



# Getting Support From the Congregation

77

## **How do we help the congregation realize and act on their responsibilities for youth?**

This is a long-term project that focuses on education and consciousness-raising. Enlist the help of the pastoral staff, beginning with baptism. In the services of the Baptismal Covenant, the questions asked of the congregation imply that every member of the congregation will do whatever is needed to help facilitate the spiritual growth of the infant (or child, or youth, or adult) being baptized. Ask the pastor to interpret the importance of that question in sermons, during baptisms, in the church newsletter, and in special study sessions about the meaning of baptism. This will not cause members of the congregation to tear down your door to work with youth, but it will build a solid, long-term foundation for congregational support.

78

## **How do we get adults in the church to realize that youth are important enough to spend time with?**

In addition to the long-range strategy outlined in the previous question, here are some things you can do. Look around to see who in the congregation is already paying attention to youth: stopping to talk to them, showing interest in their activities, and supporting their choirs,

teams, mission projects. Ask each one of these people to enlist one other adult to come with him or her when he or she talks with youth. Adults have some serious fears about relating to youth, such as not knowing what to talk to them about and not wanting to seem out of touch. Following a mentor to talk with youth can help them deal with some of these fears.

Enlist some of the real decision makers in the congregation to help you. These are not necessarily the people who hold the top offices, although they may be. They are the people who set the tone for the congregation, the ones everybody else checks with to see how they are going to vote in church meetings, in order to decide their own vote. Meet these people for lunch, coffee, or just to talk. Outline for them what your game plan is for youth ministry (see Question 92). They will be impressed that you have long-range goals and have a plan to reach them. Talk to them about why youth are important and some of the needs youth have. Then ask them to advocate for youth whenever possible. This may mean going out of their way to publicly talk to youth or speaking up in meetings to advocate for youth interests. Have something specific in mind you would like them to do. Not every person you talk to will agree to help, but more of them will say yes than no.

This is usually the spot where we would talk about the future of the church. I would not do that, for two reasons. First, we have used that phrase too much, so it no longer resonates with people. Second, youth are *not* the future of the church. Oh, we hope they will be part of the church in the future, but most of the youth in your church today probably will not be the future of *your* church. They will be somewhere else. However, the youth are the *present* of your church. This is the point you should push with the congregation. Youth are here; they are the present. How do you relate to them and help them become fully participating members of the congregation in the present? And, by the way, this means more than putting youth on church committees, although that can be important.



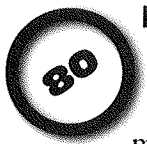
### **What church structures are necessary to support youth ministries?**

The foundational structures are financial, physical setting, and educational. First, the financial structures. In many congregations, the youth are the only group in the church still expected to finance their own ministries. Look at the line item for youth ministry in your church budget. How large a percentage of the actual cost of youth

ministry is that amount? This tells you a great deal about whether or not youth ministry is a priority for your congregation. This does not mean that the congregation has to pay all the bills for the ski trip and the day at the amusement park. That is a different issue, and youth are more than willing to help raise those funds. That is also true for mission trips. (Many adult groups also raise their own funds for mission trips, so that is fair.) However, the church should provide adequate funding for resources, programs, and training for adult leaders.

A close relative of the financial structure is physical setting. What do the youth rooms look like? Do the adult classrooms have new furniture, while the youth deal with castoffs? Are youth rooms freshly painted? Where are the youth rooms? Are they separated from the rest of the church? This carries a subliminal message all by itself. What is the physical condition of the youth rooms? I recently visited a church where the youth rooms were in one large room that was broken up by accordion partitions that were broken. They either did not close completely or had gaping holes in them. Sometimes youth rooms are used to stash equipment that the church cannot find any other place for. This sends a message to youth.

Besides strong financial and setting structures, we need a strong educational structure. It is hard to do serious teaching in a room that has only two walls, which are crammed with bulletin boards and blocked by couches. Where do the teachers hang maps or timelines? What do they use for projection equipment? What is the support system for Christian education with youth?



### **How do we raise awareness among other church staff about the importance of youth ministry?**

Having been both a youth minister and a senior pastor, let me say that you have to begin with the senior pastor. Is she or he aware of the importance of youth ministry? How does that show in her or his priorities? Ask the pastor for an hour to talk about youth ministry. Outline your game plan so that the pastor knows what you are doing. Ask her or him for help in specific areas. One area would be closer cooperation in such things as confirmation. Ask how you can help with confirmation education. Would the pastor like your help in knowing more about the youth in the class? Then talk about worship and preaching. Most senior pastors are not going to want to turn the worship service over to you so that youth can include rock music. But most senior pastors

would be happy to hear suggestions about how minor adjustments to the worship service would make it more inviting for youth. And most of them would be happy to hear suggestions about how to use illustrations, examples, and youth problems in their sermons. All pastors want their sermons to be relevant to the whole congregation; therefore, if using a youth-oriented illustration will help, they will be happy to try. If this works, they will be coming back to you for more ideas.

If you are a paid youth worker, you and other staff, such as the Christian education director and the music director, may need to talk about common areas of responsibility: Sunday school, confirmation, and so forth. How does your game plan fit with the game plan for Christian education and music ministry? How can you work together to make all programs stronger and more appealing to youth? One of the biggest problems I had when I was teaching youth Sunday school was that the music director wanted the youth released early from Sunday school so that they could warm up for half an hour before they sang in the worship service. Ultimately, we had a confrontation about that issue. However, we both came away feeling that we had learned from each other and were willing to support what the other person wanted.

In short, one of the best ways to work with other church staff is to focus on areas of common interest. If you can devise a strategy for working with other staff that leads to a win-win situation, they will be more willing to support your ministry while you support theirs.



### **What can you, as a layperson, do if you think the church is making poor decisions relative to youth, but you are not on the right committee?**

If you know someone who is on the right committee, lobby with him or her. If you do not know anyone on the committee, talk to the pastor and to the movers and shakers in the congregation. (See Question 78 for ways to identify those people.) Be honest about your concerns, but do not call names or cast blame. Say things such as, “I am concerned that the youth are spending all their time doing fun stuff instead of learning about God.” Make suggestions for what kinds of decisions you think would be the right ones. Ask for advice on how you could be a successful advocate for youth. Volunteer to be a part of the group (or groups) that make those decisions.



**How do we help youth feel significant to others in the congregation—that is, how do we help adults (besides family or close friends) know youth by name and take an interest in them?**

Begin by asking the mentors of the confirmation class to keep in touch with youth after confirmation. This does not have to be a major commitment. They could stop to talk to youth in church: “How’s it going?” “What’s new at school?” “What are you doing that’s cool for you?” They could remember birthdays. They could on occasion invite the youth for dinner, for a Coke, or for whatever. However, they should always follow your church’s Safe Sanctuaries policies and procedures (see Questions 69 and 97).

Enlist older members of the congregation. They care about youth and often have time, although they may think they are too old to do anything to help youth. Invite them to make friends with youth, to drop them notes of encouragement or congratulation, to send birthday greetings, to give them a call from time to time. Ask them to let the youth know they are praying for them. Nothing makes a person feel more significant than knowing someone is praying for him or her.

Ask an adult class to adopt a youth class. Adoption means a commitment to get to know the youth in the class, to pray for them by name (prayer partners is a good method to do this). From time to time, have the classes meet together. Invite youth to the adult class, and have the adult teacher lead. Next time, the adults go to the youth room, and the youth teacher leads the class. The adult class can occasionally invite youth to their potluck dinner and program. A general invitation will not work here. Specific adults need to invite specific youth, offer to pick them up, make them feel welcome, be sure they have a plate, and so forth. This pairing of classes could be a rich growing experience for both age levels.

