

## Building Community Among Youth

Building community has been part of our Christian heritage since Jesus walked through Palestine spending time with his disciples. Jesus and his followers spent many hours learning who they were, discussing what Jesus was teaching about the kingdom of God, and preparing to share the "good news" with the rest of the world. The group ate, prayed, laughed, and worked together for three years. Through this experience the little band grew to know and trust one another despite jealousy, selfishness, conflict, and disagreements. Through the example of Jesus and his disciples we can begin to learn what community means and how we can form a community among individuals with different backgrounds and interests.

Most of us long to be in a group where we are accepted as we are and where we can feel that what we say will be listened to without judgment or ridicule. We want a place where we can share some of our innermost thoughts and trust they will remain in the group. We search for a group where we can have the freedom to ask questions, to discuss sensitive issues, and to disagree with each other. We want to build close and supportive relationships.

### **Community**

Young people today look for this type of community. They want a caring, loving, supportive group. They need a place where they can come and let their hair down. Meeting this need should be a priority in youth ministries. How do we go about creating such a community? One of the first things we can do to bring this about is to get to know young people individually. The best way is to make some type of personal contact with each young person. This may be done in several ways: a visit to the house, going out for a soft drink, calling on the phone. Another help is to use a survey that gives each person an opportunity to share specific interests, hobbies, and talents that can be very useful as planning takes place. These two methods assist in building trust, which involves a lot of patience and perseverance. It does not happen on its own. We have to meet young people where they are. (See the section on "The Fine Art of Contact Work," in this handbook.)

### **Recreation**

Recreation is an excellent means for creating a non-threatening atmosphere to help group members get to know each other and break down the barriers that exist when cliques are present. Icebreakers and mixers are good tools to place people into new situations and groups and create a sense of enthusiasm that will carry over to other activities. Some suggestions are Human Bingo, Numbers Mixer, Human Knots, Four Facts/One Lie, and Circle Mixer. Some games that offer opportunities to build teamwork and unity are One Frog, A What?, Balloon Basketball, Circle Relay, Skin the Snake, and the Lap Game. (See "Recreation and ReCreation," and "Games," this chapter.)

Recreation for many of us is scary, either because we have never led games or we don't feel as capable as some recreation leaders we have seen in action. Learn the directions and practice leading games. You will be surprised by the conversations, warm feelings, openness, and positive outlook it will create for your group. Recreation is a great foundation from which to build a community.

## **Study**

Engaging in studies where young people can share their thoughts and feelings is important for a cohesive group. Regardless of the study, it helps to break the larger group down to smaller units of three to five people for a particular assignment. Smaller groups provide an opportunity for community building to take place. By mixing people with those outside their usual group, they are put into situations where new relationships may form through sharing the task at hand. (See the section on "Leading Bible Study," in this handbook.)

Today's groups often include young people who attend more than one school. Although this can create cliques and feelings of rivalry within the youth group, it can also provide the opportunity for a study that may break down hostilities. When you have more than one school represented in your group, provide an opportunity in small groups for the students from each school to list the positive and negative aspects of the other school. Then bring everyone back to the large group for a discussion. Not only does this give new insights about the different schools, it also can help to end some of the rivalries that may exist.

## **Retreats**

Retreats and conferences sponsored by congregations, dioceses, provinces, and the Youth Office at the Episcopal Church Center offer young people a chance to get away from their everyday routines and to relax and be with others their own age. The chance to share ideas about what other groups are doing opens up all kinds of possibilities when you get back home. Participating in creative worship services, listening to gifted leaders, and experiencing very large groups are activities we do not usually have access to in our local congregations. Most groups come back feeling closer and renewed. The key is to build on this and not let the feeling die.

Each youth group, if possible, should try to schedule times when they can get away as a group. Whether it is a weekend retreat or a week-long trip, there should be a structure to provide opportunities for study, worship, fellowship, and free time. Being away from everyday pressures can allow for freer and more frank discussions than at regular meetings. Retreats do take special planning, but the time is well spent toward building community. (See "A Recipe for a Christian Community Adventure," in this section.)

## **Music**

Music is one of the most important avenues for group building. Music is one of the main languages that young people "speak." Sharing songs with accompaniment of guitar or piano is a wonderful way to bring a group closer together. Discussing and talking about the music young people listen to establishes bridges of communication that might not otherwise be available. Much of the music that is part of youth culture offers a message about life that helps us begin to understand who they are. Within many groups there is musical talent that may open up new avenues of communication and establish group pride. (See "A Music Note for Youth Groups," in this section.)

## **Worship**

Another excellent opportunity for building a cohesive group is to plan and lead worship on Sunday morning at least once a year. This gives people a chance to understand what worship means and how the individual parts fit together. It also gives them exposure to the congregation. The most beneficial aspect is that it can bring all the young people together to work on one project. This is their time to share their faith experiences through their own words, music, and message. (See "Exploring Prayer and Worship," in this handbook.)

## **Projects**

Social action projects or service projects are great for group building as well as providing firsthand mission opportunities. Some local projects might include using social analysis to examine the issues affecting youth in your own community, adopting families in need or working in a soup kitchen. Some week-long or weekend mission projects might include a shared experience with a Companion diocese, a Washington seminar, or Appalachia Service Project. Many places welcome youth groups and have had a lot of experience working with them. (See section VI, "Service, Mission and Social Action. ")

To see young people come together and share in God's mission is rewarding in itself. However, to see the changes in outlook and perspective of the young people who participate in these experiences is a miracle. These people feel they have accomplished something important together, and it sticks with them for many years. The work is hard but the unity it creates will carry into other parts of the youth program. Young people who do not usually associate with each other form new friendships and learn to support one another.

## **Conflict**

Conflict is something every group hopes will not occur, but it is impossible to avoid. If an atmosphere of openness, ownership, and commitment is created, and if there is sharing in the planning of schedules and leadership, much potential conflict can be snuffed out. If disagreements do take place, patience, flexibility, and timing can help. Don't hide from conflict; accept it and confront it and learn from it. (See "Life Is a Series of Hellos and Goodbyes," in this section.)

Every youth group is unique. Some helpful ways to establish a feeling of community among young people have been suggested. Not all of them will have the same effect on one group as they will on another. Try several of these and use your own creativity and ingenuity as you work to build a close-knit group. It does not happen overnight, but you are laying a strong foundation for the future,

## **Love**

Patience, understanding, love, and listening are virtues a leader needs to have as he or she builds community: patience to deal with differing personalities and actions that occur; understanding to realize the emotional, mental, physical, and psychological changes that young people face; love to create an atmosphere where young people can be accepted as they are; and, finally, listening to them with an openness that does not judge and is not quick to answer, but offers warmth even though it may not accept the behavior. Building community is an ongoing process in any youth group. It is never complete because new people are coming in and advisors change. In our local congregations, whatever the size, we have to make sure young people are ministered to so they can minister to us and others. We have to provide the best youth ministries we can, and that means building a community that allows them to feel accepted and to continue their faith journey.