

# What Are the Top 10 Characteristics of a Healthy Youth Ministry?

Posted on April 14, 2011 by Kenda Dean: <http://kendadean.com/636/what-are-the-top-10-characteristics-of-a-healthy-youth-ministry/>

## 10. Safe space.

We live in what sociologist Ulrich Beck calls “a culture of risk.” There are lots of dimensions to that, but what it boils down to is a loss of certainty (I would say confidence) that were once provided by traditions and institutions. The upshot is a current of anxiety running through our culture that we mask with consumerism (“retail therapy”), attention to self-presentation (working out, body art, etc.), an overabundance of activities (“extracurriculars keep kids out of trouble”), and countless other practices designed to keep anxiety at bay.

Young people need safe spaces in their lives where they can “be” themselves instead of trying to “prove” themselves. Safe space can mean time, relationships, or physical space where young people have the emotional, relational, physical, and spiritual freedom to explore, to risk, and to fail in a safety net of love—real love, not the Hallmark stuff. Safe spaces give youth the experience of being really “seen” and known as God sees and knows them, as beloved brothers and sisters of Christ. (It goes without saying that “safe space” in youth ministry assumes a system of protection for sexual misconduct is in place.)

## 9. A culture of permission and creativity.

A safe space yields permission—permission to take risks, to move outside comfort zones, to initiate and to lead. Healthy youth ministry creates a culture of permission where young people can follow Christ where they sense they are being led, where adults are guides but not programmers, permission givers rather than gate keepers, trail guides rather than tour operators.

Creativity requires freedom—which safe space and permission provide. Young people need practice in multiple “faith languages” — words and actions, art and prayer. Increasingly, the language of the arts is becoming a “spiritual language” for young people (especially emerging adults). Healthy youth ministries recognize that young people live in a participatory culture, where they create cultural content as well as consume it. Treating youth primarily as consumers (of worship, programming, mission) fails to recognize that they are created in God-the-Creator’s image, and also makes church seem unwelcoming and archaic.

## 8. A culture of theological awareness.

Youth ministry ought to help youth see their lives the way God sees them—which means becoming aware of theological categories like grace, forgiveness, redemption, sin, hope. One of the findings of the National Study of Youth and Religion is that churches are not helping very much on this front. The result is that kids growing up in churches frame their lives in pretty much the same way as anybody else—which makes it tough to buck cultural norms that run contrary to the gospel. Healthy youth ministry creates a culture of theological awareness, teaching young people how to imagine themselves as participants in God’s story.

## 7. Integration into worship and congregational life at every level — while maintaining significant peer groups of faith

Teenagers need people to reflect back to them who they are; this “mirroring” is basic to the process of identity formation, and for the church to be absent from this process is a lethal sin of omission. Only in the church do young people begin to see themselves through the eyes of people who try to see them as God sees them: beloved, blessed, called. Interaction with Christian peers is part of this process, but adults are significant mirrors as well.

Christ calls teenagers, like the rest of us, to follow him—which makes youth as integral to the Body of Christ as anybody else. Separating youth out from the larger congregation is both theologically irresponsible, and a pragmatic mistake. Segmenting youth exclusively into “youth activities” leads young people to associate church with their peer groups—making “graduation” into the intergenerational faith community extremely difficult .

## 6. A community of belonging that is authentic, fun, and passionate about living as Christians in the world.

Truth is, it doesn’t really matter if the community of Christians in which youth participate is a youth group, a choir, a drama troupe, a Bible study, a parachurch organization or even the congregation as a whole (though the larger the congregation gets, the less likely people are to experience it as a community of belonging apart from small groups of fidelity, intimacy, and prayer). The point is that teenagers need to feel like the church is a place they belong, and not just attend—and belonging means they participate with joy alongside others who are living in the same direction.

## 5. A team of adult youth leaders who are actively growing together in faith and who embody the quality of community with one another and missional attitude that we want our kids to have.

You can’t lead where you don’t go. Adults need to unpack their own baggage so we don’t accidentally bring it into our relationships with youth—and we need to model the kind of spiritual investment in ourselves, in one another, and in the world, partly because it’s a faithful way to live, and partly because youth need examples of what communities that support each other in living as Christians in the world looks like.

#### 4. A supportive congregation where people actively seek God and that talk about God as the subject of sentences.

Let me unpack this one. First, I'm convinced by the 2003 Exemplary Youth Ministry study that congregations where young people reliably develop mature faith "talk about God as the subject of sentences." Two things are important in that phrase: 1) People talk about God, which means God is a lively concern in these congregations; and 2) God is the subject of sentences, which mean when people talk about God, they are saying that God does things. God is an actor in their lives, in the life of the congregation; God is doing things through them; God is alive and present and in their midst. And, they talk to God as well as about God. You can probably think of churches where God is about as inert as the couch in the church parlor. But congregations that help young people have vital, lively faith talk about God as the subject of their sentences. God happens to them and through them.

Talking about God as an actor in the world is an indicator that people in a church are actively seeking God, and that they believe God makes a difference. That's Step #1 in becoming a supportive congregation for youth ministry. But I'm equally convinced by Mark DeVries' thesis in Sustainable Youth Ministry that congregations that impact young lives deeply invest in the infrastructure and leadership (lay and clergy) that make it happen.

This is not in lieu of investing directly in teenagers; people in congregations need to know young people by name, and welcome them "as they are" (even kids who don't fit the congregational norm, and who look, sound, and smell differently from the kids we imagined). Supportive congregations give young people given concrete evidence that they are known ("Hey, how did it go with that teacher who was giving you trouble?"), and challenge them to grow beyond who they already are, and into the person God has created them to become ("You can't smoke weed here. I care about you too much to let you hurt yourself.") They give youth opportunities to grow in their faith and to live into their vocations, naming teenagers' God-given gifts and inviting them to use those gifts on behalf Christ in the church and in the world.

Third, a supportive congregation is one where the whole community invests—visibly—in growing in faith together, and where teenagers witness the fruits of this investment as people takes risks on behalf of others in Christ's name.

#### 3. A senior pastor who is crazy about young people.

See #4, above – all these things are true for people who lead congregations as well. The senior pastor or head of staff, in many ways, embodies the congregation's "brand." If a congregation supports youth ministry, it will be clear because the head of staff talks about young people (positively) in public, includes them in leadership, embraces the faith development of parents, knows youth and their leaders by name, and makes himself/herself available to young people for spiritual conversations. The senior pastor is youth ministry's head cheerleader: Go, team.

#### 2. Lots and lots of parents who are growing in, and living out, their love of God and neighbor (and who are aware that this matters to their kids).

You've heard it before: parents are the most important youth ministers young people ever have. No variable in the National Study of Youth and Religion is more important in young people's faith identities, or in their ability to sustain those faith identities between high school and emerging adulthood, than parents who are religiously active while their kids are teenagers. And if young people don't have parents who are investing in faith, then churches need to be places where kids can find adults who are investing in faith, and who are willing to "spiritually adopt" these teenagers so they can eavesdrop on what it looks like to be an adult follower of Jesus Christ.

#### 1. Jesus. (Read below)

I know, I know: the "right" answer in church is always "Jesus." And of course, Christians understand God as three-in-one, so Jesus is not the only person of the Trinity who matters in youth ministry, so please don't misunderstand me as reducing God to the Incarnation. But Christians understand God as Triune through Jesus, whose life, death, and resurrection reveals who God is and who we are in relationship to God. Doing youth ministry without God is like doing dinner without food: you can come to the table, but there's nothing to eat...so why bother?