



Volunteer Longevity

Last year I met a lovely woman at a district high school retreat. I was helping with servant events and got to chatting with her as her teens filled mason jars with soup fixings. At one point she mentioned that the kids she brought were probably sick of her and longed for a hipper, younger youth leader. After all, she had been with these kids since she taught their kindergarten Sunday School.

I couldn't hold back. "No!" I practically shouted. "Your commitment to these young people is huge, exceptional! You have no idea what a gift you are." At this point, I realized by her face that perhaps my response was a tad aggressive. I took it down a notch and tried to explain my extreme enthusiasm. After all the research we have done on young adults in the LCMS, I needed her to know just how critical deep, long-term relationships are for ministry.

by Julianna Shults

In a world where nothing stays the same, teens will struggle with demanding schedules, identity crisis, changing relationships and more. Having consistent people who are praying for and investing in youth makes an impact.

What I told her boils down to this: your longevity as a professional church worker or as a volunteer isn't just good for you; it is important for young people now and in the future.

One important finding from our 2017-2018 LCMS Youth Ministry research was that the tenure of the person who took the survey (overwhelmingly pastors) had an impact on the retention of young people. If the person who took the survey was present in the congregation in 2004-2006, they knew the whereabouts of approximately 75% of the young people confirmed. If they were not present, they only knew where 55% of those young people were now. Those who had been in the congregation since 2004 showed a 35% LCMS retention rate while those who had a shorter tenure had a 24% LCMS retention rate.

The study was only able to identify the influence of the primarily pastors who took the survey. However, it is not hard to draw the conclusion that the same impact could be found in long-serving DCEs, other church workers, and volunteer leaders. In fact, throughout all phases of the 2017 research we found that long-term relationships, not programs, played an important role in young adult retention.

When young people are personally known and cared for, they can ask difficult questions and receive support through crisis.

Through relationship the Holy Spirit helps leaders articulate Law and Gospel when it is most needed. Youth don't need flashy new programs or the hippest young leader who is here today and gone tomorrow. In a world where nothing stays the same, teens will struggle with demanding schedules, identity crisis, changing relationships and more. Having consistent people who are praying for and investing in youth makes an impact.

When it comes to relationships, the role of long-term volunteers cannot be understated.

There are a variety of statistics out there, but the majority say the average tenure for a professional youth worker is around 4 years and for a pastor around 6 years. Youth Specialties found that 39% of professional youth workers are in their first three years of ministry at their church and only 12% have been in ministry at the church after more than a decade. Some professional church workers are blessed to stay in the same congregation for 10 or more years. Many find that ministry becomes richer through relationship over time. Yet, there are often



very good reasons why a professional church worker may not stay in the same congregation for many years. As church workers move and transition, it is the long-serving volunteers who ensure young people stay tied to the church.

One way some congregations are encouraging long-term relationships is by assigning volunteers to groups of children and teens rather than to an age level.

For example, an adult commits to a group of girls who they follow up the grade levels through high school, rather than for the fifth-grade class over several years. These adults must be ready to be engaged over the long run, but their role can make a huge difference in overall retention through transitions. Even more exciting, this is something that happens very naturally in smaller congregations and is a huge strength to their ministry.

Another way we can encourage long-term relationships is by investing in our professional church workers and volunteers.

Congregations must encourage balance and self-care rather than allow for people to be pulled beyond their capacity. Leaders must develop shared trust, respect and vision between the pastor, other church workers and volunteers. Long-term volunteers need pacing, training, encouragement, and support as they take on the task of pouring into young people. It's not easy, but it will pay off in the end.

I will remind you as I did that volunteer: Don't dismiss what God can do through you when you commit to loving young people for the long-term.

There are days when young people will test you, and you will think someone else could do better. Bible study might not have gone as smoothly as you hoped and maybe those youth were on Instagram and not their digital Bibles. Remember those things will be forgotten over time. What they won't forget is you and what you allow the Holy Spirit to do through you. Your investment from Kindergarten Sunday School through their lives reaps plentiful fruit. God will use your continued presence to remind young people of Jesus and of what he has done for us. Thank you for your dedication and commitment to young people in the church. ■

Discussion Questions

- Who are the adults who consistently spend time with youth from your congregation and community? What are their roles? How do the youth view these adults?
- Which adults in your congregation have consistently volunteered their time in a dedicated manner to the youth in your church? What motivates them to continue serving?
- Who were the “other” adults from your childhood and adolescence who gave of themselves to connect you with Christ and the church?
- How long do adults who serve with youth in your congregation typically remain active in that service?
- What letter grade would you give your congregation for its care for the physical, emotional, and spiritual health of the pastor(s) and other church workers who serve?

When I was 9 my pastor at the time told me I could talk to him about difficult issues and he wouldn't tell my parents. I never took him up on it, but I needed to hear that in my life. I figured if God put people like that on Earth, he must be here for me and love me. I never doubted that again.

23-year-old transgendered
LCMS Lutheran