

Staffing Your Youth Ministry Program

Your youth committee has suggested programs for the next three months. You call volunteers who might help plan and run the programs and you hear the words "Sorry, no" so many times your head is spinning. The reasons begin to sound similar after a while--not enough time, too busy, other commitments. You do what any reasonable person would do, you bring a proposal to the youth committee to recommend that your congregation hire a youth director.

Wouldn't it be great to have someone to plan and organize your whole youth program? Someone else could do the detail work, line up volunteers, really work with the young people. It's the obvious answer to your problems.

Are you asking the right people? Nothing can be more frustrating than doing a job you don't enjoy or can't do without a sense of competence.

Before You Act

What seems like the obvious answer is not always the best answer. Hiring a staff person to work with youth *can* be a good decision--we'll get into that in a bit--but sometimes it isn't. For many congregations, it is a band-aid solution to a problem. It helps heal but it doesn't prevent future problems.

What does this mean? If you are a parent, or if you have ever worked as a babysitter, you know the way young children react when babysitters come. Babysitters are perfectly capable, competent people, but they aren't mom or dad. They don't know all of the little rituals that are important to bedtime. They can sometimes be a lot more fun than parents. But having a babysitter usually means that parents are doing something that the children aren't welcome to do and that translates as rejection.

This example may be a bit extreme, but it is important that your youth committee ask themselves if they are interested in hiring someone to do something that their congregation really should be doing. Effective youth ministry happens in congregations where young people are loved, respected and included in all aspects of congregational life. Caring adult members of the congregation are vital for young

people to feel part of the community of believers. "Hiring out" the work of adults will not replace the need for young people to feel that they belong to and with adults in the congregation.

Look for someone with program skills plus the maturity and knowledge to handle working with young people in a professional way.

Making It Work

Before you recommend hiring a staff person to work with your youth ministry program, ask yourselves how you can improve your work with volunteers. Sometimes, by making a few changes in how you use volunteers, you can alleviate the need for a paid staff person. Try answering the following questions:

- *Are we realistic in asking people to do reasonable tasks?* Sometimes we expect too much from people. We ask them to make a long-term commitment or to do something that will take an inordinate amount of time. Look at what needs to be done. Break it into reasonable tasks. Someone might be willing to attend every youth event if they do not have to also prepare refreshments and arrange transportation. Someone else may not enjoy youth activities but might enjoy organizing refreshments.
- *Are you asking the right people?* Nothing can be more frustrating than doing a job you don't enjoy or can't do without a sense of competence. Ask people with good relational skills to work directly with the youth. Those who are good at details can assist with planning.
- *How are you supporting your volunteers?* Can you send them a subscription to a youth ministry resource magazine? How about paying their way to attend a workshop sponsored by your synod? Volunteers deserve to be treated with respect for their gifts and one of the best ways to show respect is to provide avenues for them to have further training. Also, see that they have what they need to do their job. They may need a key to get into the church building, access to a computer to assist with the youth newsletter or a limited budget to pay for expenses such as their registration for a youth event.
- *Are you thinking creatively about volunteer recruitment?* How about the new couple who are attending the pastors' class and will join the church in a few months? They have expressed their interest in getting involved with the church and the pastor feels they may have gifts to offer. Or the senior

citizen who loves to bake. She might feel honored to be asked to bake for youth group meetings if someone would stop by her house to pick it up on their way to the meeting. Teams of parents or other adults may rotate responsibilities for certain events or meetings. Perhaps the parents of young children would be happy to be your youth sponsors if someone would babysit for their young children during meetings. Many adults may not have thought about helping out and they probably won't respond to a newsletter article. If they are personally asked, especially by the youth, they may be eager to say yes.

- *Are you thanking your volunteers?* It is normal for us to respond well to being appreciated. Thank people, again and again and again. Thank people in person, with a note and in an article in the newsletter. Plan a special activity at the end of the year for volunteers. Let people know how special you think they are. They will probably say yes again.

Your program will be strongest when a team of committed youth and adults work together to provide leadership.

We Still Need Paid Staff

If you feel you have given working with volunteers a good try and you still need a paid staff person, then it may be the best decision for you. A paid youth director will give you consistency and should assure you of having a person who relates well with young people for all of your programs. The right person can provide a needed boost to your entire congregational ministry. One of the most critical aspects of youth ministry is that it is relational, and a caring person who knows all of the young people and personally supports them in their faith journey can be a significant addition to your youth ministry efforts.

Contact your synod office. Let them know of your interest in adding a staff person. They may have a staff member or may be able to recommend someone who could help you write a job description, determine a fair salary for your area and promote the position.

It is important that you find the right person for your congregation. Involve youth in every step, from writing the job description to interviewing and making the final selection. Look for someone with program skills plus the maturity and knowledge to handle working with young people in a professional way. The person should feel

comfortable with your community, other congregational staff and members of the congregation.

Once you have selected a youth director, support them. Your youth committee is more important than ever. You can work with your staff person to offer assistance, advice and counsel for their work. The role of volunteers will remain important. A youth ministry program should not revolve around the personality or skills of one person. Your program will be strongest when a team of committed youth and adults work together to provide leadership. A good youth director will relate to and care about youth and adults in the congregation in a responsible way and will facilitate the leadership of others.

Whether or not you choose to have a youth director, the young people and adults who volunteer to serve in leadership roles are important to a strong youth ministry program. Offer regular, prayerful support for all who offer their time, talents and resources to further the gospel.

Calling and Providing for Youth Ministry Staff

It's safe to assume that all congregations want their ministry with young people and their families to be effective and to grow.

Eventually, many congregations decide to invest time, energy, money and other resources in a staff person to give direction to their youth ministry. Some churches call an ordained youth pastor. Others call a youth director, youth minister or director of youth (and sometimes family) ministries.

Whatever the position title, many new staff people are doomed before they begin. Congregations decide that they need "someone to do the job," so they rush out and hire a young, energetic, dynamic person. Often, that person burns out in a few years, sometimes even a few months. Nothing can hurt the long-term effectiveness of a congregation's youth ministry like the revolving door syndrome of youth staff coming and going. Ministry with young people centers on trusting relationships, and congregations with a history of rapid turnover have a difficult time establishing effective youth ministry.

A congregation needs to address five basic steps before calling a person to begin his or her ministry.

Step 1: Create A Team

One of the church's most important ministries is making the Christian faith real and relevant in the lives of young people. Youth ministry staffing should be considered with a great deal of prayer, thought and planning. One of the most important steps a congregation can take is to first create a team.

The team should be no smaller than eight and no larger than 12 people. It should be comprised of a combination of young people with whom the individual will work-- adult volunteers, parents, congregational council members, and at least one pastor or staff person who will serve in a supervisory role. These people are charged with examining the issues, writing a job description, and serving as a Call Committee. A broad-based team working together to discern God's hopes for your congregation can help ensure a good match.

Step 2: Create A Vision

...for the Congregation

This is one of the most important tasks, yet is the most frequently overlooked. Together the team should spend time discussing the congregation's vision for youth ministry:

- What do you wish your ministry with young people and their families to look like in one year, five years and even ten years?
- What do you hope for young people to know and to experience after being involved in your youth ministry?

A major part of your team's work should focus on those questions. If a vital part of your vision is outreach into the community, you will look for a very different person than if your vision focuses only on the nurturance of the young people within your congregation. Creating a vision statement is a strong way to communicate your congregation's commitment to quality ministry and to your goals. It will help as you advertise your position, and will serve as a filter through which your examination of candidates can occur. It also provides a way for potential candidates to evaluate their sense of call to your congregation.

...for the Position

As you develop a vision for your congregation, you will be developing a vision for the individual that you will be calling to serve. Your congregation's budget will become

an important factor as well. As your vision grows, the answers to the following questions will become clear.

- Should we call a lay or ordained person? Generally, ordained candidates bring a greater level of education to the position. They also tend to cost more. Every person, ordained or lay, needs to be evaluated based on his or her skills, gifts, experience and training.
- Should we hire full-time or part-time? Although largely a financial decision, there are distinct differences in who you will interview based on this decision. Part-time staff are less likely to be trained to lead a youth ministry and might need more support from inside and outside the congregation. Part-time staff are also less likely to stay long-term. However, part-time staffing can be a good way for a congregation to work into a full-time person.
- Should we make use of a student or an intern? This is a cost-effective way of finding someone who is exploring youth and family ministry as a career. The downside is the revolving door syndrome that can hurt in the long run. Students and interns can be effective, but they need a strong committee or other source of support to carry the program from intern to intern or student to student.
- Should we cluster with another congregation? Especially in rural areas, many congregations are choosing to pool resources to share a staff person. These people generally are called to serve a community or school district. This can be a wonderful method of serving young people and their families in a cost-effective way. Still, there are issues; occasionally, individual congregations feel as though their own needs are being short-changed, and the youth staff person can feel pulled in different directions. Good communication and planning is crucial.
- Should we focus on youth or youth and family? "Youth and family ministry" has become a buzzword this decade, but it is still being defined. We know that we should expand our vision to include families--the primary faith center--but we're not sure how to do this yet. If you choose to have your staff person focus on families, you will need to look for a different person than if you choose to focus strictly on youth. A youth and family person needs training in family dynamics and systems, and needs to be skilled especially in working with adults.
- Are we hiring a "Lone Ranger" or a team player? Historically, the church has hired Lone Rangers to work with youth--those able to draw young people by the power of their personalities. The problem is that when they leave, the program frequently falls apart. It is much more important to call a team player who can work to unleash effective ministry in the congregation. Youth ministry professionals are moving away from the role of player to the role of

coach, equipping congregations to take ownership of their ministry. A team player is a very different candidate than a Lone Ranger.

Step 3: Create a Job Description

A key issue in calling a staff person is the job description. This should be a specific document that outlines the expectations, responsibilities and accountabilities of the individual. It should begin with the purpose of the position, such as: "The director of Youth and Family Ministries works to encourage, inspire and nurture young people and their families in the Christian faith." The job description should also clearly identify which staff member supervises and supports the individual (most often this is a senior or associate pastor).

Specific responsibilities in this description should flow from your visioning process. If you choose to focus on outreach, how many contacts would you expect the person to make in the course of a week? For which programs will she be responsible? How will he relate to other programs (such as Sunday school or confirmation)? What are the expectations in terms of the number of over-night events, or long-term summer trips?

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Step 4: Put Together a Package

Because youth ministry staff people have been historically young and inexperienced, the perception is that they can be picked up inexpensively. As much as possible, the salary package you offer should reflect the vision your team has already created. If your vision calls for a more experienced or educated person, you should expect to pay more.

Currently there are many more good congregations looking for candidates than there are available candidates. This has implications for the salaries and benefits you offer.

Creating a salary and benefit package is about stewardship. It is about a congregation caring for its staff members. A youth ministry staff person should be fairly compensated for ministry.

Before you put together a package, take a look at the salary guidelines published annually by your synod office. If you're calling a lay person, compare those guidelines to what school teachers in your local school district with similar experience and education are paid. Consult with neighboring congregations that are similar in size.

Be sure to consider your community's cost of living. And don't forget about benefits such as health and life insurance, a pension plan, vacation, continuing education and books, and mileage reimbursement. A congregation should be prepared to spend \$23,000-\$45,000 for a full-time package.

Step 5: Call a Person

Finally, you are ready to begin your search. Advertise the position in a variety of places.

The difficult part is evaluating candidates. You might have the pastor or staff person who will supervise the person do an initial screening and narrow the field to three or four candidates to present to the committee or team. These questions can help in this screening interview:

- Does the person understand our vision? It is vitally important that she be able to work within your congregation's goals. She may be creative and gifted in a particular area, but that is an asset only if it fits with your vision and goals.
- Can the person articulate the Christian faith? Ask him about his faith experiences and influences. If he can't articulate his faith to you, he certainly can't explain it to young people.
- Will the person work well in your congregational climate? Will she fit in with the rest of the staff? Will she appreciate and support your style of leadership, or your congregation's style of worship?
- Does the candidate like young people? It may be too obvious, but a person must enjoy being with youth and families on their own turf.
- Can the supervisor work well with the candidate? The youth ministry professional/supervisor relationship is the most important one that you will forge.

- Is the candidate passionate about working with young people? Passion is something that cannot be taught. Programming, relationship building and event planning are teachable skills.

Finally, take your top candidates to your team. After composing interview questions, ask each candidate the same questions so the comparison is equitable. After each interview, pause for reflection. When you've reached consensus, a final step might be an interview with a senior pastor (if you're in a multi-staff setting) or the church council. Check the candidate's references. The best way to determine what she will do in your congregation is to know what she's done in the past.

Hopefully, hiring a youth (and family) ministry staff person is the beginning of a long and lasting relationship. But remember, your task as a congregation is not over when the call is extended. To help provide longevity in the position, you must continue to pray for, support and nurture your staff person. Give him regular evaluations, and provide for his continuing education. Encourage her to think of new and creative ideas for communicating the faith and continually challenge her to grow in her skills. Help him link to other youth ministry professionals in your community for networking and support.

Help in Hiring

Place Advertisements in Publications

- Local synod newsletters
- The Lutheran magazine
- Associate, the ELCA newsletter for Associates in Ministry

Contact Organizations

- List the position on the web site of the ELCA Youth Ministries Network. Go to www.elcaymnet.org and post your position there.
- The Youth and Family institute at Augsburg College (612.330.1624) is developing a comprehensive site for Youth Ministry placement on the World Wide Web. Their Web address is <http://www.youthfamilyinstitute.com/>
- Youth Leadership, Inc. (612.870.3632), the organization that runs the graduate program at Luther Seminary, is a source for candidates with M.A. or M.Div. degrees in Youth and Family Ministry.
- Youth Encounter (612.789.3556) lists openings in its newsletter.

- The Wartburg Center for Youth Ministry (319.589.0220) trains at several different levels.
- Place Job announcements with your local camping ministry. Many camp staff are looking for youth ministry positions.
- Post the position at local Lutheran colleges, or with Lutheran Campus Ministries. Lutheran seminaries are also a good resource. Phone numbers and addresses available in the ELCA Yearbook.