

Engaging with Young People

Where They Are, Where You Are, and with What They Need!

Faith communities are asking questions about youth ministry. That's a sign of a healthy and curious church. But their questions often betray outmoded assumptions: of needing certain numbers, types of families, spiffy facilities, and a constant flow of new material or models. Let's look at what it means to accompany young people in their walk with Jesus Christ by examining some of the questions, myths, and realities.

What should we know about youth and youth ministry?

- When we say “teen,” we ought to say it with gusto! We're talking about the years for seven of life's most dramatic and rapid physical, emotional, social, and intellectual developments. It's also probably more helpful to think younger youth and older youth. Younger youth are still fairly dependent on their parents, family rhythms, and a simpler daily structure. Older youth are becoming more autonomous and separating from authority—this is not negative but natural—as they approach adulthood.
- Youth group is not youth ministry—or at least it shouldn't be the only aspect of ministering with and for youth. Ministry is broad and encompasses relationships, atmosphere, and a comprehensive plan to accompany your youth through adolescence. Youth group—the traditional gathering planned for young people in the church—is just one way to minister to young people. Think options! Consider meeting the needs of the young people in various ways—without discounting the great value of youth group.
- *Adults*: the invisible word in youth ministry! We used to think five youth and one adult, but modern ministry with youth says, “Flip that!” How about multiple healthy adult relationships in one young person's life and faith? See Sticky Faith (stickyfaith.org) for some fantastic ideas about cultivating relationships with youth that lead to lifelong faith. We have a great opportunity to engage with other adults called to youth ministry in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)—the Presbyterian Youth Workers' Association (pywa.org). Be sure to check it out! It's for adults in all stages of leadership.

What do we do if we're interested in youth ministry?

- First, spend a little time thinking about why you are interested. Write your reasons down. Is it joy from watching the way young people live? Is it a sense of fulfillment or energy in serving as an adult among young people? Is it that the work reminds you of an important time in your life? Is it a sense of being called by God to offer “something more” in the way of leadership in your church? Are you missing young people in your church or community and think that you need to have them present? Do the young people who hang out in the church's parking lot or at a nearby school pique your curiosity? As you note these attributes, offer them to God—giving thanks for the joy of feeling a sense of God's call. Then . . .
- Talk to someone about it! Sit down with a youth worker, an educator, or your pastor and talk about what interests you. And get in touch! We'd love to talk with you, pray with you, and connect you to others called to youth ministry: gina.yeager@pcusa.org.

What qualities make for healthy youth ministry?

- A sense of joy about the age and stage of young people and all that entails: Their energy. Their hesitancy. Their sense of justice. Their lack of history and experience but their willingness to be a part of history.
- If you are an adult: A willingness to be the adult with confidence, humility, courage, and respect. A willingness to nurture and encourage the young person in front of you and not simply expect a replica of yourself.
- Secure physical, emotional, and theological boundaries: More than ever it is critical to ensure, from the beginning, proper space between a young person and an adult. This space does not exclude but actually protects intimacy and caring. The young people you are caring for and guiding may have a radically different faith—or practice or experience of faith—from yours. Your call as a youth worker is to listen to their thoughts and their heart and to encourage reflection as they consider their life and next steps.

How can we pass along faith to our youth?

- Young people are attracted to and gravitate toward healthy, life-giving, and joyful people of faith. One of the most important things we can do in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is (a) continue to deepen our own discipleship and adventure in living as Christians, (b) share our faith with our young people in ways that are creative, real, and gracious, and (c) shorten the distance between Sunday and the other six days—the everyday world where young people dwell. Help youth see that God is a part of their life when they are in school, among friends, sleepy, taking tests, studying, at home, with family—in other words, all the time!
- Don't apologize for or try to disguise conversations about faith. Young people appreciate the big, important, mysterious, and complex questions that come with being a Christian. They are busy people. If they are with us, for worship or Bible study or a youth group meeting or a book club, they are likely passing up several other activities. Give them the substance and attention for which they long. Encourage their questions, their reading of Scripture, and their thinking about the exchanges between God and God's people. Their stage of life is a fresh and fantastic platform for hearing God's call.
- Remember these attributes of learning and sharing faith: hearing, seeing, connecting, and contemplating. Human beings are wildly complex organisms. Throw in adolescence and all that is happening and shifting—not to mention the immense scale of human learning—and we should expect the transfer and growth of faith to take time, preparation, commitment, and a willingness to experiment!
- How do we know if our kids are really receiving or experiencing faith? This is part of the same mystery in which we all participate. We trust that, through the Spirit, God's word is shared and faith nurtured by our action, our compassion, our friendship—and even amid hardship. We believe that within these experiences we see glimpses of what it means to be people of God. Young people demonstrating faith have a uniquely profound impact upon the earth, the church, and the world. Their energy and desire to act, even without absolute knowledge, is inspiring, though it is sometimes—dare we say it? —intimidating to adults who have learned to hide or withhold their expectations of God. A young person in the process of being transformed by God can be quiet and reflective, confused, and grumpy, or wildly verbal and demonstrative.

Still thinking about engaging with young people or beginning a youth ministry?

First! Understand the great myths of youth ministry:

- You need youth to do youth ministry.
- Youth group = youth ministry (or, at least, is the only way of doing it)
- Young adults are the only people youth want as their leaders.
- We are a graying church; we're done being parents.
- We don't have a band, or a screen, or a paid youth worker.

And now let us bust a few of these myths—for good:

(a) *Youth group = youth ministry*

Youth ministry means accompanying young people: walking alongside them as they make their way through adolescence—helping them to know a loving God, present in life and in death, who calls us to be with them. It is not a program or a mission statement. Youth ministry is a combination of relationship and discipleship with teenagers—any teenagers. Youth ministry can happen in a prayer, in a sermon, through a simple message of support on a church sign, in a charitable gift, in an acknowledgement, or through the support of parents or grandparents.

(b) *Young adults are the only people youth want as their leaders.*

Young people need leaders who are alive in their faith, willing to learn alongside them and be mutually transformed through Jesus Christ. Youth need adults who demonstrate thoughtfulness, good listening, and humor. Youth need adult leaders who do not seek to control or change youth but instead to understand them, enjoy them, and encourage them. Young people are attracted to people (and institutions or communities) who pay attention to them. While there are young adults who are fabulous youth workers, there are just as many middle lifers and older agers who are also savvy companions of youth.

(c) *We don't have any kids. We are a graying church and are not meant to do youth ministry.*

You are always meant to do youth ministry, just as you are meant to care for the poor, advocate for the oppressed, etc. Here are ways you—yes, you!—can do youth ministry:

- Adopt a nearby high school or middle school and offer to provide donuts, coffee, and juice for the students as they enter school on significant “first” days: first day of school, first day after long breaks, first day of testing, and so on.
- Consider tutoring programs for students taking PSATs, ACTs, or SATs.
- Offer driving lessons for youth preparing to drive (using your church parking lot). Include parents and guardians.
- Support the youth of a nearby church by providing scholarships to a Presbyterian summer camp or presbytery youth retreat, conference registration fees, or travel scholarships to the Presbyterian Youth Triennium.

If you are a new worshipping community with a substantial young-adult or young-family base, begin to think about how you might support the health, welfare, and spiritual nurture of children and their parents through each grade. Begin to create milestones or goals for faith now. What parts of your particular mission story do you want to impart to your younger people as they grow in faith?

Remember: Youth are simply another age group our church is called to notice, support, pray for, and teach.

Finally, take energy, courage, wisdom, and creativity from these forerunners of our faith:

“Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs.”

-Jesus, to disciples complaining about the children coming to him (Matt. 19:14)

“These are the things you must insist on and teach. Let no one despise your youth, but set the believers an example in speech and conduct, in love, in faith, in purity. . . Do not neglect the gift that is in you.”

-Paul, writing to Timothy, a young apostle in Ephesus (1 Tim. 4:11–12, 14)

“Go into the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation.”

-Jesus, to the disciples after his resurrection and before his ascension (Mark 16:15)

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