

Chapter

9

Youth Ministry Is Congregational Ministry

Support of the Total Congregation

Youth ministry is not a substitute for church or a branch office of the main church. It is an integral part of the congregation, with its young members participating in the total life of the church, as well as participating in youth ministry. Likewise, a congregation should not view its youth ministry as something extra, or as a program off in the basement.

However, it's not unusual to see youth programs willingly marginalized within a congregation. The congregation is content with the youth being cared for, and the youth leadership is happy to have some breathing room. While this looks on the surface to be a win-win situation, the truth is, everyone loses.

Youth ministries that isolate themselves from the congregation result in unbalanced ministries. For many reasons, the connection between youth and the rest of the congregation should be solid and anchored at many different points.

Continuity

When we sequester our youth ministries away from normal congregational life, graduating youth never have a place to "come home to." They neither understand the local church nor know how to work within its culture. When or if, as young adults, they seek to reconnect with a congregation, they seek the only thing they know, the same kind of warm, fun, intimate worship experience they remember having in youth ministry. They enter a typical Sunday morning congregational worship and are quickly dismayed. Because they are unequipped to know how to

Chapter Nine: Youth Ministry Is Congregational Ministry

integrate, work to change, or assess what they should do, they often quietly drop away. This should be a great concern to congregations.

Community

Youth ministry is best nurtured in the context of a community of faith that includes children, youth, and adults. When youth ministry functions outside the rhythm of church life, a critical connection to the community is lost.

Relationships

Adults have the responsibility to pass the faith to the next generation. Within the local family of faith are abundant opportunities for ministry, support, interaction with other generations, and other ways to develop long-term relationships benefiting youth and adults. Listening to and interacting with our elders, intentionally spending time with people who faced the challenges of adolescence, can be helpful for young people. The adults have chances to impart wisdom, nurture, and grace to searching youth.

Accountability

Everyone needs to have some level of accountability for his or her spiritual and discipleship practices, especially those in leadership positions. Busy leaders are tempted to neglect their spiritual mentors, to delay time-consuming study, and to omit third-party review of their thinking, actions, and intent. Where should you go for these things? The obvious and practical answer is the church to which the youth ministry belongs. Sunday school teachers, church staff, adult and youth accountability groups, parents, formal evaluations, task committees, lay leaders, and pastors are built-in guidance systems providing needed counsel in Christian discipleship.

Gaining Congregational Support

High visibility of youth in the congregation is one key to gaining the congregation's support for your youth ministry. Adults must see and hear youth so they can appreciate youth as people with valued ideas and gifts. Interaction between youth and the administrative council, the council on ministries, and various committees will encourage shared ministry. Such experiences of joint ownership in ministry can result in advocacy in the future. Through activities such as the examples that follow, you can enhance visibility and congregational/youth partnership:

- Sit together in the front pews during congregational worship.
- Take pictures during youth events and display them in prominent places in your church building.
- Volunteer to provide flowers for the altar once a quarter.
- Volunteer to help with secretarial duties in the church office.
- Write a column for your congregation's newsletter.
- Volunteer to give the children's sermon and to help with child-care as needed.
- Serve complimentary juice and muffins between Sunday school and worship.
- Serve on administrative groups in the congregation.
- Include youth in worship leadership (ushering, reading Scripture, greeting, leading prayers and creeds, and so forth).
- Make posterboard-sized get-well cards for church members in the hospital. Have the youth sign and, if possible, deliver the cards.
- Sponsor events that require entire church involvement, such as a church cleanup day or food drives for a local food bank.

Youth Serving on Committees and Boards

Youth can and should be encouraged to participate on committees and boards in the local church. While many churches faithfully name youth to these groups, that doesn't guarantee quality involvement. To make sure youth serve to their potential, review the following:

Plan Meetings When Youth Can Attend

Most meetings happen at times that are convenient for adults, not necessarily for youth. The net result is that youth just can't get there to participate. If regular meetings can't be adjusted to suit everyone's needs, perhaps an annual or quarterly meeting designed to get input from the youth could be arranged.

Select Youth Comfortably Capable of Interacting With Adults

Deciding which youth are nominated and placed on boards and committees is worthy of careful and prayerful thought.

Meet With Youth Members Immediately Before a Meeting

Take time to help youth understand the agenda and where any hot spots may be. Equip them for participation and reinforce their role and reason for being there.

Have Youth Report Back to Youth

Encourage youth members of committees and boards to report in youth gatherings on what happened and what they learned. Coach them through the reporting experience as well.

Improving Awareness of Youth Ministry

At times youth ministry is unintentionally overlooked by local church decision-makers. Why this happens isn't as important as what can be done to minimize it in the future. Examine the places in your local church where decisions are made: money matters in the finance committee, personnel matters in the pastor-parish committee, worship matters in the worship committee, and so forth.

Who among the adult committee members knows intimately what is going on week to week with the church's youth ministry? Is someone on the committee keeping the needs of youth, their concerns and their issues, before the group? Youth deserve representation at every level of the congregation. The two approaches listed below are most helpful when they are combined.

Outside In

Begin with the nominations committee. Select a person who is willing to serve on this committee and who knows the church members well enough to nominate people (youth and adults) for vacancies. Check with your pastor to discover if vacancies exist and what procedures are followed for filling them. Once a "youth-friendly" person is elected, he or she can prayerfully nominate those who, in addition to being faithful and skilled, also have the added dimension of being well-versed in the youth ministry of the church. This is slow, long-range planning, but it pays wonderful dividends later.

Inside Out

Review the names of adults on the boards and committees and begin actively involving and exposing them to the youth ministry. Invite them to attend programs, retreats, work projects, and so forth. Help them learn what is going on: the kids, their needs, and their issues. In this way, over time, you should be able to embrace the hearts and heads of decision-makers throughout the church system.

This isn't license to place adults in decision-making positions so they can agitate for youth ministry. That type of stance creates a backlash effect that does more harm than good. Rather, this is to assure that when youth issues come up in those meetings, someone is present to represent the youth ministry from a position of strength and firsthand knowledge.

FOR MORE HELP

It Takes a Congregation: How to Gain Support for Youth (SkillAbilities for Youth Ministry). Published by Abingdon Press. Available through Cokesbury (800-672-1789).