

thESource *Resource Kit*

Let's Lead - Youth Leadership

by Tim Kurth

True or False: Youth are not the church of the future, they are the church of today.

If you answered TRUE, you are among the majority of youth workers and volunteers. You are in this business because you believe in young people! You care about their lives and their faith! You support them, mentor them, and spend lots of time with them.

Now take a look at your youth ministry program:

- Does it reflect your opinion of youth?
- Are youth actively involved in ministry—including leadership and planning?

"Now wait a minute!" you may be thinking. "Youth leaders? I can't let them do that! Planning is MY job. But even if they could lead, we'd be setting ourselves up for disaster!"

Youth are amazing people! They are capable of so much. Their energy, enthusiasm, and creativity is boundless. How can we capture those talents and put them to good and positive use in youth ministry? To see the possibilities and benefits of youth leadership, let's take a look at a typical week at a perhaps not-so-typical congregation, St. Paul Lutheran Church of Somewhere, U.S.A. In this church, the youth are, in every sense of the word, the church of today.

Monday: Youth board meeting. Rachel, a junior in high school, reports on plans for the upcoming spaghetti supper fundraiser. She and her committee (consisting of four other youth and one adult mentor) have been working on publicity and volunteer recruitment for next month's event. In the next room, Bryant, a sophomore, is discussing Friendship Sunday as a member of the Evangelism Committee. At St. Paul, those who are confirmed are adult members of the church. They have full voting privileges and can hold any elected office.

Tuesday: Mark, one of the adult counselors, calls each of the four members of his planning team to see if he can help with the plans for Sunday's youth meeting. Each youth is responsible for a different aspect of the meeting. When he talks to Cindy, he asks her not only how her devotion is coming along, but also how her big basketball game went against the cross-town rivals, Central High. He asks what the date of her next game is and makes a note on his calendar to be sure to attend.

Wednesday: Choir practice at St. Paul this evening. Among the members of the choir are Todd, a freshman, and Lori, a senior. Amy is the accompanist. While the choir is practicing, Bryant and Cindy are helping by baby-sitting the children of the choir members in the nursery.

Thursday: Lisa, a senior, is leading an informational meeting about next summer's Servant Event to repair housing for the elderly. Sue, the DCE of the congregation, is there as well, but clearly Lisa is running the show! Lisa lined up two youth who attended last summer's event and they are sharing their experiences.

Friday: Junior High Lock-In. Four Junior High youth, along with their counselor, Jeremy, decided on the events for the evening. The Bible Study topics, games, and the movie were all chosen by this team of youth. So far, everyone is having a great time!

Saturday: Sue, Jeremy, and Mark (the adult leaders) head over to the big basketball game. There they see a half dozen of their youth for some relationship-building.

Sunday: Youth are all over St. Paul on Sunday morning! Acolytes, choir members, assisting in the nursery, lectors in the worship services...and of course, members of the congregation worshipping together. Later that day, many youth return to church. On the fourth Sunday of every month the youth lead an evening worship service. Under the guidance of the pastor, the youth select the theme for worship, choose the songs, and a few lead the music with guitars and piano. Following the service, activities and discussions are led by the youth group officers.

Sure, this sounds great in theory, but it'll never work at my church!

Certainly, the task of turning over leadership to the youth seems very overwhelming—and maybe even impossible! By giving Youth Leadership a try, you've got nothing to lose and everything to gain. Youth

Leadership means believing that youth are the church of today—in every way! Yes, there is a risk of failure because everyone is breaking new ground. Failure without caring adult support will critically damage your attempt at youth-led youth ministry. However, failure that comes with interpretation, support, and encouragement to try again can build a strong foundation for leadership in the church—both now and in the future.

So where should you begin? Now that you have some ideas about what youth can do, start rethinking your youth program—but let the youth do the rethinking! At your next youth meeting break into groups of three or four. Answer the following questions on paper:

- What do you get out of coming to our youth group?
- What is the best thing we do here for youth?
- What is something that we don't do very well?
- What would you do if you could make any changes you wanted

Collect these answers and read them. You begin to give leadership by taking seriously what your youth have told you. Don't stop there! Gather a task force of teens who represent your population. Freshmen through seniors, male and female. Even include teens who have never participated in your ministry. This group should create the structure for the new and improved youth program, keeping in mind the answers given by small groups.

Youth-led ministry doesn't mean adult-less ministry! In any model you create, the role of the adult leader is crucial to success. Train and equip adults to be mentors, coaches, cheerleaders, and advocates. In working with youth leaders, they build relationships with them and are constantly encouraging the youth to grow and stretch their abilities.

Youth-led ministry is by nature a trial and error style that fosters growth and learning for everyone. You must let your youth fail and succeed, and learn from all of it. Be ready to defend your young people. Give them substantial leadership roles and trust them to follow through. Once they begin taking ownership of the smaller elements, begin sharing larger and larger responsibilities. Challenge them to take the lead and provide the resources and support they need to succeed. Practice debriefing failure so that it works to your advantage. Plan and organize leadership training events in which all youth are welcome to participate. Nurture leadership as it shows itself in the lives of your young people.

But all in all, whether your youth are entirely responsible for leadership or whether it is more of a partnership between youth and adults, in allowing youth to lead in the church, the best thing we can do is empower them to follow Paul's admonition to Timothy:

"Do not let anyone look down on you because you are young, but be an example to the believers in your speech, your conduct, your love, faith, and purity." 1 Timothy 4:12

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