

It Takes A Village

Fulfilling Baptismal Promises to Young People

As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.¹

There is a trend in many churches that once young people are post confirmation age they are the sole responsibility of the youth director and leaders. Not only is this an awful lot to expect of both paid and volunteer youth leaders, current studies show that this model is simply not as effective as it should be to properly support our young people's faith formation or spiritual needs.

In their recent book for youth workers, *Sticky Faith: Practical Ideas to Nurture Long-Term Faith in Teenagers*², authors Powell and Griffin suggests ways to involve the greater church community in the investment of our young people, and not solely rely on the youth staff and volunteers. They argue that the standard ratio of one adult for every five young people should actually be more like five adults for every one young person. This is quite a drastic difference. Lest you fear that we are about to challenge you to recruit even more volunteers for your youth program when you have already burned out your faithful few, keep reading. In order for the five adults to one youth ratio to be practical and tangible, the entire faith community must be involved. This means that in addition to the youth leaders, each young person should have the investment of additional congregation members throughout their teenage years. The type of "investment" that each adult makes in the life of each young person will vary as much as the personalities in your congregation. The diversity of personalities and shared stories is also vital in the lives of young people, as stated in *Almost Christian*³, since their faith is greatly formed from relationships with people and mentors, not programs alone.

As a starting point, suggest that the pastoral and education staff at your church consider reading *Sticky Faith* and discussing the five to one ratio as a new model for youth ministry in your congregation. And certainly tweak the ratio to best fit your congregation. If you are a smaller church, try this out with the three to one ratio first, or covenant to mentor each young person through college, and not just their senior year of high school.

Explain to others on your staff that this model would look very similar to confirmation mentor models when an elder is chosen to mentor a confirmand throughout their confirmation classes. Or it would look very similar to after school tutoring programs where adults volunteer their gifts and expertise in certain subjects to assist young people with their schoolwork. Perhaps it will look like the retired music teacher being assigned to the young person who is hoping to become first chair in the youth orchestra, or like the young adult who opened his own engineering firm being assigned to the young person who wants to study engineering in college. As with anything else in life, when we are matched and assigned tasks based on our gifts and strengths, we thrive and enjoy it much more than when we are not.

¹ Ephesians 4:4–6

² For more information on *Sticky Faith* resources from Fuller Youth Institute, visit www.stickyfaith.org.

³ *Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers is Telling the American Church*, Kenda Creasy Dean

Also, as you are “pitching” this model to your congregation, remind them of the baptismal vows and promises they made on behalf of all members of your church:

Question to the Congregation

*Do you, as members of the church of Jesus Christ,
promise to guide and nurture _____
by word and deed, with love and prayer,
encouraging them to know
and follow Christ and
to be faithful members of his church?*

Congregational Response

We do.⁴

If they feel inadequate or nervous about what to do, remind them that they don’t have to “do” anything but spend time with their young person: meet monthly for dinner, attend their soccer game, text them after a big exam, offer to write a reference letter for college, find out their passions and help support them, remember their birthday, help them find a summer internship, etc. Above all, love them where they are and listen to their hopes, dreams, and questions. Be authentic and enjoy getting to know them. Enjoy guiding and nurturing these wise and passionate young people and think about what you would have wanted in a mentor when you were there age. As the adults in your congregation fulfill their baptismal promises to the young people, they will likely find themselves encouraged to know and follow Christ on a deeper level themselves.

This model of ministry, like all other relational acts of the body of Christ, just might transform your congregation and better the Kingdom of God in your community. After all, it takes a village to raise a child, and we are all children of God.

⁴ The Sacrament of Baptism, *Book of Common Worship: Pastoral Edition*.

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