they don't have anything to do this summer. I found a donor who's going to come forward to stipend two of these. Will you give me a couple more? I think we'll have three or four kids who want to do it.' And they were like, 'okay, but don't limit yourself, right? Whoever wants to do it, we'll figure it out.' Uh, we came back with 11 students. Eleven students. We had 11 of our college students who jumped on board to this stipend internship program.

And the idea of the internship program was, we stipend them to do, um, to do some work. So, they were each paired with a different staff member in a different ministry area that they were doing some work with. But really the crux of it was that they would meet with me and our, our youth and young adult minister, weekly in cohort groups to do vocational discernment. And so, we, that was part of the requirement for their program. And so, we would meet, um, to read scripture together, to pray, to listen to other voices. We, we did some reading on Howard Thurman, we listened to, to Martin Luther King, Jr. We looked at Frederick Buechner, you know, some of these voices, um, that talk about vocation in the world, and they practice telling their stories. This is the key component. We put them into dyads, and they tell their story of something they were passionate about, or a time someone recognized their gifts and really try to discern and listen to the Holy Spirit at work in their lives. And we had a blast. It was the highlight of my summer.

**Megan:** So, listening to the Holy Spirit at work—and helping these college students learn how to do the same—Meredith and her team wondered if they were on to something here. While vocational discernment is certainly a perennial issue for college-aged students, Meredith noted that these kinds of elements—mentorship and practicing ministry, learning from and reflecting on the wisdom of heroes of faith, interpreting and telling the stories from their lives when they've seen God at work—perhaps these elements could be translatable to their Log College Project initiative? Perhaps there was something here that could further nurture authentic relationships.

**Meredith:** And so, when we were looking into the fall, and we still have this Log College Project, we were like, well, what if we tried this with our 11th and 12th graders? What if we did the same thing, what if we stipend them, um, to come on board and do a project? We will give them the chance to launch some sort of project in the church. We'll give them seed money to that project. And they'll meet with us weekly in cohort groups to do intentional discernment as they get ready to head off to the next stage of life.

We have ten students right now, ten of our 11th and 12th graders. And at the heart of this, right, was that we knew that their semester was going to be different. We're still all virtual here in Virginia. Um, and so a lot of the leadership opportunities that they would have normally had in school were going to look very different. So, we wanted to give them that chance. Um, and we're having a blast. It's amazing. And we have a retention rate of our 11th and 12th graders, you know, usually in youth ministry, by 11th and 12th grade, a lot of students are dropping off. They're busy with college applications, they're doing all this stuff. (*sports, leadership, yeah, it's very common, mm-hmm*) Um, we have the highest percentage we have ever seen of 11th and 12th graders showing up every single week and engaged in the church.

**Megan:** We've heard lots of theories for why students don't tend to stay engaged in the church once they reach their 11th and 12th grade years in high school. And while this isn't true across the board in every single context, one theory that a story like this lends credence to is that young people leave not because

they're too challenged by the realities of Christian discipleship, but because they're not challenged *enough*. We're often so anxious that they'll leave if not everything is to their pleasing that we try to simplify and glamorize the whole process—we try to make our youth room as cool and comfortable as possible, with all the latest and greatest gadgetry and technology, we try to plan the coolest events and trips that we tenuously tie to Christian discipleship, we hire the cool youth pastor who can figure out how to make the Bible quote-unquote “relevant to today's teens.” And so forth. It's as though, if we can be honest, we assume that the thing they really want is coddling of some kind—and we give that in spades. But what Meredith stumbled upon in attending to the Holy Spirit at work was that these young people actually wanted the challenge—the opportunity to step up and lead, to make their voices heard, to have their perspectives valued.

During our conversation, Meredith told me the stories of several young people who she's seen through this journey already, including one young person who essentially saved the day for a major annual event by facilitating it through technology during the pandemic in a really innovative way. And the long-time member with whom she was partnered for the event was just blown away by this young person's capacity and innovation and eagerness to lead and teach at the same time. And at the end of that event, the young person even approached Meredith with all this newfound confidence and recognition of her agency in the church and said, “I'd like to get involved with the live-streamed worship now because I know I have gifts and skills to bring to the table that could enhance that whole process.”

**Meredith:** And so here, we're seeing not just this project that went really well, but this young person who now feels empowered and invested and is taking the next steps on her own. And for me, that sums up what the Log College Project is all about. Um, it is about helping young people find, claim the church as their own, and the church making room for them to, to change us.

## Part Four—Authentic Relationships

**Megan:** Throughout this project, we've been conducting research by listening to the stories and perspectives of the people in these churches, hoping that the patterns and themes that emerge might provide insight for other faith leaders who are passionate about youth ministry. Today, I'm happy to bring back the Rev. Aqueelah Ligonde, one of our Log College Project Research Fellows, a dear friend and ministry practitioner extraordinaire. In her work with Abiding Presence, Aqueelah was immediately drawn to Meredith's passion for youth ministry.

**Aqueelah Ligonde:** I knew I was in for something special when I interviewed Meredith. She had so much energy and so much insight and so much honesty that it was actually contagious, like from our first call. I think we could have gone on and on and on in that interview, just talk, we had a lot in common, um, and, uh, just you can feel, or I could feel her, her love for young people and her love for the church, um, was fantastic even on the first call. So, I was like, okay, this is going to be a fun, fun journey.

**Megan:** In early 2020, before the pandemic hit, Aqueelah was able to visit Abiding Presence, and she was also immediately drawn to the kinds of authentic relationships already in progress in the congregation.

**Aqueelah:** One of the, one of the biggest surprises for me was just kind of this interpersonal connection that adults have with kids, like this really deep relationship. Um, there's a volunteer, um, who, uh, older gentlemen that not old, old, but he's an older gentleman, and everybody loved him. Little kids—there was a toddler in the hallway who saw him, and got so excited that he was in the hallway too. I sat with a couple of high school girls, and they were like, we love him so much. Like, when we take our trips, we





want to ride in his car. Um, we talked to other volunteers, they look to this guy to kind of be the, the, the spearhead of like how to engage kids. And I thought that was so cool because he wasn't your, you know, we talked about before your typical youth minister, you know, you didn't have cuts in his jeans and the goatee.

**Megan:** And the goatee. Yeah.

**Aqueelah:** And his guitar, or he, you know, he didn't, he didn't wear a tight black V-neck t-shirt. He was like grandpa, right? And I was like, I get it. He was real and, um, and authentic. And just, he said, you know, 'I just love on the kids and the adults.' He had been there for like a generation of young people. So, people who now had kids, uh, who, who he, you know, kind of ministered to, uh, when they were younger, they were starting to have kids. And so, he became like that, that constant for the church. Um, I don't know if I was surprised by it, but I would call that a win that you have somebody in the church who can kind of walk through generations and who has such a deep love for young people, but doesn't really try. Wasn't even trying hard, you know. I, you could tell he wasn't trying to make them love him. He just was himself. And, uh, that made him the best youth minister that I'll probably have seen in a couple of years.

**Megan:** So, when a community is focused on cultivating authentic relationships, forming authentic people, and tending to these relationships across generations—what's the result? How do young people feel in those spaces?

**Aqueelah:** One of the stories that I, that I, um, am holding really close to from Abiding Presence that, um, that might speak to this is there was a teenager teenage girl who started to come to the church with her friend—her friend invited her and she came—and, um, kind of fell in love with the church to a point where she would come when her friend wasn't there. Like, she would show up for things, and her friend who invited her wouldn't be there, but she wouldn't make her wait. Her family didn't go there. Nobody else in her family, it was just, it was just her. She found this place, um, at Abiding Presence, this like, this place that she felt nurtured and loved. So, I got to meet with her and about three other teenage girls, uh, were meeting after school. So, they, when school was happening, they would meet after school in youth room to get their homework done. But we all know that's code for just hanging out with the youth pastor, just hanging out and eating snacks. That's really what that was about, but they said, we're going to do our homework together. So, I get to sit down with her and I was like, you know, why, why are you, why do you come by yourself?

And she said, 'I feel comfortable here.' Like, she really felt like this is the, this is my church. Like, there was something that was already there. Meredith and Abiding Presence didn't need to create something new for her. Um, it was really the relationships that she found there that brought her back, not just from her friend or other teenagers, but even from the adults. So, that's why she would come all on her own is that she found, she found something that was, um, she found something that was deeper. And so, I think God is moving in the way that relationships are being shaped at Abiding Presence. And I don't know, I'm pretty sure they see it and understand it, but, uh, I pray that God just kind of is continuing to make that deeper, um, for the adults and for the kids so that they see these, that it's really all based on relationships, right? Like all of this is based on relationships.

## Conclusion



**Megan:** Next week on *Disrupting Ministry*, we have a very special bonus episode for you as we close out this first season of our new podcast. My colleagues Abigail Visco Rusert and Carmelle Beaugelin and I have, like many of you, been conducting our regular meetings online over the past million months or so (however long this nightmare has been going now). And I've often thought that many of those meetings should've been recorded and made available for the masses because of their delightful mix of brilliant conversation, profound theological insight, and general fun and irreverence. And well, they made the mistake of putting me in charge of this project, so I am making my dream come true and inviting all of you to listen in on a staff meeting of the Institute for Youth Ministry at Princeton Theological Seminary. We'll be discussing the themes from the episodes of this first season of *Disrupting Ministry*, as well as dreaming, scheming, and co-conspiring, as we inevitably always do, about the future of ministry with young people. I'm very excited for you to join us!

Today's episode was written and recorded by me, Megan DeWald, and once again, Nii Addo Abrahams was our audio editor, producer, and generalized genius and wizard. My thanks also to Maiia Avelino and Christine Toto for their help with promotion and logistics and for generalized awesomeness. To find out more about the Institute for Youth Ministry, visit our website at [iym.ptsem.edu](http://iym.ptsem.edu)—and from there, click on the words that say Princeton Theological Seminary or visit directly at [ptsem.edu](http://ptsem.edu). Until next week!