

## Encouraging Participation

### Getting Youth Involved

"Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses." (1 Corinthians 12:4-11)

Youth aren't a great deal different than anyone else when it comes to being motivated. They are subconsciously asking four questions:

#### **Am I Needed?**

I know many youth leaders who want more youth to get involved. Being wanted is nice, but it's not enough. Youth, like anyone else, gravitate to where they are needed, where a significant role is waiting for them.

#### **Am I Expected?**

Youth are looking for tangible signs that they're in the right place. Did you remember their names? Can you recall what significant concerns you last talked about? Can you stop what you're doing to go and greet them?

### Am I Able to Help Lead?

Have there been adequate times for youth input in the youth ministry planning? Are the youth doing as much of the leadership work as possible?

### Do They Like Me?

If teens feel that they are liked, by other youth and adults, they'll be back time after time. If they are uncertain whether or not they are liked, their commitment begins to equivocate. If they are aware that they are not liked or accepted, they will do one of two things: leave and not come back, or come back often and make as much trouble as they can manage.

## Incorporating New Youth

Make your group the kind of place where people feel welcome and want to be. Consider the following questions:

- Is the spirit of Christ reflected in the attitudes and behaviors of everyone present?
- Are youth in visible positions of leadership?
- Are youth encouraged and supported in their ideas and comments?
- Is there time for the youth to talk freely without too much direction?
- Is there time for the youth to talk about specific topics in a safe, nonjudgmental arena?
- Do you take care to mix different youth up in small discussion/activity groups to enhance their ability to get acquainted with others?
- Do the youth who attend regularly know how to welcome newcomers?
- Are the skills and abilities everyone brings to the setting being used?
- Are new people invited to subsequent activities?
- Is your meeting place as attractive and as inviting as possible?

## Planning For Maximum Involvement

Through planning, youth can feel ownership of what is going on. With ownership comes a sense of responsibility to make sure the plans are implemented. The number-one way to enable youth to stay motivated and to follow through on responsibilities is to let them help plan and choose activities for which they will be responsible.

Planning means:

- Seeing where you are.
- Deciding where God wants you to go.
- Moving a step at a time to reach your destination.

## Inviting Youth

Invitations are important. As you invite youth to participate, keep these points in mind:

- Be specific: Make the invitation specific to the individual and a particular date or event. Don't simply tell each youth when to come or where to go; ask each one when he or she wants to be picked up, and plan to stay with him or her throughout the time.
- Be persistent: You will probably need to invite friends more than once.
- Be realistic: Your group members may receive a number of rejections before someone accepts the invitation. Don't take rejections personally and don't give up!
- Make invitations authentic and compelling. As you extend your invitations, you will be sharing good news, doing evangelism in a natural and effective way.
- Be clear about values and goals: Some youth will be more interested in what your ministry is trying to accomplish than in your recreational activities.

## Inviting Unknown Youth

This invitation can be more difficult. Identify someone who has had some background experience with the person to be invited, such as a class at school or the same sports team. Pay special attention to youth who have just moved to your community. They probably will be experiencing some loneliness and would appreciate your invitation and offer of friendship.

Remember that in youth ministry we are called to be faithful, not successful. We must give our best and trust God for the outcome: The one who plants and the one who waters really do not matter. It is God who matters because God makes the plant grow: "So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth . . . For we are God's servants, working together; you are God's field, God's building" (1 Corinthians 3:7, 9).

## Working With Busy Youth

How do we address personal busyness, schedules of volunteers and participants, conflicting activities, academic schedules, rehearsals, practices, sports, clubs, and an attitude that we should try to do it all?

One obvious answer is to offer youth the one thing that no one else can: peace, stillness, and quiet. Youth ministries can offer opportunities for stillness without having to think through, explain, or account for their thoughts. Youth ministries can offer space, place, relationships, and acceptance. Youth ministry can be driven by a vision of Christ, who is more than willing to take our yoke of busyness and give us a lasting peace. What are some practical ways this can be done?

### Accept Limitations

There are limitations and realities in our present day and age. We cannot fight true busyness. Instead, we must learn to work with it. No matter what event or activity we might have, what meeting we intend to hold, someone is going to have a conflict. What do we do? Cancel? No. If only two show—don't cancel. Take the two and have the best time possible, "... For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them" (Matthew 18:20).

### Know the Calendars

While it is impossible to anticipate every conflict, you can often avoid major ones by looking at school, family, and church calendars far in advance. Consider changing the camping trip that conflicts with a Scholastic Aptitude Test weekend and go for an "After SAT" party instead. This gives youth an excellent way to talk about taking the test, which is what's on their mind anyway.

### Create Alternatives

In obvious situations, think about alternatives. Have the concert on a Saturday night or a Sunday afternoon. What you need to avoid is competing head to head with regular activities that involve the majority of youth you are attempting to serve. Forcing kids to make unnecessary and difficult choices isn't fair or helpful. Everyone loses—you, the kids, and other volunteers. This becomes especially difficult for parents who feel that poor planning is happening.

### Know Your Audience

Relationships with youth and volunteers are the most important considerations in dealing with busyness. There is no substitute for knowing what they struggle with and then supporting them through it. Work with them in this godly process; support them faithfully, and expect good things to grow as a result. Face struggles fairly and courageously, and trust that all things will work for the good and the glory of God.

### For More Help

*Open Doors, Open Arms: How to Reach New Youth (Skill Abilities for Youth Ministry)*. Published by Abingdon Press. Available through Cokesbury (800-672-1789).