

The Web of Youth Ministry

Beth Dana and Jesse Jaeger

Congregations are one of the few places where people of all ages come together, build relationships, and live their faith. But where are the high school youth in these communities? Historically, UU congregations have focused on the Youth Group as the primary model for ministry with youth. However, a truly multigenerational community welcomes and affirms the voices, gifts, and journeys of every person of every age. This pamphlet is a tool for congregations to go beyond the one-size-fits-all youth group approach to nurture a more vibrant, inclusive faith community in which youth are encouraged to grow in spirit, service and leadership.

Spiritual Development

As spiritual beings, youth experience awe, gratitude, wonder, appreciation, and “at-one-ness.” Youth ministry should encourage spiritual awareness and offer both individual and group experiences that nurture and enliven the spirit. Creating worship, singing, expression through creative arts, experiences in nature, and such disciplines as meditation, prayer, and yoga are some examples of activities that nurture spiritual development.

Beloved Community

Being held in the arms of a beloved community is an essential part of being a religious person of any age. To be acknowledged and affirmed for just who you are is especially important in adolescence. A youth ministry that is seen as the responsibility of all adults in the congregation, that knows and includes its youth in many aspects of congregational life, and that appreciates the gifts that each youth brings, grounds youth in authentic UU community and faith. From this grounding, youth can connect with the wider Unitarian Universalist movement and with the diversity of our multifaith world.

Justice Making

Youth answer our faith’s call to work for justice in their own lives, in local communities, and in our larger society. Service trips, whether local or far from home, can open youth’s eyes to social inequities and inspire them to work for justice. Organizing a social justice project within the congregation can connect youth with others and demonstrate their leadership. Whether serving food, marching to witness for justice, or leading workshops, youth engage in social justice issues that are important to them.

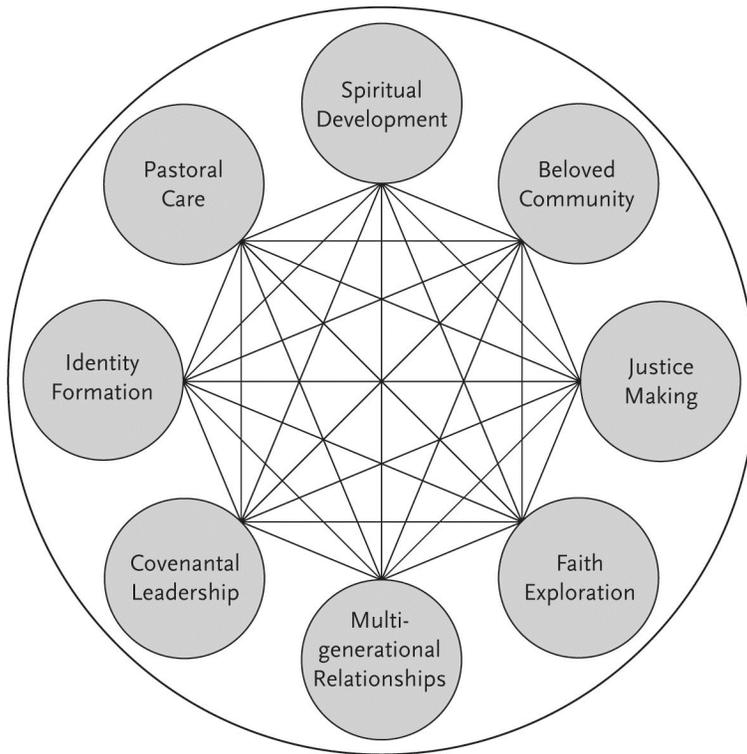
Faith Exploration

Structured learning environments that promote the free and responsible search for truth, meaning, and purpose are an important part of youth faith development. Faith exploration takes place when youth engage with workshops in the congregation and at camps and conferences. The UUA’s Tapestry of Faith programs for youth are designed to be highly engaging and adaptable for different groups. Topics explored include ethics, interfaith leadership, theology and bridging to adulthood. Unitarian Universalist religious education

acknowledges that we are all both learners and teachers; when youth facilitate education programs, it is a learning and leadership development opportunity.

Multigenerational Relationships

Multigenerational faith communities offer opportunities for all ages together (for example, an all-congregation retreat), for multiple age groups (for example adults and teens working together on an immigration justice project), and for peer groups (for example, a youth group or women's crowning ceremony). Diverse programming can both meet the specific developmental needs of an age group and bring people together across age groups for the benefit of everyone. Dynamic youth ministry connects youth with people of all ages through religious education programs, mentor relationships, multigenerational choirs, worship and workshop leadership, celebrations of life passages such as Coming of Age and Bridging into adulthood, and fun outdoor retreats open to all families and ages.



Covenantal Leadership

Youth leadership is a covenantal practice in which youth are safe, recognized, and affirmed as full and vital participants in the life of our shared Unitarian Universalist faith communities. Adults encourage youth to take on more responsibility as they grow and develop. The goal for youth is to become empowered and effective leaders through intentional leadership development over time.

Identity Formation

Dynamic youth ministry supports youth in their journeys to figure out who they are as spiritual beings, relational beings, racial/ethnic and sexual beings, and people of faith. Youth ministry helps youth develop a healthy identity by providing programs like Our Whole Lives: Sexuality Education that explore and affirm diverse identities, by offering mentors and role models, by providing opportunities to participate and to lead, and, ultimately, by accepting and respecting them as they are and as they grow.

Pastoral Care

Youth have age-related pastoral needs that are met in communities where people know how to listen deeply, where everyone works together to create a religious community that provides pastoral care with youth. This includes creating safe congregations, supporting youth who are in crisis, and celebrating their joys and accomplishments. Pastoral care with youth is strengthened when ministers have a direct relationship with the youth.

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For Further Reading

Gail Forsyth-Vail and Jessica York. *Bridging: A Handhood for Congregations*. Boston: Unitarian Universalist Association, 2012.

Jennifer McAdoo and Anne Principle. *Journeys of the Spirit: Planning and Leading Mission Trips with Youth*. Boston: Unitarian Universalist Association, 2010.

Jill M. Schwendeman. *When Youth Lead: A Guide to Intergenerational Social Justice Ministry (plus 101 Youth Projects)*. Boston: Unitarian Universalist Association, 2007.

Office of Youth and Young Adult Ministries. *Youth Ministry Advising: A Complete Guide*. Boston: Unitarian Universalist Association, 2012.

Tapestry of Faith, www.uua.org/re/tapestry

A series of programs and resources for all ages that nurture Unitarian Universalist identity, spiritual growth, a transforming faith, and vital communities of justice and love.

Youth Ministry, www.uua.org/youth

Resources and tips for youth ministry and opportunities for youth leaders.