

Starting Youth Programs Within the Church

How do we start a youth group? Or, how do we teach our youth the importance of their lay leadership within the congregation? What loaded questions! Obviously, there is not a quick and easy answer for this huge and vital mission, but there are certainly some important points to be aware of and hopefully some helpful tools to share along the way.

Question #1 Are the youth in your church integrated into the weekly worship and various lay opportunities?

Some examples:

- Acolyte Program
- Choir
- Potential Vestry Members
- Youth Lay Readers
- Youth Ushers
- Youth Liaisons to various committees (Christian Education, Outreach)

Question #2 Do the youth have at least one designated adult (either a lay person or a staff person) who is specifically designated by the Rector and committed to being a mentor, coordinator of youth activities and events, and a listening ear?

Whether a lay person or a hired staff person (lay or clergy), a successful youth program must have someone willing to devote time and energy to organizing fellowship and teaching time as well opportunities for service for the youth. Someone who is willing to share God's love and the message of the Gospel with the youth of the church is obviously vital. **Who** this person is can be just as important if not more important than **what** he or she helps the youth organize. There is not one perfect type of personality for a successful youth worker, but a genuine and sincere interest in youth is an obvious must.

Special Note: All persons designated to work with youth should attend the Diocesan training session on the "Prevention of Child Abuse" seminar. Go to the website to find offerings of the workshop near you. (www.thediocese.net)

Question #3 Do the youth of your church have a designated and consistent time to gather as a group?

Whether there are 2 youth nervously walking through the doors of the church or 200 youth knocking down the door, having a consistent meeting time and place is pivotal in forming group cohesiveness. This could be once a month or once a week depending on the needs and desires of your particular church, but if we schedule time for soccer and lacrosse teams, it makes sense to have the same kind of commitment for church youth group.

Question #4 What do I do with them once they come????

For starters, try these websites for suggestions on icebreakers, games, Bible studies, and tons of other books and resources.

www.youthministry.com

www.youthspecialties.com

www.vts.edu/cmt/ecy.htm

Ask a lot and listen even more! Given the stress levels of kids today and the ever changing world in which we live, having a safe haven to come to and be accepted should not be taken lightly. That combined with some good old fashioned pizza makes for a great mix to what can be a crazy week.

That being said, kids can be social with other kids without necessarily needing the church. So, what make fellowship in or with the church different from hanging out with friends at a Friday night football game? How do we make sure as youth directors that we are not merely cruise directors for teens?

There must be a “method to our madness”! The person and/or team responsible for the youth needs to come up with a general mission for spreading the Gospel with the youth. What works for one church might not work for another, but the elements of fellowship, teaching, worship, and outreach seem to be consistent. How each church implements those pieces of the pie depends greatly on the kids. For example (and this is simply what has worked for us), we have one President of the EYC (Episcopal Youth Community)

who meets regularly with me so that we are on the same page. The President works with the following officers:

Vice President for Programs – This officer plans one program a month which in some way strives to encourage faith development through teaching. This could be a Bible study but is not limited to that. She recently hosted a “Pictures of God” program where students were asked to work in teams to decide where they saw God in their daily lives or where they found God when they were sad or happy. After taking the group pictures, posters were made and shared with the congregation.

Vice President for Outreach – This officer plans one outreach activity a month. Ideally, hands on help at a soup kitchen or shelter are a great way to see the Gospel at work – literally! It’s amazing to watch a faith deepen through ministry such as this. World Vision’s 30 Hour Famine has become a hit in Region 5. They have wonderful materials that walk you through a weekend full of activities, Bible studies, and ways to build awareness of the world hunger situation. Try checking out their website!
www.30hourfamine.org

Vice President for Activities – Here’s where the cruise director comes in! Once a month, this officer plans a time for just fellowship. Not that it doesn’t happen during the other events, but this night is simply for bowling or a foosball tournament!

Vice President for Communications – This officer sends out email reminders about upcoming events, writes Parish Report articles, and sends thank you notes after a speaker comes to visit.

Question #5 **How important is student leadership?**

HUGE!!!!!!!!!!

Within reason, kids need to own what they are planning if it is going to be a success. Whether it’s a leadership team, officers, or a youth vestry, the kids are learning the responsibilities of lay leadership by doing it. Think of what great vestry members we

have to look forward to in 10 to 20 years! In order to best fulfill the mission of youth ministry in your church, they might need some leading questions to get them going in the right direction. (It's definitely all right to be the umbrella of their organization!)

What do we want to focus on spiritually next year?

Do we need speakers or should we ask the Rector to sit in on a couple of sessions?

How are we planning on helping others in the next couple of months?

Who's going to call the soup kitchen to book a date?

How should we get others involved?

How can we welcome new people to our group and make them want to come back?

Should we have pizza or lasagna next week?

Beyond the logistics and the nuts and bolts of the kids learning how to envision and implement an event, the kids are learning the importance of lay ministry. They are constantly being reminded that they have a responsibility as a leadership team to show the love of Christ to each and every person who walks through the door.

Question #6 How do the designated youth leader and leadership team communicate with one another and the church?

Some suggestions:

- Phone calls inviting kids to youth group
- Announcements in bulletins or parish reports
- Flyers in the mail
- If possible, email is "in", and a great way to send out last minute announcements!
- Pictures in common places so that the church as a whole can know what's going on and spread the word.

Question #7 Once you're on a roll, how do you keep them coming back?

It's easy to think that if something was a success one year, it should become a tradition for the next 20! This is sometimes true but might not always be the case! Once again, you cannot go wrong in listening to the kids and letting them be the judge.

Keeping things fresh and exciting so that the kids can't wait to come back might change as you grow, but the fundamental basics are just as true with 200 kids as they are with 2 kids. Creating a safe place to share the love of God and having an opportunity to explore the meaning of faith with friends and people who care is a priceless gem and an opportunity for a foundation that is invaluable.

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