

Small and Special: Ideas for Small Congregations

The small congregation offers many exciting possibilities for doing youth ministries. The intimate atmosphere allows for the building of community in a very natural way and promotes the visibility of its young people. That is all well and good, but what is done with the ministry and visibility is what counts. The following are some ways to involve young people in the planning and experiencing of youth ministries. It is up to your group to determine which, if any, are of interest. As has been said, "There's nothing new under the sun, just new ways of approach." Youth ministries in the small congregation relies on the partnership of young people and adults working together. Therefore, it is crucial that planning not be done solely by one group or the other. Ownership of the overall program will bring the best possible experience and attendance and model what it means to make and keep commitments. In other words, plan together!

1. The small congregation experience brings the opportunity to do relational youth ministry between young persons and the rest of the congregation, in many different combinations.

Some specific possibilities are:

- *Adult leaders and adolescents.* At least once a year invite one or two of the young people to your home for dinner. Discover special activities and interests of individual group members and go to an event of which they are a part, or invite them to join you in attending an event they would enjoy.
- *Young people and peers.* Use resources on identity and peer ministry, have training sessions to help young people develop their skills in relating to peers in a positive way. Retreats, lock-ins, and field trips, where interaction of peers is comfortable and natural, all aid in this area of ministry.
- *Young people and older adults.* A magical thing happens when a cassette recorder is turned on and a young person asks an older adult to share some of his or her history or faith story. The tape may be turned into a journal of faith and shared with the congregation, used for a congregational dinner program, or placed in the church or local library as a resource.
- *Adolescents and children.* Young people and children are wonderfully matched together in tutoring, child care, storytelling, campouts, vacation Bible school, and day camps and as choir partners. These types of opportunities allow young people to develop parenting communication and teaching skills. The children develop healthy attitudes about adolescence and adolescents, communication skills, and community love when they are important to someone outside the family.
- *Parents and adult leaders.* Constant communication regarding program, studies, and activities can benefit both parents and adult leaders in helping in the coordination and participation of young people. If, in addition, one or two special programs for parents are offered each year, this will be viewed both with appreciation and as an educational opportunity. Parental involvement with their young people in the youth ministries program is also crucial. This may range from serving as transportation chairperson, cooking a meal, or sharing special interests or vocational emphases to up-front leadership at a retreat or study series. The key is to involve -parents (with the approval of their young people) at least once a year,
- Handbook for Ministries with Young Adolescents / The Episcopal Church Center, 1966

- *Parents and adolescents.* Special Bible studies, communication sessions, shared retreats on particular topics, survey experiences, and so on can awaken family relationships and deepen the love that already exists.

Young people and congregation staff and vestry. In the small congregation, "Everybody knows everybody" is a familiar comment. Use that real plus by having young people and vestry members partnered to discover the various ministry programs and to explore places where young people can fully participate. The staff person or vestry member could help explain how to function as a member of a committee and serve as mentor in a particular office of the congregation.

2. Adolescents are exploring what commitment means. Request young people to coordinate particular events; allow them to discover what all is involved in putting together a program or ministry opportunity. The congregation might covenant with the young people to serve as the staff for vacation Bible school, a special Advent or Lenten series, or a congregational program. Committees might have a fair, where representatives explain the role of each group and allow individual young people to select a committee where their interests lie.

3. Young people may discover or know an area of ministry that is not being handled in the congregation and choose that area for their outreach opportunity.

4. When numbers are needed for a particular opportunity, inviting school and community friends and relatives might be a possible avenue. A more beneficial route would be to partner with one or two other groups from the congregation.

5. Biking, hikes, hiking retreats, concerts, movie marathons, travel, and visiting local officials, sites, and personalities are ideal for youth ministries programs with small numbers, for coordination is more manageable. The important thing to do is to capitalize on the unique size of your group by choosing those activities a larger group has difficulty in pulling off.

6. Begin a "sharing of talents" skill bank within the congregation community and move outside to other youth groups. For example, Shadow Valley wants to do a lock-in and needs a song leader; your group has a sixteen-year-old who is an excellent song leader. You match them up with the understanding that Shadow Valley will reciprocate by inviting your group to do something with them sometime in the near future. This creative bartering can strengthen both your ministry and others.

7. In a similar fashion, the youth group might choose to become "time and talent brokers" for their own congregation, local (nearby) congregations, and the community. Taking the "time and talent" cards most congregation members fill out, the group lists the names of those with similar interests. These are then put on large posters and placed in a highly visible area of the church. In addition, the group matches up these lists with other congregation lists and community persons. Great things could happen, and for once people would have something done with "those cards" in an effective way.

8. Have young people list those adults in the congregation with whom they would like to work in the youth program. Then have a young person or two take the names and be responsible for personal recruitment. If an adult leader can go with them, that's great. But do a few

simulations to practice how to recruit, have a printed job description for the adolescents to take with them, and give only a short time frame to be in touch with the potential adult leader.

9. **The youth ministries program of the congregation could sponsor a "family enrichment" film series at the church and open it to the community.** By soliciting the aid of the local PTA, school librarians, public libraries, and perhaps community college personnel, movies could be secured inexpensively or even at no cost.

10. **A congregation newspaper might be started by the young people.** There are many jobs to be filled on a newspaper. With team effort the key, everyone would have an essential role. Duplication problems? How about calling one of those "barter" congregation in the community to see if they would let you use their equipment if you supply the paper. No money for paper? Read on!

11. **Doing youth ministries does cost money, and a holistic program may cost more than the budget will allow.** This may be viewed as an excellent time to call on the congregation to live out in a tangible way the commitment they made at the point of baptism to nurture and aid in the growth of the young people. Make a "Youth Ministries Needs and Wants List." Post it on the bulletin board, and outside the sanctuary (in the narthex), and put it in the bulletin. Do it as a WANTED poster and clearly differentiate between those items the group feels to be essential (needs) and those items the group feels it would be nice to have (wants).

12. **For "people profiles," each member of the youth ministries program fills out an interest sheet,** which can be used in the bulletin as an ongoing "Youth Corner" entry (acquainting the congregation with an in-depth look at youth ministries), as a scrapbook with individual photos, or as a "guess who?" program, allowing for identification of the youth profiles and then Bible study on "people profiles."

13. **Try the Early Bird Special, a once-& week breakfast (in homes, at the church, or at a local hangout) where prayer and Bible study are the focus.** Or the group might choose to be responsible for composing some portion of the upcoming worship (a prayer, talk with children, the sharing of a song or poem).

14. **Begin a creative arts troupe-clowning, drama, dance. Look for resource persons in your community.**

15. **Can't afford to go to a diocesan, or provincial event? How about volunteering your congregation to host the event, so you can participate! Everyone benefits this way.**

16. **Radio stations have what is known as public air spots" — free time for community use.** Your group might develop some youth spots and approach a local station, either for a regular "Youth Impressions Corner" or to provide isolated offerings.

17. **Use phones and digital cameras and produce your own issue-oriented or special-topic movie.**

18. Use photography to raise the congregation's awareness of local needs by having a "discovery in print" adventure. Young people, armed with whatever type of camera is available to them, with an adult guide on a discovery tour of the area, snap areas of need in the community; perhaps a community center, the local schools, homeless center, or shelter. (Note: never take photographs of people without their permission!) After the initial outing, the films are produced and prints used to develop a program on what was discovered. This may lead to a mission project. You might invite local community leaders to view the program and follow it with a panel.

These are only a few ideas. There are lots more where they came from. That's right — from within your very group. So what are you waiting for? Small is special. It's time everybody learned about the benefits of living, working, sharing, and caring in the smaller congregations. "I've been asked to take responsibility for the youth group. The last leader moved, and now I'm responsible for a group I really don't know. We met last week and they seemed distant.