

Recruiting and choosing adult counselors for the 2009 ELCA Youth Gathering

By Kathy Hunstad (rev. 12/08)

What is the most important part of preparing for an ELCA Youth Gathering? Raising money? Filling out the forms on time? Answering parents' questions and concerns? Booking travel arrangements? In the mix of all the things that need to happen as a congregation prepares for a Gathering experience, the most critical work will be in recruiting, preparing, and supporting the adult counselors who will be part of the journey and experience with the young people.

There are **four key components** to preparing together for a successful ELCA Youth Gathering experience:

1. Intentional choosing of counselors
2. Careful planning
3. Focused group building
4. Reflecting on and processing the experience as it happens each day
5. Meaningful closure and follow-up

The most important is choosing counselors

Great adult counselors for your Gathering experience could mean the difference between success and disaster. Regardless of the size of your group, being intentional about selecting adults is key. Take this responsibility seriously. Ask the question: Why do we send adult counselors? If the only answer you can think of is, "To keep youth in line and out of trouble," you need to rethink why you're even going. Adults are positive mentors and guides. They empower and encourage youth in opportunities of leadership and relationships. They are connectors for youth and the Gathering experience, and for youth and their relationships with peers and other adults.

Search carefully

When looking for adult counselors for the Gathering, do just that—look for them. Pay attention to adults and how they interact with youth. See potential. Recognize abilities. Talk to them. Plant a seed. Ask them to "think about it." Don't advertise. If someone volunteers and you have no idea who they are or what they're about, don't say yes or make a commitment to them. Check them out first. Talk to people who might know them. Talk with them personally, to better understand who they are. If you feel they have potential, get them involved with the youth in a group setting to see how they connect and interact.

Before any firm commitments are made or asked for, Be sure to talk to youth and get their ideas of which adults they might respect and relate to well, and would be interested in having along. Some groups create a team of youth and adults

(heavy on the youth) who choose their adults from the list of those who are interested in going.

Depending on the size of your group and the number of counselors you need, consider putting together a diverse team of adults who will relate to youth in a variety of ways. Pull together parents, adults who are married without children, young adults (must be 21 or older), parents whose children have graduated, singles, older adults, and the like. This brings about a wonderful balance of potential, ages, and life experience. There is no one perfect adult counselor. You want every young person to connect with at least one and hopefully several adults during the experience.

Part of the search for caring, competent, faithful adults may involve performing individual background checks, if they are required or recommended by your congregation or insurance carrier. If the background check policy for youth counselors or advisors is unclear or nonexistent, have a conversation with staff and leaders of the congregation and advocate for taking the extra step and cost of checking out your volunteers. The safety, health, and wellbeing of the young people we are entrusted with are worth the extra work and every penny of the cost.

Qualities of an effective counselor include:

- Faith-focused and centered in God
- Has a healthy, balanced life of their own as an adult
- Has a relationship with youth or open to developing relationships with youth
- Patience and wisdom
- Interest in youth and youth culture
- Focused on youth and their needs
- Committed and insightful
- Sees what needs to be done and then does it
- Has a positive, appropriate sense of humor and playfulness
- Remains calm when unexpected things or emergencies occur
- Knows how to share responsibilities and tasks with youth
- Is observant of group dynamics and other things going on around them at any given time
- Good listening skills and attentive to youth
- Has the physical and emotional ability to fully participate as an adult leader in a very active program

Adults considering this Gathering experience should ask themselves some questions:

- Do I love teenagers?
- Am I a team player?
- Will I be able to focus on the youth and their needs?
- Do I have good listening skills?
- How do I deal with conflict?
- Am I patient?

- Do I listen first or do I jump to conclusions?
- Am I able to see what needs to be done and pitch in?
- Am I able to encourage youth? Including youth who sometimes rub me the wrong way?
- Can I develop appropriate, healthy relationships with youth and help them relate to each other?
- Where am I in my faith life?
- Will I be able to share my faith in positive, encouraging ways?

Set realistic and honest expectations

Adults need to know up-front that this is no vacation, no matter how much fun the trip will be. It's a working trip with the powerful, positive possibility of changing the adult's life as much or more than the youth they work with. There is less sleep than in a normal night, but there is also much more fulfillment than there is in a normal day.

Counselors first and foremost need to love being with teenagers. At very the least, your experience will be five days long, and for some groups, up to two weeks long. You'll need mature, centered adults who are gracious, faith-focused, great team players, willing to go with the flow, and motivated to see what needs to be done and follow through. Sounds impossible? Asking too much? No, there are many adults who possess these qualities. They will need preparation, support, and affirmation though to maintain their energy, positive attitude, and enthusiasm.

Training is essential

The time spent for training and for adult counselors to be together before the trip is very important. They need time to address the serious issues, understand the information, consider the possibilities, and to anticipate and perhaps role-play different scenarios that relate to the experience. They also need time to get to know each other, better understand each other's skills and strengths, learn to work together, and have fun. The time spent in community building and training is a great example to set for the youth of your congregation.

As you can see, recruiting and preparing adult counselors for your Gathering experience involves lots of careful work, but pays off big-time! It also leads to caring, healthy adult-youth relationships far beyond the Gathering.