

CHAPTER 4**Building Strong Relationships**

Jennifer, Dave, and Betsy had been excited by the idea of including a relational ministry along with the programmatic ministry their congregation had already begun. But they were a little uncertain of how to get started, or what a relational ministry might look like.

The heart of youth ministry is relationships, just as the heart of the church is the relationships developed among its members and between each member and God. For too long, churches have forgotten or ignored the building of relationships between adult members and youth. While programs are important, a significant part of youth ministry is about relationships and building a relational ministry.

As I said in the previous chapter, there are many relationships in a relational ministry, but one of the key relationships is between the adults of the church and the youth of the church. Many adults are unclear as to how one develops relationships with youth. The easiest way to build rapport with a teen is the same way one develops any relationship—by spending time together, by sharing interests, and by having common concerns. As adults and youth spend time together, sharing mutual interests, talking with each other (which is not adults talking at youth), and taking each other seriously, relationships begin to develop. These relationships do take some time to develop, and it is only as the adults and teens have this time together that a relational ministry can succeed.

It is helpful to remember that the concept of time for a teenager is different from an adult's conception. While adults tend to see time in terms of years, teenagers tend to see time in terms of months or even weeks. Thus a two-year friendship between an adult and a teenager can seem to the teenager as a lifelong bond. This explains why some adults can develop deep friendships with teens in the space of several months. Unfortunately few churches have adults who will take the time and commit the energy to developing lasting friendships with teens.

In our culture most teens have very few, if any, adults who really know them. The continued urbanization and suburbanization of the country has established concentrated places where teens gather. Large consolidated high schools have also created the situation where teens spend most of their time with other teens. Contact with adults, especially with a broad age range of adults, has been minimized. Never before in our history have so many teens been concentrated in such a small space with so few adults to watch over them. This is one of the reasons why it is imperative for youth in today's society to have adult friends who know them. These adult friends can help teens in times of questioning, in times of trouble, and in times of joy.

In many places, including our church communities, there is a lack of adult role models. This problem is extremely significant in many of the ethnic communities in our country, especially the African-American community. The problem is intensified by the fact that in many churches the most active members are female.¹

It is often difficult to find any adults who are willing to take the time and energy that is needed to invest in a congregation's youth ministry. Nevertheless the challenge of youth ministry is to recruit and educate adults who are willing to spend time and commit their energy to being with young people.

As you are developing congregational youth ministry, here are some hints for building relationships with young people.

Basic Data Gathering

One of the keys in building relationships is knowing something about these teens you are in relationship with. Gather information such as when the teen was born (a birthday card is nice to send); siblings; divorced parents and/or visitation issues; whether the teen works and, if so, where and when he or she works; other activities the teen participates in, such as band, athletics, drama club. Having the teen's current phone number and address is crucial. It always amazes me how much a simple birthday card or a note received at summer camp can mean to a teen. Whatever gifts and talents the teen has is another helpful piece of information to know, as you may be able to encourage the teen to use her or his gift or talent for God. For example, perhaps the youth can participate in worship. Can she read out loud well? Can he play a musical instrument? Will she pray before a large group? Does he have carpentry skills for a work camp? Are the teens interested in athletics but are not good enough to be on the high school team and would love to play on a church league team? Or are they into journalism and can help with the youth newsletter?

I usually keep this kind of information on an index card. I also keep track of it when I make a personal visit with the teen, so I can make sure all the teens are being called on. A sample of my index card appears on the next page.

Name, Phone

Address Age____

Birthday

School Grade

Family Situation_ Hobbies _____ Work_____

Address and Phone Tidbits _____

Record of Contacts (on back)

Be Yourself

Most teens can tell whether you are putting on an act to get close to them or just pretending to be their friend. You must be yourself, which at times can be harder to do than we think, as many of us are not in tune with who we really are in the first place. You cannot relate to every teen. This is one of the reasons why it is important to have a variety of adults working with the congregation's youth ministry. To be overly simplistic, one doesn't want all "jocks or cheerleader types" working with the youth ministry but a variety of adults with a variety of interests. You can relate to those teens who have similar interests and perspectives to yours. A congregational youth ministry ought to have a variety of adults who are willing to enter into a relationship with teens. These adults, in part because of their variety of interests, will be able to find teens who are willing to spend time with them.

In those churches where only a few adults are involved in the youth ministry, it is imperative that those adults be open to a variety of young people. It may be even more important that these adults keep track of their contact with the teens, so that they can be sure all of the teens have been visited and that the adults know all of the teens in the ministry program.

I recommend that most congregational youth ministry programs assign different adults to each youth so that the adults can develop long-term and helpful personal relationships with the teens in the congregational youth ministry. Most adults will find some teens whom they enjoy being with or talking to. It is important as an adult worker with youth for you to be willing to listen, to be nonjudgmental, to have the time, to like being with them, and to be able to share a faith perspective. (See the next chapter, on adult leaders with youth).

Respect Confidentiality

The main barrier between adults and teens is often the issue of trust and confidentiality. Many times youth will share something with an adult to test whether the adult can be trusted with the information, whether the adult will tell the teen's parents or other symbol of authority. Too many times adult leaders with youth do not keep confidences. The only time information ought to be shared is when a life is in danger. If you get in a position where you feel you must share the information with somebody, you may want to seek permission of the youth before you act. This can help to maintain the teen's trust in you and deepen your relationship with the teen.

I'm not sure I can overemphasize this point. *Teens need to have adults they can trust.* They need adults with whom they can share their deepest feelings and concerns. In most cases, if the teens haven't shared this information with their parents, it is because the relationship the teens have with their parents is not very sound. Your sharing of what the teen has entrusted to you with their parents is not going to improve the communication and relationship the teen has with his or her parents. In many cases, it will only exacerbate the problem.

Key on Common Interests

Like most adult relationships, the relationship adults have with teens will focus on common interests. So what are the common interests you, as an adult, have with the teens you are establishing relationships with? (See topics at the end of the chapter for a way to get started in your conversations with teens.)

I love music and find that music is a way into the teen's world. In fact, discovering what radio stations are being listened to by teens helps me understand the world in which the teens live. Knowing what types of music and groups a teen is interested in helps me to have a better grasp of who that person is. There are a number of resources that can help you "keep up" in this arena, such as the publication *Rolling Stone* and the cable TV network MTV.

If you enjoy movies, this may be a common area of interest that allows you to enter into the world of the teen you are trying to get to know. Books on various topics have all been successful common interests for adult workers with youth as they develop relationships with teens.

Many times a specific program or program emphasis can be developed from these common interests; for example, you may start a book club, a movie club, or a camp for bikers. Remember that as one creates or builds these programmatic areas of special interest, it is important to be faithful to your role as a Christian leader. A movie club that

doesn't include conversation around the implications for the faith becomes just a movie club and not a ministry of the church.

The idea is to establish a common arena for conversation that adults and youth both enjoy so that trust and conversation can continue. School is always a possibility, although many teens think you are coming across as a parent when the topic of school comes up. By this I mean that the conversation can quickly shift to grades or how well teens are doing—parental interests. You may do better to focus more on teachers, life around school, or peer relationships than on academic achievement.

Find Time for the Teens

An important part of relationship building is finding the time to be with teens in informal or nonprogram settings. Certainly it is important to be around when programs and formal ministries are occurring, such as worship, but in developing relationships some of the most important times can be the informal periods.

Do you stop by where teens work just to say hello?

Do you know whether they are involved in activities and what those are? Even if you cannot show up where teens are active, you can make a point to ask them how it went the next time you see them.

Do you make yourself available to them at appropriate times, such as arriving to program meetings early and staying late in case any of the teens want to talk?

Do the teens know where you live or how to get in touch with you?

Do you occasionally include them in your plans, such as taking a couple of them to the movies on Friday night?

If you don't spend time with teens and are not available for them, you will never develop a relationship with them. The most important part of congregational youth ministry, and the hardest to define, is the informal time you spend with them as relationships are developed and maintained.

Turf Issues

A significant way to build relationships with teens has been the willingness of adults to engage them on their "turf." This has different meanings for differing teens. In some situations this is as simple as being around at the teen's home or school. Indeed, a simple way to get to know a teen is to have lunch with her or him at the school cafeteria or to be around at school activities, such as athletic or band competitions. For others, their "turf" may be their workplace or a certain mall where they might gather.

For most churches located in suburbia or in rural areas, meeting teens on their "turf" is not a problem. In some cities, however, you must be careful about "turf" issues and how you are going to develop a relationship with these teens. Unfortunately, sometimes a teen's "turf" may well be a dangerous place for an outside adult. One must be careful about advocating a ministry of meeting teens on their "turf."

It is important to understand what a teen might call his or her "turf." Usually a teen's turf is where he or she ultimately feels at home and has some sense of belonging. It may be school, home, work, a mall, a parking lot, or a basketball court.

An Adult Friend, Not a Peer

A significant problem for youth ministry has been the number of adults who want so much to be accepted and liked by teens that they forget they are adults and can behave like teens. Youth ministry calls you to develop friendships and relationships with teens, but not to become one of them. You are an adult and as such the relationship you have with the teens must stay as an adult friend.

What relational ministry is all about is incarnating God to youth through your relationship as much as that is possible, given that you, like the teen, are human. It is about an adult taking the time to care for teens in a profoundly religious way. It is about adults who befriend youth on behalf of themselves, the church, and God.

All cultural groups have rites of passage, which signal the transition from childhood to adult responsibilities. In the United States cultural rites of passage that recognize the passage of children to teenagers and teenagers to adults have become diffused. Most teen groups have rites of passage that may or may not be identified as such. The issuing of a driver's license is an example of a significant rite of passage for many teens. For some, sexual activity has taken on the significance of an important rite of passage.

Relational youth ministry, in which adults of the church are engaged, will be informed by the rites of passage in the adolescent community in which the church finds itself. Adults ought to be willing to recognize the significance of these events in the life of each teen and be able to deal with these rites of passage in a theological manner. In those places where the rites of passage have antisocial or anti-Christian implications, the church will be pushed to develop other rites of passage and to invest these new ceremonies with as much significance as the cultural ones do in the lives of the adolescents they minister to/with/by.

The most neglected area of youth ministry over the past twenty years is relational ministry. Congregations need to develop and educate a cadre of adults who are willing to spend time and develop meaningful relationships with teens. This is even more important for the teens who reside in those places of our society that lack significant appropriate male models. We will now examine some of the aspects of developing and recruiting adults for this significant ministry.

As Jennifer, Betsy, and Dave reflected on building a relational ministry they realized that they had already begun the process. They all knew youth whom they talked with regularly. Now they had some sense of a plan about how to enrich those conversations and use them more effectively. They began to think of the questions they could ask that might help them gather useful information for programming and in getting to know the teens in their congregations youth ministry. BUILDING STRONG RELATIONSHIPS

Of course, the relationship between the adults of the church and the youth are just one aspect of the relational ministry of the congregation. Youth need to be challenged to examine all the relationships of their life (such as with peers, God's creation, siblings, and parents) to make sure those relationships are a faithful reflection of their faith and belief.

TEN TOPICS TO EXPLORE WITH TEENS

Here are ten topics you might want to try to explore when talking with teens. These topics are designed to help you begin the process of developing a relationship with teenagers. The information you gather can be added to the index card (see above), if it is helpful. And it can be the basis for further conversation.

1. School

Best and Worst Class and Teacher: Schedule: _____

2. Friends

Who you hang with: __ What you do: _____

3. Music

Latest CD you bought:.

Radio stations you listen to: _ Hottest new group: _____

Latest concert you attended:.

Films

Last film you saw: _____

Next film you want to see: _____

5. Television

The shows you watch regularly:.. The shows you dislike: _____

6. Reading material

Magazine you subscribe to: _____

Type of books you like to read: _

Outside Activities and Hobbies

Sports you participate in: _____

Sports you like to watch: _____

Other activities (such as camping):, 8. Family

Brothers and sisters: _____ Do you share a bedroom? _____

Do you get along with parents, stepparent? Why or why not? _____ Favorite relative? Why? _____ Do you have chores at home? What are they? _____

9. Vacation

Favorite vacation: _____

Place you would really like to visit and why:

Worse vacation _____: 10. Work

Do you work? Why or why not? _

What do you do with the money you make? _____

