

Chapter

1

So What Is Youth Ministry?

The Church's Mission

The General Conference of The United Methodist Church is the only body that can speak for the entire church. In 1996 it stated that the mission of The United Methodist Church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ. This simple statement is the guiding principle for all ministry, including ministry with youth. We are in ministry with youth to help youth and those who work with youth to be faithful disciples of Jesus Christ.

Youth Ministry All Week Long

Not too many years ago youth ministry was often a single weekly time slot geared to providing wholesome group activities for teens. This included Sunday night programs, hayrides, camping trips, relay races, scavenger hunts, skits, and so forth, all designed to keep youth engaged and connected to the church.

Today much has changed. Youth ministry is no longer viewed as a once-a-week occasion with a single group of teens. Instead, church calendars offer a variety of times, locations, and themes for different youth all week long, such as:

- Sunday morning study classes and contemporary worship.
- Sunday afternoon youth choirs and leadership planning.
- Sunday evening youth gatherings.
- Late-night faith-sharing circles.
- Monday morning prayer breakfasts.
- Tuesday evening Bible studies.

- Wednesday drama rehearsals and tutoring opportunities.
- Thursday after-school huddles.
- Friday sunrise prayer clubs.
- Saturday service projects, and many more opportunities on a once-a-month basis.

While there is a time and a place for hayrides, bowling, and other forms of relaxation, balanced youth ministry must offer opportunities that go well beyond fun and fellowship. Teens today want more than icebreakers and pizza snacks. They need and seek Christian opportunities, not idle time fillers.

A Youth Ministry Inventory

Youth ministry is everything that includes, affects, invites, or touches the lives of youth within your congregation. Chances are your church already offers a much fuller range of opportunities for youth than most youth are aware of. Use the following list as a starting point to identify the scope of your youth ministry. As you seek to establish a balanced and healthy youth ministry, begin with the items you have checked and grow from there.

Youth participate in the worship life of the congregation as:

- Ushers
- Acolytes (candle lighters)
- Liturgists (Scripture readers)
- Greeters
- Leaders of a youth Sunday service
- Leaders of Easter sunrise service
- Musicians
 - vocal choir
 - bell choir
 - playing instruments
- Members of dance or drama ministries
- _____ (list others)

Youth have opportunities for fellowship through:

- Youth group meetings
- Church picnics

- Church sports teams
- District and conference activities
- _____ (*list others*)

Youth provide leadership through:

- Serving on church boards or committees
- Working with vacation Bible school
- Working as an assistant in the nursery
- Serving as an officer in a church-based group
- Participating in lay outreach or evangelism programs
- Serving as a delegate to annual conference
- Participating in district, conference, and national opportunities
- Teaching a Sunday school class
- Leading a Bible study
- _____ (*list others*)

Youth learning opportunities include:

- Bible study
- Sunday school
- Share/care groups
- Special short-term study groups
- _____ (*list others*)

Youth service opportunities include:

- Mission trip
- Christmas and/or Thanksgiving projects
- Visits to healthcare centers
- Outreach programs to the community
- Christmas caroling
- _____ (*list others*)

The Purpose of Youth Ministry

Each autumn, churches gather their youth together with a few adults and try to decide what to do. As common as this may be, its approach is a bit backwards. It's far more appropriate to first determine the purpose of having a youth ministry and then to organize in a simple way to live out that purpose. So what is the purpose of a United Methodist youth ministry? Consider the following:

The five purposes explained above help youth grow toward becoming disciples, or “learners”—not having all the answers, yet choosing to follow the Christian life. You will discover that your faith will grow as you journey with others.

What Is Our Task?

“There shall be a comprehensive approach to development and implementation of youth ministry programming at all levels of the Church. The comprehensive approach is based on the understanding of the primary task of youth ministry: to love youth where they are, to encourage them in developing their relationship to God, to provide them with opportunities for nurture and growth, and to challenge them to respond to God’s call to serve in their communities.” (From *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church—1996*. Copyright © 1996 by The United Methodist Publishing House. ¶1118.2, page 480. Used by permission.)

Let’s look a little further at the four elements of the primary task of youth ministry.

Love Youth Where They Are

Accept the youth as they come. See them first as they are, not as you think they should be. The Christian love in your heart should be the first thing a youth notices about you and should be a constant component in all your ministry. Teens choose to become part of a youth ministry for many reasons. Some may attend for social amusements or mission projects, because another particular youth is there, or just to get out of the house. All these reasons are acceptable, and a youth should be welcomed regardless of the reason.

Encourage Them in Developing Their Relationship to God

Be intentionally Christian in focus. The expectation of a life of discipleship and commitment to Christ should be a steady hum throughout all the fun, laughter, study, prayer, travel, worship, service, special events, and discussions.

Provide Them With Opportunities for Nurture and Growth

Establish a variety of ministry opportunities that take seriously their levels of understanding and commitment. Each youth is typically at a different place on his or her faith journey.

Christian Foundation

Youth ministry should provide experiences and opportunities that teens probably would not have with other groups. If churches simply duplicate programs of other groups aimed at young people, why exist? Recreation is a great tool for establishing relationships; but if games are the sole focus of a youth ministry, youth will go other places that meet their deeper needs. This is why worship, study, outreach, and service receive emphasis alongside fellowship in a balanced approach.

Growth in Faith

One of the greatest gifts church youth ministry offers is a safe space where youth can explore who they are and who God is calling them to be. Youth today are bombarded with demands and messages telling them who they should be. An effective youth ministry is a place where young people can find support to put aside the competing voices in order to hear and to respond to the voice of God. Your youth ministry may be the only place a young person has to experience such safety.

Help for Daily Life

An effective United Methodist youth ministry provides opportunities for youth to examine their experiences and values as they intersect with real-life issues. Your ministry can provide occasions for youth to ask, "Why am I here?" "What happens to me when I die?" "What is my relationship with the people I live with?" and "What difference does it make how I live my life?" These kinds of questions can be the focus of youth group discussions and Bible studies.

Leadership Development

Youth ministry should provide for development of youth leadership. In youth ministry, the focus is on giving youth opportunities to lead. Your youth ministry may be the only group in which a particular youth will ever have the opportunity to be a leader, developing self-esteem as he or she learns and practices leadership skills.

Healthy Relationships

An effective youth ministry is invitational; that is, it is easy to enter. Offer youth a place where they feel welcome. Let them become part of a core of youth who support each other through times of feeling lonely, misunderstood, or rejected. Every human being needs to have a place where he or she is accepted.

Challenge Them to Respond to God's Call to Serve in Their Communities

Create opportunities where youth can plan, lead, and participate in service ministries. These can take place in the church, the schools, the community, anywhere they go! Give youth a chance to understand how and why the good news of Christ is spread throughout the land.

To say it another way, The United Methodist Church envisions youth flourishing in the world as faithful disciples, beginning right now. It can happen! And you, the leader of youth ministries, can help it happen.

The Whole Church's Ministry

"But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it." (1 Corinthians 12:24b-26)

It is a mistake to view youth ministry as separate from the rest of the church. The Scripture from Corinthians reminds us that all the ministries of the church are connected. When youth ministry becomes separated from the ministry of the congregation, the youth and the congregation suffer. Effective youth ministry requires the support, encouragement, and accountability that comes from being part of the church family.

A Vision for Youth Ministry

We have already stated that the mission of The United Methodist Church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ. A vision guides how you will live out this mission within your church. While the mission provides the frame or the boundaries for your youth ministry, the vision is the picture of what you are striving for your youth ministry to be. If you were to paint a picture illustrating God's intentions for youth ministry in your church, what would it look like? How would this picture compare to the picture for the entire congregation?

Developing a vision or "picture" is an important step in any ministry. When we are all looking at the same picture, it is easier to determine what we need to do to make our reality look like the picture. A vision leads us into an intentional future.

You will have created a workable vision statement when everyone can agree on and state clearly the vision of the ministry. Once these

statements are written and understood, planning decisions come more easily, and effectiveness is more accurately measured. Ministry is designed with an intent that is in harmony with the other groups in the church. In other words, youth ministry is purpose-driven rather than pastime-driven.

Consider the following steps when developing a vision statement:

1. Ask all members of the congregation (including youth) to pray and search the Scriptures for guidance in clarifying what God is calling the congregation to do and to be.
2. Design a listening event or events where youth and adults can be heard. Record what is said during the events. Ask these questions:
 - Why do youth from our church want to get together?
 - What is the purpose of our youth ministry?
 - What do we want youth to gain from being a part of our youth ministry?
 - What is God calling us to be in this day and place?
 - Who are the youth with whom God is calling us to be in ministry?
3. Form a team that includes youth and adults to process the results of the listening events and to formulate a vision statement.
4. Test the statement with youth and adults.

Having struggled with what God is asking your youth ministry to be, you will be better equipped to plan for ministry that will move toward the vision.

Leaders bear the responsibility for guiding everyone toward the vision and for holding everyone to the vision. Both youth and adult leaders are committed to living out the vision when:

- They are enthusiastic about their roles.
- They listen carefully and regularly.
- They are willing to think and plan flexibly.
- They are dedicated to constant and continual improvement.
- They are challenged by the prospect of change and growth.

Who Is Included in Youth Ministry?

“The term *youth ministry* is an inclusive title, encompassing all the concerns of the Church and all activities by, with, and for youth. The youth ministry of The United Methodist Church shall include all persons from approximately twelve through eighteen years of age (generally

persons in the seventh grade through the twelfth grade, taking into account the grouping of youth in the public schools), who are currently or potentially associated with the church or any of its activities. Youth who are full members of the church have all rights and responsibilities of church membership except voting on matters prohibited by state law." (From *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church—1996*. Copyright © 1996 by The United Methodist Publishing House; ¶258.2, page 149. Used by permission.)

Following is a brief explanation of some of the above terms:

All Activities by Youth

This includes anything that youth lead. We should encourage this level of activity all the time.

All Activities With Youth

This includes anything that youth and adults do together and should include the bulk of youth ministry activity in a local church.

All Activities for Youth

This includes anything that adults do for the benefit of youth (essentially without youth input or assistance). This element has its place, but should be the smallest category of the three listed here.

All Persons From Approximately Twelve Through Eighteen

The ages are listed because not all youth are in school and yet those youth are still in need of the loving, saving grace of Jesus Christ.

Generally Persons in the Seventh Grade Through the Twelfth Grade

Some youth programs reach out to younger people to prepare them to enter into mainstream youth ministries in the near future. Some churches offer opportunities to individuals beyond the formal age to reinforce their faith walks as they enter young adulthood. The way that youth are grouped in schools may affect how churches decide what ages will be considered as youth. For example, in a community where sixth graders are part of a middle school, the church may want to include sixth graders in the youth ministry.

Youth Currently or Potentially Associated With the Church or Any of Its Activities

The church youth ministry includes youth in your community as well as those in your congregation. Participation in a United Methodist youth group does not require youth to be a member of your church.

What Is a Youth Coordinator?

"The coordinator of youth ministries and the youth council, when organized, shall be responsible for recommending to the church council activities, program emphases, and settings for youth. The coordinator and council shall use available resources and means to inform youth concerning the Youth Service Fund and shall cultivate its support: *provided* that prior to this cultivation or as a part of it, the youth shall have been challenged to assume their financial responsibilities in connection with the total program and budget of the local church." (From *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church—1996*. Copyright © 1996 by The United Methodist Publishing House; ¶258.2a, page 149. Used by permission.)

The congregation looks to the youth coordinator for direction in matters of its youth ministry. Seen as the lay person who holds the "big picture," the youth coordinator promotes the development of a comprehensive youth ministry. The following suggestions will help youth coordinators carry out their ministry:

- Maintain a prayerful perspective of the entire youth ministry of the church.
- Become acquainted with as many of the youth as possible.
- Become acquainted with each of the leaders, teachers, and officers of youth.
- Become educated on the nature of adolescents, their needs, joys, and concerns.
- Work with others to identify the particular needs, abilities, and desire of the youth.
- Be aware of youth participation in all church activities.
- Serve as an advocate of youth involvement in church planning and decision-making. (Encourage the appointment of at least two youth to each local church committee, council, and so forth.)
- Serve as a primary assistant to adult volunteers working with the youth, including seeking resources, budget support, and solutions to other needs that volunteers have to accomplish the church's vision for youth ministry.
- Attend the meetings of the church council and youth council (or similar bodies) in your church. Call attention to overlapping dates

and other concerns. Keep before the council the need to be sensitive to the ability of youth to participate in and to profit from the activities being planned.

- Talk with your pastor about his or her concerns and suggestions for youth ministry. (The pastor should be a primary source of information about youth ministry opportunities in your district, conference, and jurisdiction.)
- Work with each teacher and leader of youth (small membership churches) and/or with the youth council (larger membership churches) to plan and to evaluate youth ministries.
- Make recommendations to the church council concerning leadership training needs of workers with youth.
- Meet and plan with each ministry team chairperson (missions, worship, evangelism, education, stewardship, and so forth) to discover what the ministry team is planning for youth and to suggest emphases needed by youth in that area.
- Be alert for announcements of training events for age-level and family coordinators, youth coordinators, adults who work with youth, and youth who lead.
- Have a conversation with the district and/or conference coordinator of youth ministries. (Consult your pastor for the names of these people.)

FOR MORE HELP

The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church—1996. Published by The United Methodist Publishing House. Available through Cokesbury (800-672-1789).

Guiding Youth Ministries: 1997-2000. Available through Cokesbury (800-672-1789).

Youth in Charge: How to Develop Youth Leadership (SkillAbilities for Youth Ministry), by Tami Bradshaw and Jeff Huber. Published by Abingdon Press. Available through Cokesbury (800-672-1789).