

Young People in Church

*This guide
is for all
members of
congregations*

Youth ministry is an exciting and vital part of church life. Answers to several critical questions will shape the way in which the teens in our midst are viewed.

- Are youth considered to be a mission field *of* the church or mission workers *for* the church?
- How do we release and empower a group that exhibits such a wide variety of faith commitments, ranging from baptized members to seekers to agnostics?
- How do we adapt to the changing dynamics of youth groups as membership changes each year?

Viewing young people through a missional lens assists congregations in placing youth within the center of the church's identity and ministry focus. Such a focus widens the responsibility of caring for youth to the whole congregation and not only to the youth sponsors and Sunday-school teachers. This vision also allows teens to understand their place in the family of God and provides opportunities for them to use their gifts accordingly. Just like adults, youth are individuals with different personalities, gifts and faith journeys. When we lump all youth together and segregate them from adult life and work, we are following the cues of our culture rather than the gospel.

Youth are not only an important part of future congregational life but are also an important part of present congregational life. A comparable parallel is the family. In a healthy family, all members of the household have a role to play on regular days as well as on special occasions. This is how the church should function as well: the concerns and activities of teenagers should not be limited to a special day or time but should be woven throughout the fabric of daily church life. Missional churches understand this and seek to have youth within the fabric of congregational life. In these churches, youth are not on the fringes.

In addition to learning the biblical story and building a scriptural foundation, youth should have an understanding of how their church "works" — how decisions are made, how gifts are discerned, how leaders are called, how budgets are created and how money is spent.

A missional church will include youth regularly in worship, allowing them to discover and use their gifts for the benefit of the entire congregation and for the glory of God.

Youth usually have a wider circle of friends outside the church than adults in the congregation. This makes youth excellent bridges between the church and community life. How does this ability to cross barriers benefit your congregation? Are youth respected as ambassadors of the faith? Do we listen to their interpretations of their experiences? Do we help them interpret the culture in ways that help them make positive connections?

*"Don't let
anyone look
down on you
because you are
young, but set an
example for the
believers in speech,
in life, in love, in
faith and in
purity."*

(1 Timothy 4:12)

The missional journey is never complete. It includes both action and reflection. Consider taking action on one or more of the following suggestions. Set a time to gather again and reflect on what you learned.

- Do church members know by name all of the youth in the church, not just the ones who are especially gregarious or who come from the most active or prominent families in the congregation? What intentionally intergenerational activities would create a natural place for this to happen in your congregation?
- Do the adults understand that today's world is not the same as the world in which they grew up? Teens in each generation may face similar challenges, but the nuances of those challenges will change from decade to decade. Rather than decrying youth culture and mourning for "the way things used to be," adults can listen carefully to youth describe their reality. Can you create a setting where youth and adults can describe their experiences to each other safely?
- Do adult members attend activities of the youth that take place outside of congregational life? Advertise school plays, concerts and sporting events on the church bulletin board.
- Do some youth attend church without their families? Pay special attention to them. Give them a mailbox, and with their permission, include them in the church directory. Make polite efforts to include the family in the life of the congregation, but let the youth set the parameters for this. Teens who have not grown up in a church atmosphere may be attracted to a church family, but will not want to be cut off from their biological families.
- Are youth able to develop and use their gifts for ministry by regular inclusion in worship? They can serve in many roles. A mentoring program that pairs youth with adults can provide an opportunity to discover and practice gifts and widens the pool of people who are available to serve in these roles. This may also present some worshipping communities an opportunity to practice graciously accepting the developing gifts of the youth and creating a "safe place" to learn how to share their gifts.
- Do not assume that the youth who seem to enjoy horsing around have no spiritual depth, nor that the quiet, contemplative ones are spiritual giants. How do you provide opportunities for a diverse group of young people in various stages of spiritual development to have meaningful conversation and learning experiences?
- Does the church leadership — the pastors, Christian education staff, office staff — know the young people personally? Consider hosting youth Sunday-school classes in homes for a meal, highlighting several youth each month on a bulletin board or involving youth in the planning and hosting of congregational events.

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Through a Missional Lens is designed to provide individuals, small groups and congregations with practical and hands-on ideas for the missional journey. Articles focus on our interaction with our culture as we join in God's mission from "across the street to around the world." For additional resources visit www.MennoniteMission.net.



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