

Congregations Have

Warmth, Challenge, and Grace



- Congregations foster an open and honest environment where youth share joys, questions, crises, and doubts, 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 its 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, and hurt, and make it easier for young people to walk away.

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

Warmth is characterized by displaying Christ's love for all people and an intentional invitation to be known and seen by the community of believers. Everyone, including guests and regular attendees, should be welcomed generously to worship and ministry program and given what they need to focus on God's gifts for them.

Healthy youth ministry is hospitable, and all Baptized members are consistently reminded and shown they are an important part of the body of Christ.

As we receive God's forgiveness and love, warmth encourages us share it freely with others.

There are key actions we can take to help foster warmth. Youth ministries can connect teens across generations where they can be known and know others. Warmth can be seen when peers create space to care for one another, pray together, and share God's Word. Christian adults throughout the congregation model lives of faith with honesty and joy. This warmth in a congregation allows for an open and honest environment where youth share joys, questions, crises, and doubts 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 and truth, 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.

Deeply rooted in their faith, adults prepare well for deep spiritual conversation and are dedicated to continuing to build relationships over time as difficult issues are addressed. 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.

In these relationships they can share God's grace and forgiveness while navigating conflicts and disagreements with truth in love. As you teach vocation, you will find students who may have the gifts and temperament for church work. Healthy youth ministry encourages youth to pursue church work vocations as it fits their gifts and skills. Healthy congregations can be incubators for future church workers by providing support, encouragement, and foundational training to youth.

Grace in our relationships and congregational environment 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 congregational environment, but it is key to healthy youth ministry. While they might not always articulate it with these words, teens are looking for these qualities in other places and even online, but the church is the one place that can not only care for their emotional, relational, physical, and mental health, but their spiritual wellbeing as well. An environment of warmth, challenge, and grace is not created overnight. It cannot be superficial or selective. 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. Warmth, challenge, and grace are made person by person and through consistent effort over time.

Discussion Questions

For Individuals

- Who has been a good example to you of warmth, challenge, and grace? What actions did they take that made you feel this way?
- What words would you use to describe your congregation?
- What words would a youth or visitor use to describe your congregation?
- What youth do you personally know and how do you show warmth, challenge, and grace to them?
- What personal stories do you have that might help youth see faith in action through failure, grace, challenge, and joy?

For Youth Ministry Teams

- What space (physical, digital, or through time together) have you created to allow youth to study God's Word together at a developmentally appropriate level?
- Would you say your youth ministry is a safe place for young people to struggle? If so, why? If not, what changes can you make to help create that environment?
- How can we create opportunities for youth leaders or congregation members to 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

- Are the youth who attend worship and other congregational programs welcomed and known by the adults in the congregation?
- 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?

7 Practices of Healthy Youth Ministry