



Hello, I Am...:

First Virtual Youth Leadership Convention Presents Possibilities

By Becky St. Clair

Adapting events to follow COVID-19 restrictions and precautions has become part of what is dubbed the “new normal.” For the Southeastern California Conference youth ministries team coordinating this year’s annual Youth Leadership Convention, this involved many hours in a hot and humid warehouse, being gnawed on by mosquitos, and using empty pallets screwed together to create different film sets with a roll-up loading dock door as a backdrop.

“Often we take this crisis box and try to shove into it all the traditional ways we do things, and they just don’t fit,” said Patty Marruffo, associate youth director. “This year, out of necessity, we stepped out of the traditional format and expanded our convention into something even more than we expected.”

This annual event brings together conference youth leaders to “explore, learn, and advance their leadership abilities into the future,” Marruffo explained. With three socially-distanced film sets in the conference warehouse, event hosts led participants through various workshops presented virtually by various leaders on topics relevant to young people and their leaders today. Topics included Pathfinder club organization, friend choices and spiritual development, teaching children to think, interactive storytelling, understanding youth culture, racial reconciliation and privilege, mental health and COVID-19, and many more.

“We set up tracks this year specifically to allow for open and honest dialogue on issues that are relevant and important to young people and their leaders today,” Marruffo said. “This included a track to address racism, diversity, and inclusion.”

The theme this year, chosen by conference youth, was “Hello, I am...” inspired by Isaiah 43:1, which states, “I have



Hello, I Am...:

called you by name, you are mine” (ESV).

“Our youth interpret this verse as an anthem that compels us to respect, acknowledge, and love people from all backgrounds the way Jesus loves each of us,” Marruffo explained.

The keynote speaker was Marlene Ferreras, assistant professor at La Sierra University. Her message was a unique and innovative look at the intersection between social science and theology.

What made this year’s event particularly unique—aside from the virtual element—was the intense engagement made possible by using an app rather than being face-to-face. The app allowed participants to create community boards on specific workshop topics and arrange virtual meetups to network. By the end of the event, nearly 19,000 interactions had taken place on over 230 community board topics, and 52 virtual meetups had been organized by attendees. And, though it was impossible for anyone to attend each of the workshops during the event, all of them were recorded and will remain available for six months so registrants can return to the app and continue to learn from the convention.

“Our prayer is that those who attended go away blessed, equipped, and motivated to continue honoring God through their service to young people,” Marruffo said. “I’d like to incorporate what we’ve developed this year into future events. The more we can connect these leaders to resources and to each other, the better off our entire conference will be.”