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"Youth Ministry for Life" *Help Sheet*  
(for congregational leadership)

# How does youth ministry fit into the ministry of the whole congregation?

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## Highlights

- [To what degree is our youth ministry and integral part of our congregation's ministry?](#)
- [How do we make youth ministry integral to the life of our congregation?](#)
- [Just do it!](#)
- [Resources](#)

(printer friendly PDF version)

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Over and over we hear “the youth are not just the church of tomorrow, they are the church of today.” If we shuffle young people off to the church basement, give them some hand-me-down couches, and let them paint the “youth room,” we put them out of sight and out of mind, and discourage them from being the church of today and wanting to be the church of tomorrow.

The church is still one of the few places in American culture where generations have an opportunity to interact, where values can be taught and modeled, and where an individual is valued as a gift to the community. It's not random or accidental that this should be so; community and relationship is the very heart of our values. Rather than shuffling a specific age group off to an isolated “youth room,” these realities of community and relationship need to be at the core of the congregation's ministry as it relates with youth and families.

Youth ministry may be developed in a congregation guided by any number of models, but each of those models is integrally related to the ministry of the whole congregation. Youth ministry is not simply a “youth group.” The emphasis of youth ministry models and an integral youth ministry is one that honors each young person's baptismal calling and our own Lutheran understanding of the body of Christ ([1 Corinthians 12.12-27](#)). The

church is built on a foundation that we add to each day through our ministries and actions, and we lay that foundation on the hearts of young people and followers.

Even if we agree in principle to these ideas, how and where do we begin? There are three challenges to face in making youth ministry an integral part of congregational ministry: 1) Asking, 2) Seeking, and 3) Finding. The first is to *ask*: “To what degree is our youth ministry an integral part of the life of the congregation already?” The second is to *seek*: “What are some things we might do to make it more integral?” And the third is *find*; Okay, not a question, just a challenge: “Do something!”

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## **ASK**

### To what degree is our youth ministry and integral part of our congregation’s ministry?

Begin by asking questions of the church council, members gathered at an annual meeting, committees and governing groups, parents, and youth. Ask the pastor and the staff about the priority of youth in the overall ministry and mission of the congregation. The following list of questions is a place to begin. You may think of other discussion questions as you discern the real role of youth ministry in your congregation.

- Are young people greeted by name on Sunday morning and other community times? How many other adults do the same?
- Are young people asked to assist in planning and leading worship?
- Are young people asked to sing in the adult choir?
- Are young people asked to serve based on their individual gifts?
- How are young people being mentored into leadership?
- How do we honor parents and parenting in the congregation?
- Do young people have peer support in the congregation?
- Where does our church budget reflect an interest and priority in youth?
- How are relationships being built and encouraged intentionally between youth and healthy, caring adults?
- Are the issues discussed in church forums of interest to young people? Do they help select the topics and issues?
- How many adults are praying for young people by name?
- Do we use rituals to recognize the milestones in the lives of youth and families?
- Does the congregation demonstrate its role in the discipling and nurturing of all the baptized?
- Is the youth minister included in staff planning meetings?
- Are the costs of youth and family events accessible to all? How do we make them accessible?
- How are youth leaders recognized for their work and service?
- How do adults in the congregation intentionally model high moral and ethical standards?
- Are programs planned and evaluated on the basis of their encouragement to build relationships?

- Are programs planned and scheduled with consideration to the needs and conveniences of families?
  - How are diverse family configurations accepted and honored?
  - How do we welcome young people who have non-traditional home environments?
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## **SEEK**

### How do we make youth ministry integral to the life of our congregation?

There are many ways to make youth ministry a priority of the congregation, but a healthy youth and family ministry will usually attend to the following four categories in some manner. In each category are listed suggestions for accomplishing the category goal, but the ideas are certainly not comprehensive. Other ideas will emerge as your congregation and its leaders give attention, thought, and prayer to youth and family ministry.

#### Build relationships with healthy, caring adults:

- Cell groups, small group studies.
- Intergenerational mission projects, trips, or Servant Events.
- Prayer partners.
- Learn names, greet each other, smile, and talk with each other.
- Ask all adults to appreciate, encourage, and utilize the gifts and passions of youth.
- Mentor the leadership abilities of youth and adults and let them lead.
- Share your faith journey honestly with young people. Ask them about their faith journey.
- Provide intergenerational activities.
- Be selective and careful in recruiting, training, and supporting adults who work with youth.

#### Provide structured formal and informal learning opportunities:

- Discuss faith development when planning programs with youth.
- Provide some intergenerational opportunities for learning.
- Involve youth and adults in co-leading programs, classes, etc.
- Include youth in congregational planning and ministry.
- Mentor and coach adults and young adults to teach and facilitate youth classes.
- Develop learning opportunities that attend to the needs of parents.
- Discuss with young people what they are learning and experiencing in school and elsewhere.
- Ask young people what is important for them to learn or discuss.
- Ask young people what they are curious or concerned about.
- Train leaders to use current events, community issues, life experiences, or things "happening in the moment" as springboards to learning and discussions of faith.

#### Provide support:

- Budget for youth and family ministry as an ongoing priority.

- Provide quality space for young people to meet and gather.
- Provide opportunities for youth to participate in the congregation as a group as well as individually. Encourage involvement and the use of their gifts and talents.
- Train and support young people in peer ministry.
- Recruit, hire, train, and support quality staff and volunteers to serve in youth, family, and young adult ministries.
- Encourage youth leaders to network with neighboring congregations.
- Support and acknowledge youth leaders in a formal way.

#### Support the families:

- Provide parenting classes and support groups.
- Provide resources for families to nurture their young people.
- Schedule youth programs around family priorities.
- Develop relationships among families.
- Embrace the diversity of families.
- Plan family-friendly worship services.
- Ask families what they need or want from the church.
- Encourage family Sabbath time.
- Inform youth and families of where they can seek help or counseling.

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## ***FIND***

### Just do it!

Remember what Jesus said, “It’s all about relationships... love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength and love your neighbor as yourself” ([Mark 12:28-31](#)). That’s what we believe and that’s what we teach by our words and, more likely, by our actions. Begin your discussions anywhere and let your youth ministry grow to, for, and with young people.

Jesus also said, “Where your treasure is, there will be your heart also.” ([Luke 12:34](#)) So the real question is, do we treasure the great gift God has given us in young people or do we think they are not treasures until they are grown up and fully capable of living without us? There is no question that the adolescent and teen years are difficult as the young child whose life has been dependent on ours, grows into a young person who is testing the parameters and opportunities of the world. These may also be the most important years of faith formation. It takes the investment of the whole community to lay this solid foundation of faith and maturity.

Young people are spiritual, according to a Gallup poll. As a generation, they may be among the most spiritual. That means there will be a church of tomorrow—in some shape or form. If we are intentional about affirming and using the gifts of youth in today’s church, we will be strengthening the foundation upon which the church is built. This is our calling. This is why, when young people are baptized, we promise “to faithfully bring them to the services in God’s house, and teach them the Lord’s Prayer, the Creed, and the Ten Commandments... [to] place in their hands the Holy Scriptures and provide for their

instruction in the Christian faith... [so that they may live] in the covenant of their baptism and in communion with the Church... [and] lead godly lives until the day of Jesus Christ.”

We also proclaim, “We welcome you into the Lord’s family. We receive you as a fellow member of the body of Christ, a child of the same heavenly Father, and a worker with us in the Kingdom of God.” The question is, do we really mean it? How do we put action into our words of welcome? What we do for and with young people shapes the world—today and tomorrow. So let’s begin somewhere in our present situation and raise the level of priority of youth ministry in the overall ministry of the church.

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## Resources

- [\*The Great Permission: An Asset-Based Field Guide for Congregations\*](#). (A guide for developing ministry based on strengths and assets.) ELCA/Augsburg Fortress, 2002.
- [Renewing Congregations: Resources for Transformation](#) (bibliography). The Division for Outreach, ELCA.
- [Search Institute](#) (Resources for better understanding youth, families, faith, and culture.)

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Contributed by **Rev. Janice E. Nesse**  
Seattle, WA 11/03

[Index](#) of current ELCA Youth Ministries *Help Sheet* topics.

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