



Getting Youth More Involved

32

How do we get youth to attend consistently?

The word *consistently* seems to recognize the reality that every youth is not going to attend every session, whether it is Sunday school or a fellowship group. Given that reality, the best way to get youth to attend consistently is to have

- a sense of belonging to the group;
- a welcoming atmosphere for newcomers;
- quality lessons/programs;
- trained, caring leaders/teachers;
- consistent follow-up when youth miss.

All of those together will not guarantee youth will attend consistently, but building on them will put you ahead of the curve on that issue.

33

How do we draw into the faith those youth who are on the outside/fringe of the group? Some of them come regularly but do not seem to be touched by what we do.

My passion in youth ministry has always been drawing youth into the faith and helping them grow in faith and understanding. In the real world, some youth will come but will always be on the fringes and seem

untouched by what you do. The hopeful note there is that you do not know what foundations you are laying for the future in those youth. What you say and do with them now, even though they do not seem touched by it, may make a major difference to them in the future. What you do with them, futile though it may seem, is a part of God's work of prevenient grace in their lives.

What can you do? Continue to reach out to those youth and try to include them in what you are doing. Ask them what their interests and issues are. Maybe they are concerned about something that you can build into your ministry so that you can reach them.

The other thing you can do is not give up. Continue to build a ministry that offers the opportunity for a maturing faith. Pray that God will give you a handle on how to reach those in the fringe youth. Trust God to bless what you do and to work in their lives. Remember that God's prevenient grace does work, and your ministry is one instrument of that grace.



We have good attendance at social events, but it is like pulling teeth to get youth involved with mission projects and fundraisers. Help!

Part of the issue may be motivation. How do you approach publicity/recruiting for mission projects and fundraisers? With the schedules youth keep these days, they need to know how participating in a project will pay off for them. One question that is always in the back of their minds is, What's in it for me? Keep that in mind as you plan for mission projects.

Another way to get them involved is to take a small group on a mission/work project, even if you do not have quite enough youth to do all the tasks involved. Work extra hard to be sure the trip/project is a success—that is, that youth have a good time, that they see that they make a difference, and that they make the connection between the project and their growing faith (the “What does this have to do with God?” question). These youth then become your best salespeople for the next event. And, if youth get fired up about a mission trip/work camp, it is reasonable to them that they need to have fundraisers so that they can afford to make the trip. (See Question 45 for other suggestions related to this question.)

How do we deal with the fact that youth have such incredibly busy schedules and we want them to commit even more time and energy?

Good question. I have seen the calendars my youth carry, and every daily page is full. There are at least two issues here. One is a pastoral issue: How do we protect youth who are already too busy and not getting enough rest? The other is a ministry issue: We have something to offer youth that they do not get anywhere else, and we ought not be embarrassed about offering it. How do we hold the two issues in some kind of creative balance?

We need to be honest with our youth on two fronts. First, we need to let them know that we are aware that they are already too busy and do not have a lot of discretionary time. Second, we need to let them know how important we think the ministry/maturing faith issues are. Then we need to talk about making decisions: If you cannot do everything, and almost everything you want to do is good (so that you are not asking them to choose between good stuff and bad stuff), how do you set priorities? An important part of your ministry could be an annual workshop of how to set priorities for time and energy, how to make decisions, and how to live out those decisions when crunch time comes on the schedule.

Also, provide a wide menu of choices, and be sure youth understand that you do not expect every youth to participate in every activity. Then you have to discipline yourself not to push the key youth to be involved in everything. After all, if the key youth are not involved in an activity, that gives someone else a chance to develop leadership skills.

But what do you do if you are in a small-membership church that has to have almost every youth involved in every activity so that you will have a critical mass to make things happen? Well, you have a couple things going for you. With a small number of youth, you can have all the youth involved in making decisions about which programs and activities to offer. This makes it easier for youth to commit their time to those programs and activities. The other thing you have going for you is that you do not have to offer as wide a spread of activities in a smaller group, which means you can focus on fewer things (in terms of preparation). And youth can focus on a smaller number of activities and give themselves more freely.

Build sabbath time into your program. Sabbath, here, does not mean a day of rest but regularly scheduled opportunities for youth to be quiet; to reflect, in the light of faith, on issues of importance to them; and to build some stability into their lives. This accomplishes two things at once. It allows you to program activities for youth that actually help them deal with the stresses of their life while increasing their participation in the life of the church.



I attend a commuter church. How do we get community youth involved in the church? What is a good start?

A good start is a firm commitment from adult leaders in the congregation. Be sure they know what it is they are committing to. For example, they may be excited about your wanting to involve community youth, but they may not want any extra wear and tear on the building or any of the “wrong” kids coming to the church. Be clear about what you intend to do, why you want to do it, and what your target audience is. It is much better to spend extra time on this in the beginning than to begin reaching community youth and then discover that the church’s leaders are not willing to support a ministry to “those people.” (Sorry, but that happens in the real world.)

But, let’s say you have all the support you need, including money and adult volunteers. How do you reach neighborhood youth? Some churches do this by sponsoring basketball or volleyball nights, either in the church gym or on the parking lot. Recently, I talked with a pastor whose church has a dance for middle-high kids (grades six through eight) on a regular basis. This has been so successful that they have had to turn youth away (because of fire codes on the number of people allowed in the gym).

Whatever the activity is, your first step has to be something that will be attractive to unchurched youth and give you a chance to begin to get acquainted with youth in the community. Spend a lot of time talking to the youth before and after basketball games, during a dance, or whatever it is you do to attract them. Begin to connect names and faces and to pick up on needs in the community. Youth may need tutoring or a safe place to hang out after school one or two evenings a week. Be alert for them to ask the inevitable question, “How come you’re doing this for us?” That is your foot in the door to witness. Do not jump in and give them the whole load the first time; tell them about God’s incredible love,

which you are trying to share with the community. This is also your entry point for talking to them about faith. Lay the groundwork for developing faith groups by inviting them to worship, Sunday school, and youth group. Lay the groundwork within existing groups so that the groups will be welcoming to neighborhood youth (and, eventually, to their families). You are working on two fronts here. One is reaching out to the community and inviting people into the church. The other is working within the church to be sure that neighborhood youth will be welcomed and the programs will be attractive enough that they will want to come back a second time.



How do we keep more-mature junior highs interested in coming back when less-mature youth dominate the group?

This is a major issue. In general, junior high girls are more mature than junior high boys are, at least socially. Work on community building as a part of your curriculum (see Questions 1–11), and build in a variety of learning activities (see Questions 22 and 94). From time to time, divide youth into smaller groups for short discussion times. Sometimes allow the more-mature youth to form their own groups, which will allow them to function at a more-mature level. Remember that the most-mature junior highs will act in immature ways at times. Girls will be as restless and silly as boys. So, providing for the needs of more-mature youth is not a total either/or situation.



What are some ways to focus seventh and eighth graders on serious issues?

Vary the presentation of the materials. Serious issues can be presented in ways that are attractive to younger adolescents and still be serious. Younger adolescents are not ready developmentally to sit still and read and discuss all the time. Use more-active ways of learning, such as games, roleplays, and simulations; and try to make learning as experiential and interactive as possible.

Take into account differences in preferred ways of learning (see Questions 22 and 94). If the resources you are using do not offer a variety of teaching/learning styles, consider looking for other resources. And remember that art and music are teaching/learning methods.



How do we hold the attention of seventh and eighth graders for an hour's worth of serious material?

Realistically, you probably do not hold their attention. Your best chance is to do some active learning, have a variety of teaching/learning activities, and shift activities every five minutes or so. A variety of resources are available to help you do this. See the resources for this section in “For Further Reading” (pages 122–123).



We live in a small town and have only a few youth. With so few, it is hard to do some things. What can we do?

It is tough hearing about all the wonderful things youth groups in megachurches are doing and knowing that all your small-town church can do is be envious. But you also have some strengths in your small group. First, you have a built-in community, which can be nurtured and built up (see Questions 1–11). You can put the whole group in one van and have a great time of fellowship and even of learning as you travel to district/conference events, to a park for a picnic, or to wherever you are going. Second, your logistical problems are easier to manage. Third, you likely have a much higher percentage of youth in attendance than the large churches have. The youth in your church know they have to be there if the group is going to work, and they are willing to take on that responsibility. Fourth, it is easier to involve the entire group in planning.

So, even though you have those advantages, are there some creative things you can do? One possibility is to pair up for some events with a church of the same denomination in a neighboring town, or with a church of another denomination in your own town. This could give you the critical mass of youth you need for a retreat, a work camp or mission project, or a fun trip.

Another possibility is to plug into district and conference youth events, which are well attended by youth from groups the size of yours. One of the pitfalls of some large youth groups is that they often do not go to events beyond the local church, since they are self-sustaining and have enough youth to do whatever they want. Send youth to church camp and take them to district youth rallies and institutes, as these connections help them feel part of something bigger than themselves. Connection is a powerful tool; it is also a source of inspiration, new ideas, and enthusiasm for another year.

41

We live in a small town where most of the youth go to another church. Our few youth get discouraged because the other church's programming looks so exciting. What can we do?

First, look at your long-range plan. Remind yourself what you want to accomplish through your youth ministry. Look for gaps in your long-range plan, and then build a specialized youth ministry to plug those gaps. For example, if you discover you are weak on spiritual formation, you can design ways of helping your youth grow spiritually (see Questions 43–51). An annual spiritual life retreat, in addition to what you do in the local church setting, can be a big boost to your youth's morale. Plan for programs/learnings focused on your denominational heritage: Where did you come from? What does your denomination believe? What is the heritage of your local church? Dealing with the question about your church's history is a great way to get older adults involved in youth ministry, as they know the stories and the reasons your church does some of the things it does. Send youth out with lists of questions and tape recorders to get those stories. Then work with other adults to get the stories on paper and into some kind of printed form to share with the whole congregation. The local newspaper editor, an English teacher, or a professional writer in your community could work with the youth on this project. It could really pay off for your youth if you teach them to be *United Methodist* Christians.

Questions You Didn't Ask

42

How do we work with age-level differences?

Another reality about youth is that, as they mature physically and socially, there are crucial differences between (and even within) age levels in terms of interest, learning preferences, and so forth. We all know that there are vast differences between seventh graders and twelfth graders. We recognize that there are smaller, but still significant, differences between seventh graders and ninth graders, or between ninth graders and twelfth graders. For example, older youth are more likely to raise questions and to test out new ideas than are younger youth. Older youth have more developmental capacity for synthesizing information and spotting critical issues. Younger youth have more difficulty in sitting still. They also think more concretely and, to some extent, compartmentalize information.

Another difference is in faith styles. Younger adolescents are interested in issues of belonging, while older adolescents are into questioning. One model for how this plays out is seen in recent proposals for a multitiered approach to confirmation. For younger adolescents, the focus in confirmation would be on belonging issues: What does it mean to belong to the church? What are the secret words and handshakes that make you a Christian? Other important components of belonging are knowing the creeds, the Lord's Prayer, and other elements commonly used in worship and participating in worship, prayer, and stewardship. Another key element for confirmation with younger adolescents is the history and teachings of the denomination: What does it mean to be United Methodist? What is unique about who we are? Where did we come from? What is our heritage? Theology is important, but at a fairly basic level. For example, it is not crucial for sixth or seventh graders to dig into the mystery of the Trinity. For older youth, theology becomes the focus, since they tend to question everything. The same youth with whom you worked on belonging in sixth or seventh grade, you now work with on theological/faith issues. At this point, you may want to deal not only with the Trinity but also with questions about the nature of God, who Jesus Christ is, the nature of salvation, the church, grace, social justice, the nature of the Bible. Doubt may be as important as faith in this process. For more details on faith styles and how they work out in Christian education with youth, see the books listed for this section in "For Further Reading" (pages 122–23).

Within age levels there are also crucial differences. In general, adolescent girls mature earlier than adolescent boys do. Once, when I was asked about the right age for confirmation, I said, tongue-in-cheek, that seventh-grade girls and twelfth-grade boys would be the right combination in terms of maturity levels. That is a bit of an exaggeration, but it points up what all of us who have ever tried to teach junior high Sunday school know to be a fact: Youth have major differences in social maturity, even though faith styles or learning developmental differences are not as wide.

If you are aware of the differences, and some of the potential problems the differences can cause, then you will be well on your way to dealing with the differences. Knowing the differences can also help you find the kinds of resources that will help you deal with the differences as you deal with serious issues of faith and life.