

Effective Planning for Youth Ministry in the Episcopal Church

Effective planning is important. In fact, though nothing can guarantee a great program, good planning can help one happen. Why plan? There are two primary reasons.

First is to involve the group. When the whole group is involved in planning and leadership, enthusiasm and commitment are increased. The second reason to plan is to save time. Time is a valuable resource. Most groups meet for only a few hours each week. Leaders who walk into a group without a good plan risk wasting time and, worse, boring the group. On the other hand, leaders who have a clear purpose and a good plan have done their job. They are prepared to be facilitators of discussions, learning, and a great program. Good planning and shared leadership are not easy and, at first, may take more time and energy. But when you consider the benefits of ownership, involvement, and interest, the effort is worth it.

The Five-Step Process

There are many ways to plan. The model presented here is a simple five-step process. The first part of this chapter briefly explains and outlines the five steps in the planning process. The second part demonstrates how the five steps may be applied to three different kinds of programs: long-term planning, a weekend retreat or lock-in, and a single session. The five steps are:

1. Assessing needs and interests
2. Setting a goal statement
3. Designing the program
4. Doing the program
5. Evaluating the program

Step One: Assessing Needs and Interests

Good planning begins with the intention of youth ministries to respond to the needs and interests of young people. The first step is to consider those for whom you are planning. What are their needs and interests? What kinds of programs would be meaningful and relevant to them? The best way to find answers to these questions is to ask the group itself. There are several ways this can be done. Some of the more popular methods include a brainstorming session, a needs/interest survey, and a discussion of past programs.

Brainstorming session: At a meeting of the group, brainstorm as many different needs and interests as possible. Spend some time setting priorities and narrowing the list. When you have the list down to the top ten, define each of the topics. Reach a consensus about what the topics mean and in what direction the group would like to move with each one. To get the group thinking, be sure to ask very specific questions: "What was the most interesting time last year?" "What do you want to know about Jesus? The church? Friendship?"

Needs/interests survey: Create a needs/ interests survey and ask group members to choose the topics that are most interesting to them. Tally the results and post them. Then spend some time as a whole group discussing the results and defining each topic. Again, be sure to ask specific questions: "What is your favorite after-school activity?" "What is a burning issue at your school?" "What three activities did you like best in youth group last year?" "What do you want to do again?" "Is there something new you want to do or study?" **Discussion of past programs:**

Review the topics that were covered in the past year or so. List those that the group remembers as being the most meaningful. Ask questions about how and why these programs met a need or interest. Be sure to separate whether the topic or the activity was memorable. Consider repeating or doing more about these topics.

Step Two: Setting a Goal Statement

After the group has assessed and prioritized its needs and interests, create your goal statements. Ask yourself the question: "At the end of the hour [or weekend, or quarter, or year!], what do we want the group to have experienced? What should they know?" Your answers are your goal statements. A goal statement is simply what you want to accomplish within your time frame. Goals must be clear, short, specific, and attainable. Some examples of goal statements are included in the three planning models that follow this overview of the five steps.

Remember that for everything you do, a goal needs to be written. You may even choose to post the statement somewhere in your meeting area. Not only does a goal statement tell you where you are going, it tells you whether you got there. This added benefit will be especially helpful to you in the last step, evaluating the program.

Step Three: Designing the Program

After writing your goal statement, you are ready to design how you will accomplish it. Designing your program simply means determining the methods you will use. Now you are getting to the fine details. Most often, your design for the program can be divided into two areas: program and logistics. Program includes the major presentations and learnings during the event. Logistics includes all the details that support the event and keep it moving. Both must be planned well to create an effective program.

Step Four: Doing the Program

This is the fun part. Good planning should help the program run smoothly. Be ready, however, for a sudden change of plans. Youth ministry is unpredictable. A change in the weather or the local high school team's making it to the state playoffs can foul up even the best plans. Don't panic. Be flexible. Simply regroup and continue.

If at all possible, never cancel or postpone an event. Even if only a few members of the group show up when you were hoping for many more, work with those you have. Consistency is important. If you promised there would be a retreat, then there should be one.

Step Five: Evaluating the Program

At the end of any event, ask the group to evaluate their experience. Not all programs need a formal evaluation, but all should end with at least an informal one. Formal evaluations include written questionnaires. Less formal evaluations may range from comments written on a file card to verbal responses in an open discussion. Use the whole group's evaluation as the basis for your more thorough planning-team evaluation.

How to Apply the Five Steps

The following pages demonstrate ways the planning steps may be applied to a long-term plan, a weekend retreat or lock-in, and a single session.

For a Quarterly or Long-Term Program

Step One: Assessing Needs and Interests

Planning for the long term helps keep everything in perspective and flowing together. It also enables groups to focus on what is coming. Some major events like mission projects demand long-term planning. For whatever reason, it's helpful to plan at least quarterly. Let's assume you are planning for the next three months, with a group that includes seventeen people. To assess needs and interests, decide on how you are going to gather information from each person. Let's say your planning group decides to interview each member personally. You take the list of group members and assign each person on the planning team three or four to interview. You agree on four questions and a time when all the interviews must be completed. The questions may include: "What are two strengths of our group right now? Two weaknesses?" "What three topics could we use for program ideas that would really interest you?" "What two fun activities would you like us to do as a group?"

When each person has been interviewed gather the answers and collate them in your planning group.

Step Two: Setting a Goal Statement

After looking over the results of the interviews and discussing them, list the most common strengths, weaknesses, topics, and activities. As you consider long-term goals, it may be helpful to create a goal statement in each of the five areas of a congregation's life: worship, study, ministry within the congregation, service, and fellowship. For instance, your goals might say:

- Worship: We will include a brief worship time at the end of all of our evening programs, which will be led by a team of one adult and one youth group member.
- Study: We will focus in-depth study on three specific topics highlighted by our interviews. These topics include family relationships, understanding why there are other denominations, and interpreting the Bible so it makes sense to us.
- Ministry within the congregation: We will volunteer to usher once a month for worship and will be responsible for decorating the social hall for the Halloween party and potluck dinner.
- Service/Mission/Social Action: We will collect donations, assemble, and deliver food baskets for Thanksgiving.
- Fellowship: We will have a fun activity once a month and plan and publicize our February ski retreat,

Step Three: Designing the Program

Because you are looking at the overall program for three months, you do not need to look at specifics for each session. What you must do, however, is assign dates, times, and responsibilities. Post or distribute a series of monthly calendars. Given your goal statements, fill in the calendars with your monthly activities and weekly meetings. Set locations and times and determine who will be the key contact. For instance, is the whole group going to plan everything or will certain people be responsible for collecting food baskets?

Step Four: Doing the Program

Either one individual or the whole group will have to hold one another accountable for actually doing their part. Once the final calendar is set, consider publishing it and sending it

to all members of the group, members of the clergy, congregational leaders, and your diocesan youth coordinator. Get the word out!

Step Five: Evaluating the Program

On a monthly basis, meet together as the planning team to check progress on future programs and evaluate the past month's programs. You will also need to go through this process again for the next quarter. When you do, stop to consider if you have met the goals you set. Ask yourselves: "What did we do well? What needed more work. What would we change for next quarter?"

You may not need to assess needs again so soon. If your first assessment was accurate and gathered enough information for you, it may last you the entire year — all four quarters.

Congratulations! You've completed the five-step process for long-term planning.