

Congregations have Warmth, Challenge, and Grace



- Congregations foster an open and honest environment where youth share joys, questions, crisis, and doubt knowing God's Word will be spoken in love.
- Congregations share personal stories of grace, failure, challenge, and joy.
- Congregations are willing to engage in tough spiritual conversations.
- Congregations have a dedicated, developmentally Appropriate space for youth where they grow as disciples with their peers.

What words would you use to describe your congregation? How would your youth describe it? Every congregation has their own history, norms, practices, and community that all impact the congregational environment. When we ask this question of youth leaders, we do see commonalities with words like supportive, welcoming and friendly.

The environment or culture of a congregation and particularly of a youth ministry may seem nebulous, hard to describe or to change. Yet, God works in and through people and relationships to develop critical factors for faithful growth in God's Word. Healthy congregations have an environment which builds trust, fosters Christ-like relationships and helps weather the storm of teenage and young adult years. In contrast, an unhealthy culture can create animosity, frustration, hurt and make it easier for young people to walk away.

We use three key works to describe an environment for healthy youth ministry: warmth, challenge and grace.

Warmth is characterized by displaying Christ's love for all people and a personal invitation to be a part of the community of believers. Every guest and regular attender should be welcomed generously to worship and ministry programming and given what they need to focus on God's gifts for them. All Baptized members are consistently reminded and shown they are an important part of the body of Christ. Warmth is a welcome invitation to be with the family of God where we receive God's forgiveness and love, sharing it freely with others.

Warmth is shown when people across generations are known and what to know others. This warmth in a congregation allows for an open and honest environment where youth share joys, questions, crisis, and doubt knowing God's Word will be spoken in love. No congregation or individual can do this perfectly, yet we strive to see and reflect God's love for us to others.

Challenge has two different aspects to it. First, challenge is being willing to engage in tough spiritual conversations. Standing firmly in God's Word, it faces the questions and confusion youth experience living in our current culture. Adults use good listening but don't just let sin and conflict slide. Challenge means respecting young people as they become independent and treating their questions seriously. The Holy Spirit working in the congregation can reflect the love of Jesus, pointing always to the cross as young people navigate joy and struggle.

The second aspect of challenge is focused on encouragement of young leaders to live out their faith. Adults should use opportunities to challenge young disciples to actively engage in vocations, service and leadership through the work of the Holy Spirit. Challenge doesn't underestimate young people. Instead it gives them opportunities to grow, even if there is potential for failure.

Grace in our relationships and culture echoes God's love and forgiveness to us. As youth struggle, grow and change, they need parents and supportive adults to constantly remind them of their chief identity as God's beloved Baptized child. Words of confession and absolution should be spoken often, and congregations should regularly share personal stories of grace, failure, challenge and joy. As young people struggle, they need a community of believers who support, share their narratives and point young people back to the cross, reminding them of the God who sent His Son for us all.

One way to foster an environment of warmth, challenge, and grace is to have a dedicated space for youth where they grow as disciples with their peers. While healthy youth ministry is integrated into the larger congregation, there is a need for space, time and resources specifically for young people. This allows adults to teach at a developmentally appropriate level and focus on the unique needs and questions of teens.

There is no prescription or program for creating a healthy environment. The work of creating this environment of warmth, challenge and grace cannot be rushed or superficial. **Congregational communities can be a teen's testing ground for seeing if God's love described in His Word is effectively applied and active in real life.** A healthy congregational environment is key to healthy youth ministry.

Discussion Questions

For Youth Leaders

- How have you personally experienced warmth, challenge and grace in your life?
- What words would you use to describe your congregation?
- How can you help create an environment of warmth, challenge and grace?

For Youth Ministry Teams

- Would you say your youth ministry is a safe place for young people to struggle? If so, why? If not, what changes can you help create that environment?
- How can we as youth leaders appropriately share stories of failure, grace, challenge, and joy?
- How do you prepare parents, adult leaders and teens to be comfortable dealing with hard questions?

For Congregational Leadership

- How do you practically work towards making your congregation an environment of warmth, challenge and grace?
 - Consider how you welcome visitors, the physical building, and communication for places to start.
- What outlets do you have for adults and teens to share personal stories of failure, grace, challenge and joy?
- What resources are you putting towards a dedicated space and opportunities for youth?