



How to Make Your Congregation Youth- friendly



By Ted Johnston
National youth ministry development team co-director

CANTON, Ohio—All of us in Grace Communion International share in the challenge and responsibility to make our congregations places where people of all ages are encouraged and enabled to become increasingly mature disciples of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. That mission involves helping others meet Christ, know Christ and serve with Christ.

A primary aspect of this discipling challenge is to engage youths (children, teens and college-age young adults) in the life of each of our congregations. If we are to do that, we each need to contribute to making our congregations more youth-friendly. This article is written to help us in this important work.

Before looking at how we can create youth-friendly congregations, let's first ask, **why should we care?** Let me share some important answers to this legitimate question.

1. People need the Lord—and that includes young people. Jesus came to seek and save the lost—and children and teens who do not know Jesus are as lost as adults apart from Christ. We share in Jesus' work to seek and save lost



youths when we invite, bring and welcome lost youths into a youth-friendly congregation.

2. The church is always one generation away from extinction and thus youths are the church's future. While we do not fear extinction (believing Jesus' promises that the church will prevail), we do have the responsibility to work to see that the church continues into the next generation.

3. As workers in Jesus' harvest of souls, we are sent to go where fruit is both present and ripe for harvest. The experience of the church throughout Christian history shows that children and teens are a significant harvest field.

Studies show that most Christians in our culture come to Christ before age 18 (with most of those doing so before age 14). As I have met with various groups of WCG adults in the United States, I have conducted informal polls and found that these statistics hold in our fellowship as well.

God is doing a particularly fruitful work among children and teens—throughout the world—including our fellowship. We have both the opportunity and responsibility to join him in this important part of the harvest.

4. Jesus showed in his earthly ministry that youths are to be full participants in the work of the church. By scolding his disciples for making it difficult for children to come to him, Jesus shows us that the church is to be a place where children are sought out and welcomed.

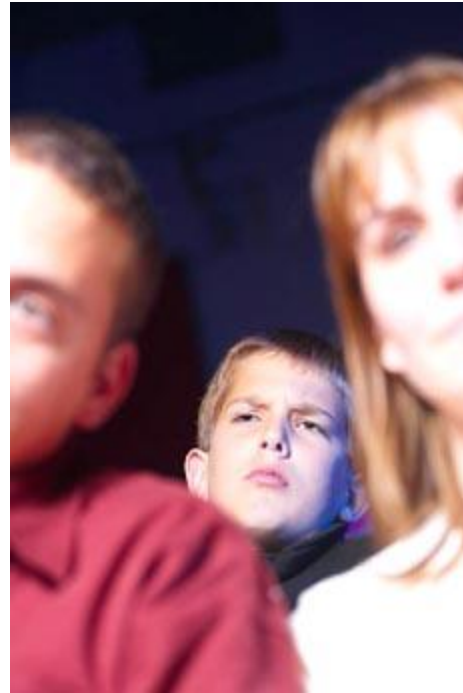
Having addressed the why of making our congregations more youth-friendly, let's now discuss the how by asking, **what does a youth-friendly congregation look like?** Following are several indicators for your consideration.

1. A youth-friendly congregation works to meet the four essential needs that are shared by all youths. (The basic content of this list and some of the ideas for the rest of this article are taken from *The Youth Friendly Parish* by Michael Anderson, published online at <http://yya.oca.org/TheHub/TOC/General/GImenu/GeneralInfo.htm>.)

- First, youths need a sense of belonging. They need a meaningful place in a group that they value—where they feel they belong. For us, this means they are able to say, “This is my church.”

But many youths don't find a sense of belonging in church. They might be more apt to say, “This is my parents' church.” Our goal and challenge is to help them find a sense of belonging in our congregation.

- Second, youths need respect rooted in valued skills. They need to be helped to develop skills to serve within the group, and then they need to have those skills affirmed as valued by the group. Many youths in church feel like unneeded and unappreciated appendages. Our goal and challenge is to equip our youths and then give them a meaningful place in real ministry.
- Third, youths need a sense of self-worth. This is related to the second need, but goes even further, where youths feel accepted and valued for simply being—for their presence as people, not merely for their contribution as workers. Our goal and challenge is to consistently show our youths that they are deeply valued and loved as individuals.
- Fourth, youths need reliable and predictable relationships. In particular, they need a few relatively close relationships with members in the group. Our goal and challenge is to see that each youth is connected to other youths in friendships and to at least one adult in a mentoring relationship.



Youths spend much of their lives—particularly during their teen years—searching out the fulfillment of these four needs. To do so is not selfish, nor ungodly. Rather, these needs are part of how God has made us.

Certainly youths can seek to meet these needs in unhealthy, ungodly ways (in gangs or cults, for example), but in our congregations they should have these needs met in ways that help them come to know Jesus and then grow as his followers.

Let me encourage each of us who are adults in WCG congregations to ask how we might reach out to youths in our congregations to help them meet these needs. **In addition to the ideas noted above, consider the following:**

1. Give youths opportunities to learn and then to perform tasks that are valued within the congregation. For example, they might participate in scripture reading, music performance, ushering, gathering the offering or serving as a greeter. Note that it is important to train them for these tasks so that they do them well. As they perform well, tell them. Show respect based on real achievement.

2. Look for opportunities to affirm young people—send them the message that they are special and essential to you and thus to the congregation.

We often send a contrary message by ignoring young people, interacting with them only when we need to correct them. But for them to feel loved and appreciated, positive interactions need to far outnumber the negative.

We can have positive, affirming interactions in various ways. For example, remember and use their names; send them birthday cards or handwritten notes any time of year. Spend time talking with them—give focused attention; if they are small children, get down on their level, eye-to-eye. Ask for their input and then use it.

Give them hugs (be careful about this if you are a man and they are adolescent girls); give them candy (check with the parents first).

3. Pray with and for the youths. Have a list in your congregation of youths for whom you are continuously praying. And let them know you are praying for them (but don't brag about it)—ask them for concerns and needs they have that you can address in your prayers.

4. Spend time with a few youths. Many youths spend little time with adults. Try to provide a few youths with such opportunities and do not confuse taking a kid along on an adult activity as spending time with them. Get into their world—and be a mature, wise, caring and consistent presence with them where they are. It will pay big dividends in their lives.

5. Learn about their world. Respect the youths enough to go to the effort to get to know their concerns, culture, needs, preferences and challenges. Find out what they watch on television and in movies; what they listen to; what they read. How do you do that? Ask them and then listen lovingly and non-judgmentally.

The point here is not for an adult to act like a teen (trust me, teens hate that)—rather the point is for the adult to understand the teen. A second part of this approach is to look for what is good and godly in the youth's world and then use that as a bridge to connect your world of Christ with what is consistent with Christ in their world.

6. Really listen to the youths. One of the greatest desires of young people (teens in particular) is to be heard. Youths are often timid around adults, so it will take some time for them to learn to trust you with their inner thoughts. Therefore, be patient and keep an open ear.

Having considered some ways to meet the needs of youths, let us now consider **how we can work together to see that these things are happening more consistently and intentionally in our congregations.** I recommend to you the following specific strategies:

1. Provide at church a setting in which teens can gather to express and discuss their needs and fears. Providing a teen small group moderated by a caring and mature Christian adult can do this. The small group could meet before or after services, or during the teaching part of the main service (though the better strategy is to make the main service entirely teen friendly and then have the teen small group before or after main church).
2. Provide times when youths can get away together and with caring, mature Christian adults. Retreats are great. So are trips to fun places. Many WCG districts offer Discovery Weekends, SEP camps and other events for youths. Take advantage of these opportunities to build closeness among your youths and for them to bond more closely with adult sponsors and leaders.
3. Plug your youths—your teens in particular—into meaningful, consistent ministry within your congregation. Do not just have a youth day at church a couple of times a year when the teens take over the worship service. Rather, give them a place in ministry week-in and week-out.

For example, do you have youths on your worship team? How about a drama team? Are youths frequently offering congregational prayers and helping with ushering. Do you have a mature youth on your congregation's advisory council? Think about how youths can be active in all the ministries of the congregation.

Much more can be said about helping your congregation to be more youth-friendly. I will stop here, however, and simply ask that you take this challenge personally. You cannot do everything, but you can do something.

I ask that you pray about this, asking God what he would have you do, given your circumstances, your abilities and your gifts. God wants to use you to co-minister in his discipling work with children, teens and college-age young adults. Seek his direction and he will grant it to you.

Copyright © 2003 Grace Communion International