

Essay Title: Youth & Adults Side-by-Side

Audio Essay: Disc 2 track 13

If you're a youth—or an adult— at North Parish in North Andover, Massachusetts, chances are good that you're involved in the youth program. North Parish has about 45 youth in its junior high program and 30 in senior high. They're supported by about 50 adults who are involved in some way in youth programming, from being a youth advisor to mentoring, driving to events, or helping with special functions.

The enthusiasm of the youth and the large number of supportive adults help the youth ministry at North Parish to be close to the center of congregational life, rather than being on the fringes. Having a part-time youth programs coordinator also helps.

One member says “A lot of why I like the group has to do with community, we have some great times and it's also a place to do social action.” A typical meeting opens with a chalice lighting, and members sharing what's happened in their lives since the previous week.

The balance of the meeting may be spent planning a recreational trip or a trip to a “con,” a multi-church youth conference. Other activities include planning worship services, social action projects, and fundraising ventures to pay for activities.

North Parish also has a Youth Adult Committee, a group of youth and adults who coordinate youth activities and resolve any problems, operating much as a religious education committee does for younger grades.

Creating and maintaining a strong youth program takes time, adult volunteers, and just the right amount of advice. When all the factors come together, a youth group adds dimension to a congregation that it didn't have before.

Creating a youth group is not a one-shot deal. Youth groups have to be recreated over and over by the youth and their adult supporters. As youth “age out,” younger ones enter the group, and leadership skills have to be redeveloped. Youth groups are encouraged to have five activity areas: leadership, worship, learning, social action, and social activities.

North Parish Director of Religious Education Gail Forsyth-Vail says, “A youth group can help youth decide how they will carry their faith out into the world. We let the ideas bubble up and we support them as best we can. A church needs a youth group just like it needs a social justice group.”

How can youth groups go wrong? Over control by adult advisors is one way. One religious educator says, “You have to let the youth fail sometimes. This past summer our group said it wanted to do three summer activities. But they didn’t plan them and they didn’t happen. The next time, they made solid plans. It was a learning experience for them.”

Another mistake is to create a youth group without input and energy from the youth. Likewise, problems can arise if the youth form a group without support from adults. A youth group should be a partnership between youth and adults.

One way to help start a youth group is to take several youth to an event held by their district YRUU (Young Religious UUs) where they can get a taste of youth empowerment. When they get excited about starting their own group at the local level, their congregation will be there to help them.

Many congregations have separate youth groups for junior high and senior high youth. One point in favor of a junior high group is that the youth can bond before they enter the busyness of high school. And that means they’re more likely to continue into the high school group.

Should a high school youth group use curricula? Jesse Jaeger, director of the UUA’s Youth Office, says, “There are two schools of thought. One is that many youth do stay more engaged with an issue to focus on. The other side is that the goal of youth groups is primarily to develop youth leadership and that a curriculum is not necessary.” He said some congregations do a

curriculum on Sunday morning and then hold youth group in the evening for the purpose of social activities. Not all youth will likely come to both, but it provides something for everyone.

Curricula for high school groups tend to be short, often only one week or one month in length, and groups often pick their own topics from current events or social justice issues.

Jaeger says, “Congregations are most vital if they’re multigenerational. A huge part of that is having a youth group. Also we have a responsibility as a faith community to provide a place for our youth to be in religious community during this critical phase in their life. A youth group is a place where youth can talk about deeper issues than at school. And where they can develop close friendships and be part of a church community.”

For more information and resources, go to: uua.org and click on Leaders

Resources

Go to: <http://www25.uua.org/YRUU/youthoffice/index.html>

Also contact your district office:

<http://www.uua.org/aboutus/professionalstaff/districtservices/index.shtml>

Many districts have a youth consultant who can help you with your youth program.

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