

## Why We Do Youth Ministries?

Why do we do youth ministries? Perhaps the simplest answer is because young people are part of the Episcopal Church and we are called to minister with them. Youth ministries is one part of the ministry of the whole church. Ministries with older adolescents means the church's involvement with young people between the ages of sixteen and nineteen, Youth ministries is the ministry of, with, and to young people and the adults engaged in ministry with them.

It would be great if there were a specific verse or chapter in the Bible that said, "You will do youth ministries!" There is not just one place but many places in Scripture to which we can turn to get a biblical basis for youth ministries. The call of Jeremiah (Jer. 1:4—10) reminds us that we are not to say "I am only a youth"; God called Jeremiah despite his youth. Paul also reminds Timothy not to let anyone despise his youth, but to set a good example for all people (1 Tim. 4:12). Jesus told the disciples to let the children come to him (Matt. 19:13-15; Mark 10:13-16; Luke 18: 15-17).

We do youth ministries in order to lay the groundwork for young people to have a faith in Jesus Christ that is their own. In the Episcopal Church we baptize infants and, as a congregation, promise to teach them about Jesus and God's love for them until they can make their own statement of faith. In confirmation, young people make their own statement of faith. Youth ministries is the special ministry of the church that provides young people the opportunities to work out their questions, their commitments, and their opportunities to grow in faith. This call to ministry is not predictable; it is an adventure. In accepting Christ's call to discipleship, we begin a lifelong journey of hope. Youth ministries includes:

- Service projects, such as young people raking leaves for older adults
- Singing in the choir
- Social action projects with young people
- Young people teaching vacation Bible school
- Parents and young people attending classes on human sexuality
- Diocesan, provincial, and national youth events
- A community center for young people sponsored by a congregation
- Youth evangelism efforts and peer counseling
- Young people walking to fight hunger
- Acolyte groups
- Senior high retreats
- Young people planning "Youth Sunday" in a congregation
- Education in peace and justice
- Christian education programs for youth
- Episcopal camps and conference centers
- Episcopal schools
- Preparation for rites of initiation
- Bible study, service, worship, recreation, community organizing, and much, much, more!

## Characteristics of Relational Youth Ministry

The characteristics of relational youth ministry in the Episcopal Church are:

1. Youth are members of the Body of Christ with particular gifts; they are part of the Church today and tomorrow.
2. A major purpose of youth ministry is to help youth share their gifts and participate fully in the Church, beginning at the local level.
3. Diversity of persons, culture, ideas, and theology within the Church and within youth ministry is good and to be affirmed; no one pattern of ministry ought to be mandated.
4. Small gatherings of young people within a congregation, essentially Christian peer groups, are an appropriate part of youth ministry and support youth participation in worship, study and service.
5. As an inherent part of congregational ministry, youth programs are not expected to carry the Gospel alone.
6. Because there is a sacramental focus in the Episcopal Church, the written word is not to be regarded as the sole channel of grace nor is Bible study the chief activity of Christian youth.
7. There is an openness to other sources of revelation, and the continuing action of the Holy Spirit; questioning and struggle in life and faith are affirmed; dogmatism and "canned answers" are distrusted.
8. Interpersonal relationships are a channel of grace and an important context within which faith is shared, transmitted, discovered, and tested.
9. Full growth (intellectual, physical, psychosocial, moral, spiritual) of the individual in community is an appropriate goal of youth ministry.
10. It is desirable for youth to assume responsibility for their own lives and to enter into mutual relationships with adults insofar as their gifts and situation in life will permit.
11. The Incarnation is a sign that all of life is appropriately taken seriously, discussed, and celebrated by a Christian; there is not a sharp distinction between sacred and secular. <sup>1</sup>

Working within context of relational youth ministry assumes that ministry is not defined by age; young people are called to the same ministry as all other members of the Body of Christ," <sup>2</sup> and is rooted in the definition of lay ministry found in the Catechism .<sup>3</sup>

A few years after the first publication of the characteristics of relational youth ministry in the Episcopal Church, a group of representative young people and adults developed what became known as the "Basic Principles of Relational Ministry." <sup>4</sup> The principles of relational ministry witness to a subtle shift in the focus of youth ministry over the past two decades from a program oriented ministry to a ministry rooted in relationships. The emphasis has been shifting in many places from a ministry "to and for" young people toward a ministry "with and by" young people as well. This relational approach to youth ministry is rooted in the Incarnation. It comes from the perspective of our identity in Christ: that is, who we are and whose we are as children of God and members of the Body of Christ. It recognizes the possibilities and limits of what it means to be human, created in the image of God. It pays attention to the related issues and concerns of identity, such as meaning, alienation,

brokenness, reconciliation, sexuality, values, decision making, failure, accomplishment, development and faith.

Such a youth ministry recognizes the common mission and ministry of all baptized persons, regardless of age. This means that "program" grows out of our encounter with that mission and ministry and is therefore determined by the lives who are the focus of youth ministry — young people — where they "live and move and have their being." It is in the midst of our living and relating to one another that we come to face what it means to share and participate in the mission and ministry of the baptized. Christian formation is seen as growing out of "intentional relational experiences."

Relational ministry is by its very nature ongoing. It is not something that can be turned on or off or programmed in a predictable way. It is by definition dynamic, in process, a living out of human relationships in the context of a faith and belief in a compassionate, loving God. What follows are four basic theological principles of relational youth ministry. While they focus on youth ministries, these principles are broadly applicable to all areas of ministry.

## Theological Principles of Relational Youth Ministry

The following theological principles are to be integrated into all aspects of youth ministries programming:

**1. In Relational Youth Ministry there is infinite respect for the individual.**

The doctrine of Creation affirms the goodness, value and worth of humanity; and in the Incarnation God has chosen to be joined to humanity in the fullest and most profound way. This expression of God's love for us calls us beyond ourselves to acknowledge and respect the worth and dignity of others, as the foundation of all relationships.

**2. In Relational Youth Ministry honesty with self and others is essential.**

The life and ministry of Jesus presents a radical example of being in honest relationship with self and others. This carries an insistence upon openly seeking the truth, by engaging with others in the full range of life's joys and sorrows, issues, questions, and conflicts.

**3. In Relational Youth Ministry there is a common responsibility for what happens.**

Christ called the disciples into an intimate relationship of friendship and ministry. Paul's image of the body of Christ presents an understanding of community which affirms and seeks to nurture the gifts of each person for the benefit and well-being of the whole. This understanding calls us beyond arbitrary divisions between people and toward shared leadership, decision-making and ministry.

Adults who work with young people are frequently confronted with questions for other adults and church leaders concerning, "How do we get young people involved in the church?" However, the real emphasis should be placed on how the church can be more involved with young people. Youth ministries should not be about nurturing potential adult believers, but rather about enabling the continued growth of young believers. The shift towards lifelong learning communities is perhaps the key to changing the mentality which suggests that the

main motivation behind youth ministries is to provide instruction which can be drawn on in later years. Youth ministries is not limited to the programs and activities sponsored within the church community. It is also directed outward to the needs, concerns and issues of youth in society.

In ministering with young people, we should be alert to their personal experience of God's active presence. It does not mean that we abandon the tradition of the faith community. Rather, we need to make an effort to connect the young people's experience with the community's understanding of God and the church as a supporting community. The most powerful human influence on the forming faith of young people is that exerted by families and peers who are living and expressing their own faith. To a large extent, they make their moral judgements in keeping with what is expected of them by family, peers and other significant others in their lives.

Young people are seeking personal commitment. Commitment includes reaching out towards people, ideas, beliefs, causes, and work choices. The church can assist young people as they begin this formation process of building commitment and purpose in their lives. Participation in religious activities provides an outlet for the curiosity, idealism, and desire for accomplishment that is characteristic of youth. Involvement in worship events and community service can be a source of affiliation when they are actively involved in decision-making.

To some extent contemporary opinion has erroneously dictated that it is a natural movement for young people to leave the congregation. The assumption is that it is important to anxiously await their return following this phase of rebellion. Our acceptance of these assumptions prevents us from looking seriously at the issues of belonging for young people in faith communities. There are no mysterious reasons why young people often fail to participate in congregational life. For the most part, they are not welcome. In many instances, there are not opportunities for meaningful participation. Perhaps not enough attention is being paid to providing young people a social group where they can belong. It could be that the instruction being given is not taking into account, among other concerns, young people's need to have some say in setting the agenda. Perhaps there is no room in the worship service for the contribution of young people, and the language is not relevant or the concepts made applicable to daily life. The relative absence of young people from congregational life speaks as powerful evidence. This pattern will only be seriously reversed when congregations take seriously on the issues of inclusiveness and participation in all aspects of its life.

Further, youth ministries should empower young people to transform the world as followers of Jesus Christ by living for justice and peace. Youth ministry empowers young people with the knowledge and skills to serve others and learn how to transform the unjust structures of society. Effective youth ministry encourages young people to examine their culture in the light of their faith and their faith in the light of culture. It is often in and through the cultural context that young people will give birth to their personal faith and sense of ministry. This cultural context is not a peripheral concern for relational youth ministry, it is a foundational principle.

## What Does This Mean for Youth Ministry?

It means that we need to give young people a place and time to question their faith, to explore what it means to follow Jesus in their own lives. This can be done through Bible study, worship, and studying the lives of Christians and other faithful people. It means providing opportunities to serve the church and the world through mission projects, local community projects, and teaching Christian education. It means helping young people talk about their faith, within the church and talking with young people outside the church. .

It means that we need to build programs that will allow young people to answer such questions as Who am I? Who am I in this community of the church? Who is Jesus Christ to me? It means talking about faith, love, friendship, relationships, hunger, peace, sexuality. It means doing things together, being together, working on projects together: retreats, mission projects, and other service. It means listening to young people as they raise issues that they want to explore, meeting them on their own terms.

It means that we need to realize that partnership means that both adults and young people have responsibilities for youth ministry, but not necessarily the same responsibilities. Adults are partners with young people to provide help to get events and programs planned, to share their faith journey with young people, to provide a point of view as a person who has experienced things that young people are experiencing and knows how to live through them. Being a role model for young people means being willing to share with them, not lecture to them. Young people involved in youth ministry are taking on new and more adult responsibilities. It is one step on their faith journey. They count on caring adults to struggle with them, to help them look for answers, to show them how faith is part of one's whole life, not just a Sunday thing.

It means that what happens in a youth group or youth ministries program is connected with what happens at school, at home, around the world, and in the congregation. You should expect help and support from your clergy and lay leaders, your diocese, your province, and the Youth Ministries Office at the Episcopal Church Center. You should engage parents in parts of the youth ministry program. Talk with school teachers, principals, and the local librarian for program ideas.

It means that youth ministries happens wherever young people are involved. This means that young people who just come to Christian education or sing in the choir or serve as acolytes are as much a part of youth ministries as the young people in the youth group. Young people are called to witness to their faith and invite other young people to be part of the community of disciples. Young people who are excited about their faith and their congregation are good witnesses to God's love in Jesus Christ.

At the provincial and international level this means that we work hard to be sure that African American, Asian American, European American, Hispanic American, and Native American young people and adults, as well as members from our church who live outside the United States, are part of events and design teams and take part in the committees of our church.