

Integrating Youth into the Church

A Beyond Youth Group Model

Church basements filled with – insert large number – of youth are a way of the past, a very 90s/early 2000s model of youth ministry. We loved our basements filled with teens, and it was good and faithful ministry when it had its place in the larger culture. But those days are long gone, and we find ourselves asking the question: How do we minister to our youth *today*?"

The larger culture has shifted, and our young people are busy. Their schedules constantly shifting in order to accommodate many things, good and important things, but carving out several hours a week for youth group can be hard to fit into that calendar. This isn't them saying church, faith, and God aren't important. For many, it is very important; however, in the current culture, it is hard to do it all.

But with this problem lies an opportunity, a chance to reintegrate youth into the larger body of the church. According to Merriam-Webster dictionary, the word integrate means "to incorporate into a larger unit." Our youth are part of the whole of the church, they need to be incorporated into the larger unit. In some churches, there can still be a place for youth group in the church, though it likely needs to look differently... likely meeting shorter, less often, and at different times or it might be something totally new: what if your youth ministry was simply sending members to gather in the stands of a sporting event while you cheer on the youth of the church. Traditional "youth groups" cannot be the only model to nurture faith and relationships with our young people. We need to be creative and invitational about how we integrate youth into the life of the greater church.

Here are several ideas on ways youth might nurture their faith and relationships in the church beyond youth group:

- Deacon - Youth are uniquely gifted in hands-on caring ministries like a deacon might do. They have an innate eye for justice issues, and love to care for the church.
- Elder on Session - Having a youth with leadership gifts serve as an elder can work nicely. You should evaluate if session meetings are interesting and engaging enough for a young person and if the current work of the session is appropriate for an adolescent. This is less about asking if a young person is qualified, and more about asking if this is a good and fulfilling ask in the first place for a young person or if it will be boring, and lacking meaning for them.
- Mission Leader (committee or one-off project) - Gen Z youth are all about social justice and service. They have a lot of opportunities between school, clubs and church to experience service and offer up leadership in this area.
- Liturgist - A lovely way to engage youth in worship leadership
- Sing in the choir - You shouldn't have to be an adult to sing in the choir!
- Play an instrument in worship - think prelude, postlude, song accompaniment or musical offering in worship
- Photography - Ask youth with skills to help capture and tell the story of your church with photography. Look to see who might be on the yearbook committee or the newspaper staff at their school
- Usher/Greeter - This is another great ask for young people, so they have a role in worship

- Serve communion - W-3.0414: “Ordinarily ruling elders, deacons, and ministers of the Word and Sacrament serve the bread and cup; the session may authorize other church members to do so.” There is something powerful about serving and receiving communion, and to think of a young person serving you might be a special way to invite youth into leadership.
- Leader or teacher in children’s ministry - If a youth has special gifts for working with children, teaching others is a great way for youth to learn and grow in faith.

How do you do this? Creativity and Flexibility!

- If they can’t make every choir rehearsal or the entirety of it, let it go, let them still sing on Sundays.
- Would serving as a leader on a committee be easier if we offered hybrid meetings that allowed them to join from home?
- Instead of a 3-year term, offer a 1-year term in leadership.
- Be intentional that committees and leadership teams make space for young people to share and adults to listen!
- Get to know the youth in the church and be invitational. Personal invitations are always more powerful than general asks.

Just because it is the way we’ve done it in the past, doesn’t mean the Spirit isn’t inviting us into new ways today. Be open, get creative and keep walking with and advocating for your youth.

Author: Brittany Porch
 Project Manager: Gina Yeager-Buckley