

Effective Youth Ministry

By Bob Young

Ministers, parents, and church families have been concerned for many years about the exodus of teenagers from our churches. Sometimes, we in churches of Christ have lived in such isolation from our religious neighbors that we have not realized that this is a problem in almost all churches, across most regions and demographics of our nation. Many people are asking for strategies and ideas of how to retain our kids in the life of the church.

This article shares a few ideas that we have heard or observed that might be helpful.

First, make a concerted effort to understand faith development. Too many church leaders and parents “let down their guard” when youth are baptized. A well-known faith development progression includes four steps: participation by proxy, initial involvement, affiliation, and ownership. To explain, children begin attending church by going with their parents. Their first participation is as parents read to them or pray with them. Children whose parents take them to Bible class experience this in early Bible classes as well. Eventually, children become capable of more personal experience and involvement. They personally participate in various activities as faith grows. The next step of the progression is the desire to affiliate. In churches of Christ, this generally occurs by baptism. The young person is a full-fledged member in his or her own right. This does not mean that their faith is fully developed. The last step in the sequence is the need to learn how to own faith and make it one’s own. Baptism marks the place at which many youth begin the struggle toward faith in earnest, and many times the church and parents provide less guidance for the process of applying the Scriptures to life than during the teaching that led up to baptism.

Second, pass on the faith. This requires that faith discussions occur in the context of the family and in the context of the church. Intergenerational gatherings, small groups, parties, and even classes can provide opportunities for older, more faith-experienced Christians to tell about their own faith and the importance it has played in their lives. Shared activities, retreats or service projects, provide an opportunity to share the activities that characterize faith.

Third, seek a youth curriculum that exposes kids to a broad range of topics about faith and how to live it in the real world. Make certain that the curriculum is both biblical and practical. Give teens ample opportunities to practice what they are learning so that the teachings “stick” to their lives. This may include mission projects, community service projects, participation in the shared activities or worship of the church, and other means of putting their beliefs into action.

Fourth, do not be afraid of youth learning about other churches or other religions. Comparison is a normal part of growing up. Why do other churches appeal? What are our strengths and our weaknesses? Our teens will answer these questions, and we will be helped by knowing the answers they give. In our pluralistic society, many teens will be helped by a basic comparative religions class.

Fifth, encourage (and insist) that the older teens provide leadership in the youth group. Allow them to grow up, learn from mistakes, and learn healthy relationships. Teens will help one another in ways that we adults never can, even in the midst of frustrations with the church. In this way, they help retain the next generation.

Sixth, older members can leave a legacy of faith to the next generation. Adults can develop relationships with the teens of the church by becoming the listening ears and advice givers that some parents are not able to be for their own kids. Believing parents need to take the command to disciple their own children very seriously through their lifestyle and actions. Too many Christian parents have given up their sacred role as parents and depend solely on the church. Some parents even distance their family from the church by failure to take advantage of Bible classes, regular or special gatherings, and youth activities. Parents need to model the faith in every way and allow the church's youth ministry to supplement their consistent Christian family lifestyles.

The task will not be completed in a few minutes each week. The task is so important that we must combine our best efforts—in prayer, sharing faith, regular attendance and participation, relationships, training and mentoring, and loving care.