



Building Christian Community

Building Christian community is one of the most critical tasks we face in youth ministry. Through Christian community we transmit the faith and form disciples, strengthening them to go out in mission and ministry. We want youth in the group to relate to one another so that we can do programming, mission, service, and so forth. Community is important for what it models biblically and theologically. The faith story of the Bible is built on community. It begins with the people of Israel coming out of Egyptian slavery and slowly beginning to form a community under the leadership of Moses, Miriam, and Aaron. The rest of the Old Testament story is about the people of God struggling to live in community faithfully and creatively. The fact that the struggle often ended in failure and disappointment does not make community any less critical or urgent. In the New Testament, Paul reminds us that the Christian community is nothing less than the body of Christ, a powerful image for community. Paul, Peter, James, and John all write about the importance of the community and offer practical, as well as theological, guidance for living together in a community of faith.

Our youth are a part of that long line of people who worked and prayed within the context of the community we call the church. The key to what we do in building community is inviting youth to become a part of that community of faith.



How do I establish one-on-one relationships with youth?

Youth ministry, perhaps more than any other kind of ministry, is incarnational—that is, it is about God with skin on. You and other adults who work with youth are the skin. So, one-on-one relationships are important, probably more important than interesting programs and exciting trips.

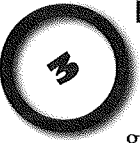
With some youth, relationships just happen. You greet them, and you have instant rapport with them. But this is rare, as most relationships take more time to develop. Here are some things that will help build relationships.

1. Be patient. Just as Rome was not built in a day, neither are relationships. Make an effort to learn each youth's name, grade in school, special interests, and so forth. Talk to youth when you see them in the halls at church, on the street, or at their workplaces.
2. Make time in your Sunday school lesson or fellowship program to ask, "How did it go this week?" Ask what was really good or really bad. Listen carefully to what youth say. If you sense that a youth needs to talk about an issue, arrange a time to get together.
3. Take relationships one at a time. You may be working on many relationships at the same time, but you can grow them only one at a time. When you have an opportunity to develop a personal relationship, focus on that youth for that moment in time. As you develop personal relationships with youth, remember to always follow your congregation's policies for Safe Sanctuaries (see Question 97).
4. Be a participant, not an observer, in community-building activities. You can work on relationships as your team works to solve a problem. That will never happen if you are on the sidelines.
5. Be aware that you may never develop close relationships with some youth. However, another adult worker may be able to. Remember that you are part of a team, so you do not have to do everything.
6. Continue to pray for youth by name, one at a time. The act of prayer makes you more open to them, more comfortable when you are with them, and more willing to risk yourself in a relationship. Prayer also opens doors to relationships with the youth for whom you pray.



How do we make youth ministry personal in a large church?

The key is to have a large team of adults who all work at developing relationships and making ministry personal. If the adult workers meet together regularly and talk about how they relate with youth, you will begin to discover which youth are outside the relationship sphere. Then one or more adults can make a commitment to developing a relationship with those youth. No youth worker can have a close personal relationship with every youth in a large church. In very large churches, the professional youth workers may not have a great deal of week-to-week contact with all the youth. Personal relationships are developed by volunteers who work with small groups within the large ministry, and the professional youth worker supports and resources the volunteers. Even in this situation, however, the youth minister can know the names of youth, know something about them and their families, and be able to engage in conversation with them on a personal level (beyond saying, “Hi. How’s it goin’?”).



How do we keep youth from falling through the cracks?

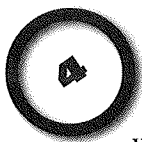
Begin with something so obvious that it seems silly: Keep good attendance records. I may think Sally has been at youth group two Sundays this month, but a look at the records will tell me she has missed six weeks in a row. You have to have solid information before you can plan for action.

When any youth has missed twice in a row without a good reason (such as a trip with family), it is time for postcards, e-mails, phone calls, or however you communicate with the youth in your group. This does not have to be a major production, just a quick note or call to let the youth know he or she is missed. If possible, add a note about something special you really miss when that person is not there: “I miss your smile” or “You always help shy youth. They really miss you.”

Be persistent. If your first note or call does not bring results, try again. If that does not work, try a personal visit (remembering all the parameters about Safe Sanctuaries; see Question 97). Persistence is crucial. In a

slightly different context, when I was a youth I invited one of my friends to come to youth group. The youth did not come. So, knowing something about how one gets results, I told him I would come by the next Sunday night to pick him up. He said he was not ready. I told him to be ready the next week, and I would be by again. It took thirteen weeks before he was ready when I came by. After that, he never missed a youth meeting, Sunday school class, or worship unless he was sick. Today, he is the lay leader of his church.

Make youth ministry personal. Know youth and what is happening with them (see Questions 1 and 2). To keep youth from falling through the cracks, you have to be constantly alert and working to stay in touch.



How do we engage those who do not want to be in the group but have to be there?

These are the youth whose parents say things such as, “You will stay in Sunday school until you finish confirmation” or “You have to go to youth group. It will be good for you, and you’ll make lots of friends.” That theme has about a dozen more variations, and you may have heard most of them. So, how *do* you engage those youth?

Do not make them self-conscious about their situation by singling them out or by talking about their situation. If they want to talk about it, they will come to you. Most of the time, however, they communicate with an attitude that lets you know what they are thinking: *Okay, I’m here. My parents can make me come, but you can’t make me like it.*

If you have a Sunday school class or youth group where youth are actively involved, these “you can’t make me” youth may become engaged in spite of themselves. However, they also need some special attention. Ask them what they really like and how they like to learn (see Questions 22 and 94). Do not make a big deal about them having to be there. Focus your conversation on them: what is happening in their lives and what is fun for them. Invite them to help with leadership in an area in which they are interested. Encourage them to be involved in retreats, mission projects, and other activities that are purely voluntary.

Challenge them to engage in things they do not have to do. If their parents force them to come to Sunday school or youth group, challenge them to volunteer to become part of a Bible study group or prayer group that meets during the week. They may become more involved if the activity is something they can freely choose. Sometimes these youth are bored by Sunday school and/or youth group and need a group that challenges

their minds. The invitation to become part of a small group that goes deeper may be exactly what they have been waiting for.



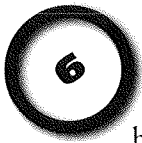
What about youth with special needs? We have a boy who is deaf and a foreign exchange student who needs our youth to speak more slowly so that she can keep up with the conversation.

Those are two kinds of special needs. Others include dyslexia, attention deficit disorder (ADD), and physical or mental challenges.

An important part of building community is including everyone in as many activities as possible. People with special needs may need some help, but the help should come, as much as possible, from the group without making a big deal of it. For example, if you have a youth in a wheelchair and your activity involves a trust walk, or a low-ropes activity, you may have to modify the activity slightly so that the person in the wheelchair can participate. Other youth can be responsible for helping get the wheelchair around outdoors. The key is that every youth is responsible for the well-being of all the other youth in the group.

If you have a youth with dyslexia or some other learning disorder, do not expect that youth to read the Scripture for your devotional time. Find other ways to be sure that he or she is learning and participating. Maybe more of the learning can be verbal, rather than a lot of reading. With attention deficit disorder, you may need to structure more learning activities that are active, rather than passive (see Questions 22 and 94). One church with a youth who was deaf made arrangements for the signer for worship to come to Sunday school and translate the lesson. The signer also helped the other youth in the class learn some basic signs so that they could say hello and carry on simple conversations in sign language. This not only helped the youth who was hearing impaired to become a part of the group but also helped build community in the rest of the group as well. Obviously, not every group will have access to a skilled signer. Check around in the community for people who can sign.

With foreign exchange students, who need people to speak more slowly, the leader sets the example. When you teach or give directions for an activity, speak slowly and distinctly. If youth talk too fast and low, stop them and say something such as, “I hear as well as I ever did. I just don’t hear as fast. Could you repeat that a little more slowly, please?” If you can say that *you* need them to talk more slowly, you will have helped your exchange student without calling attention to her or him.



How do we help new youth feel at home?

Whether it is Sunday school or youth group, take time to introduce new youth to the group. Give names and, if possible, something of interest about each youth in the group so that the new person has something to remember. Or have youth introduce themselves by name and tell something that is interesting about themselves. Ask two youth to take the new person under their wings and help him or her begin to feel comfortable. This is particularly important for fellowship groups, where the pattern of the evening may vary from church to church. Knowing such things as how to get ready for snacks or supper, what to expect from fellowship time, and what to bring to the worship circle can help new youth avoid a lot of embarrassment and feel more at home. Youth are the best people to provide that kind of guidance, one step at a time. Asking youth to take responsibility for newcomers also helps build a sense of community among the whole group.

If this is a new idea for you, carefully select youth to mentor newcomers so that the first steps will be successful ones. Other group members will learn by watching what they should do to welcome newcomers. Then other youth can begin to share the responsibility. The added advantage of this approach is that if you choose leaders in the group to welcome newcomers, this carries the subtle, unspoken message that it is okay to be open to new people in the group.



How do we handle cliques?

Cliques can be one of the most destructive elements to community in any group. Surprisingly, cliques can also be an element in building community. It depends on how the clique functions.

So, the first step is to identify which sort of clique you have. A constructive clique is a small group of people who enjoy one another's company, seek one another out, and spend time together without excluding others. Although they do not shut anyone out of their smaller group, they may not go out of their way to make them welcome, either. However, they welcome other people to the youth group. They cheerfully work in small groups with youth not in their clique and do not fuss about being separated.

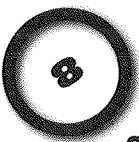
A destructive clique, on the other hand, is a group of people who want to be together for everything and do not want to be separated for anything. They are exclusive, tend to cut others who venture into their

orbit, and complain loudly when you want to break them up, no matter for what reason or for how long. You cannot just ignore them and let their clique continue to eat away at the group like acid.

So, which sort of clique do you have? If it is a constructive clique, do not worry about it. Everyone prefers the company of some people to that of others. As long as they continue to function as a part of the total youth group, welcome others, and do not fuss about being separated for activities, they are not a problem.

If you have a destructive clique, you need to do something. Sometimes it seems as if the only way to open up these groups is by using dynamite. Lectures about the dangers of being a clique and the importance of community do not touch them, since they have a community in which they feel comfortable. What you can do is gently but firmly continue to spread them out among small groups when you do learning or working activities. When they protest that they want to be with their friends, assure them that you recognize that reality and that they will be able to be together later in the meeting (or service project). But right now they are needed in this small group, and you want them to work at finding something good to say about every person in the group.

A wise leader in an adult service organization said that if you act as if you like people in the group, pretty soon you will. The same thing may be true of cliques. If they act as if they are open to dealing with other people, sooner or later they will be. It will be hard and will take a lot of patience and determination on your part, but it will pay off in the end.



How do we mesh kids from different school districts when the only time they see one another is at church? If even a large minority of the group comes from one school, they dominate the group because they know one another.

A good biblical foundation for helping mesh youth from different schools is to focus on the Pauline image of the church as the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12). Paul was dealing with two issues. The first was that some members of the church were saying that their spiritual gifts were more important than those of others. The second was how to mesh all those different people together into one group. Try some learning activities involving art that tries to show the body as all one organ, such as an eye. Ask pointed questions about how a body could breathe, eat, or do anything else except see if it were an eye. Ask youth what they think Paul

was trying to say to the Corinthian church with those images. You probably will not have to point out the obvious parallels to your own group.

One congregation, which had youth from twenty-two different schools in their youth groups, tried making a large wall decoration. At the top of the wall, they put a banner with the words “You are all one in Christ Jesus” and “First Church UMYF.” They invited youth to bring school pennants or other emblems that identified their school. The church displayed them on the wall below the banner. (Even if fifteen youth were from one school, only one emblem represented that school.) This decoration was left up all year to remind youth every time they came together that they had both different identities and a common identity.

The key is to focus on the things youth have in common: They face the same problems in growing up. They have similar problems in school; the problems just have different names in different schools. They are all coming to the same youth group. What does that mean for them? If programming for fellowship groups can focus on common needs and interests, meshing becomes much easier.

An excellent resource for building community, and for meshing youth from different schools, is *Go For It!: 25 Faith-Building Adventures for Groups*, by Walt Marcum (Abingdon Press, 1998). It is a collection of twenty-five faith-building adventures that require teamwork and focus on community building through faith. Each adventure has a Bible study as part of the reflection on the activity. It is a good start for meshing youth from different schools into one group.



All our youth go to the same school and seem unwilling to be open and vulnerable with one another. What do we do?

Ah, the opposite problem. They have to see one another again on Monday, and they may not all run in the same group at school. They are afraid that something they say will get back to kids at school, who will use it to make fun of them or to gain an advantage. That is a real concern for youth who may be extra sensitive or insecure about their place in the world. What can you do about it?

No youth, in any group, is going to be open and vulnerable without sensing a certain level of trust and community in the group. Community-building activities, such as those in *Go For It!* (see Question 8), can help build the trust level. If openness and vulnerability is an important goal for you, begin moving toward it by discussing topics that are safe. As

youth discuss these topics, you can begin asking for personal opinions. This is also the time to begin developing some rules for dialogue. One youth teacher told his class that an important rule was no putdowns, and that he expected the class to make sure that rule was followed by everyone—including him. Several weeks later, he deliberately used a putdown on a person in the class whom he knew could handle it. No one said anything, so he asked them why they did not enforce the rule on him. After that, the youth were clear about the rule against putdowns. In an atmosphere where youth routinely put one another down, the level of openness and vulnerability will always be low.

At a more basic level, it is important that you ask yourselves these questions: Why is openness and vulnerability an important goal for us? What do we mean by openness and vulnerability? How does openness and vulnerability work out at different age levels? Openness is a different thing among sixth graders than among twelfth graders. Being vulnerable is hard for people of all ages, but older youth have, for the most part, more maturity and can handle the risks of vulnerability better than younger youth can.



How do we help those who are excluded by the group?

A question that immediately comes to mind is, Why are they excluded? It may be a question you will have to answer in order to know how to help them. Is it because they are different somehow? Does their behavior invite exclusion? What is the real reason? If there are youth who are not being excluded but who have a good understanding of the group, maybe you could say, “I notice Jamie is always on the outside of the group. What’s happening there?”

What form does the exclusion take? Is it simply ignoring the person? Or does it involve verbal putdowns? Do youth physically distance themselves from this person?

Active-learning games help all youth understand what it means to be shut out of the group. Community-building activities (see Question 8) help open some doors. When youth have to depend on a person they have previously excluded, they begin to look at that person in a different way. Biblically and theologically, the imagery of the body of Christ is an important tool for opening the doors to those who are excluded.

While you are patiently working to open doors and have barriers come down, continue to make yourself available to the youth who are

being excluded. Make an extra effort to include them in activities. Ask them direct questions in discussion times so that they are invited into the discussion. Encourage them to take leadership roles that can make them look good as they make a contribution to the group.



How do we teach youth to have respect for one another and for adults who do not agree with them?

This question sounds as if it is a discipline issue, but it is about building community. Trust and respect are the foundations of any solid group, particularly for a faith community. If snide remarks and comments, such as “That’s a stupid question,” are the norm for a group, there will be little sense of community—and little hope of ever helping these youth grow in the faith.

You teach respect primarily by example, but sometimes you have to stop and explain it as you go along. As a youth leader and teacher, my primary rule was no putdowns, which was rigidly enforced. Sometimes, the best way to deal with putdowns and other forms of disrespect is to stop the group and say, “Let’s see if we can reconstruct what happened in the last five minutes. What just happened? What happened before that? Was there any cause-effect in that process?” When you get back to the point where lack of respect reared its ugly head, you can ask, “Do you see what happened here? What did that do to our group?” If you use this approach, you have to be careful not to assign blame or to allow youth to blame someone else for causing the problem in the first place.

Another model for teaching respect in verbal disagreements is helping youth understand the issue. If Mark disagrees with Anna, he has to restate what Anna said before he can state his disagreement. The leader then checks with Anna to see if that is what she said (meant). Sometimes this will clear up the disagreement, simply because a statement has been misunderstood. At the least, this process will lower the risk of tempers getting out of control, because we have pushed people to understand one another in the process of disagreement. Since we are talking about teaching respect by example, it is important that leaders model this process when they disagree with youth.

Here is still another model. Many youth protect themselves against lack of respect by prefacing what they want to say with phrases such as these: “This may sound stupid, but...” or “I know this is a silly question, but...” Whenever you hear this, you can model respect by saying

something such as, “There is no such thing as a stupid question if you really want to know the answer” or “I understand you think it may sound stupid, but it was an interesting way of getting at the question.” Always affirm what people say, even if it is out of left field. The important thing is not correcting misinformation but affirming people. You can always correct misinformation after the affirmation: “Alex, thank you for that idea. You have suggested a creative way of dealing with the issue. Unfortunately, you may not have been aware of these realities.” Then you can lay out the correct information.

