



Developing a Congregational Youth Ministry Vision

Whether you are hoping to start a new youth group, revive a dormant youth program, or revitalize and improve youth ministry in your congregation, it's helpful to think big-picture first. With a clear vision and goals for your program, it will be easier to make decisions and evaluate success. We have provided some tools and resources to help in an initial visioning, or a re-visioning process.

This resource offers practical information to help congregations:

- Develop a vision and goals for your youth program (pg. 1)
- Understand important elements of congregational youth ministry (pg. 3)
- Set an age range for your youth program (pg. 5)
- Get to know today's youth through generational research and trends (pg. 6)

There is no “one size fits all” approach to youth ministry, or to creating a vision. This guide offers some ideas and strategies, but congregations are always encouraged to adapt CUC guidance to suit their own needs. CUC staff can also help guide you in this process. Email: youth@cuc.ca.

What is a vision and why is it important?

A vision is an articulation of why ministry with youth is important to your congregation, and what you hope to achieve through a thriving youth program. It helps congregations decide what types of programs and activities to prioritize, and allows them to evaluate progress and success.

Developing a vision

Developing a youth ministry vision can be a very useful exercise to articulate WHY youth are (or should be) involved in the congregation. There is no need to spend hours arguing about word choices or spend money crafting a perfect vision statement. Simply taking the time to discuss the purpose of youth ministry at your congregation is a great way to set some intention behind the youth program and get stakeholders on board to support this important ministry.

A clear vision also helps RE staff, youth advisors and youth explain to parents why participation in youth group and the congregation is meaningful, life-changing and about more than hanging out on couches. Your vision should make a clear connection between your congregation's mission and what you do in the youth program, which will help convey the importance of youth ministry to those involved, and to other members of the congregation.

If youth are present in your congregation, it is vital that they be active participants in consultations about youth ministry, and visions for its future. It is also valuable to hear from past youth, who can share what they valued and what could be improved. They may have new insights about how their participation helped them grow and impacted their lives.



Guiding Questions for Developing a Youth Ministry Vision

- How does our ministry to and with youth fit in with the congregation's overall ministry?
- How is youth ministry an extension of the congregation's mission?
- What are the ways that youth can and do develop their identity as UUs?
- What is the role of adult advisors, allies, mentors and parents/guardians in the youth program?
- How do youth interact with other adults in the congregation?
- How important is it that youth take leadership and develop skills?
- Where do youth get an understanding of UU history and theology?
- How is youth social and environmental justice programming rooted in UU principles and values?
- How do youth integrate UU values into their lives outside of youth group?
- How can our youth ministry help grow lifelong UUs?
- How can youth be meaningfully involved in congregational life?
- In what areas can youth serve the congregation?
- What youth age range is best suited to our congregation's youth ministry?

Who should be involved in setting a vision?

- Youth within your program's age range
- Parents and guardians
- Adult advisors, mentors and leaders
- Minister, religious education staff and volunteers
- RE committee, if applicable
- Past youth group participants who have recently aged out

Steps in the visioning process

There are many ways to hold a visioning process - the important thing is to create a process that works for your congregation and that yields a meaningful result for all involved. Here are a few steps and ideas for consultation and visioning:

- Create a small group that will oversee this process - this could simply be a religious educator or minister and a few other stakeholders.
- Determine who should be involved in the visioning process, and whose voices will be lifted up. This likely includes youth, youth advisors, parents, staff, and congregational leaders.
- Plan for more than one type of consultation, to ensure that many people can participate:
 - Surveys can reach former youth and can give current youth a confidential way to give feedback and raise concerns.
 - Town hall meetings and discussions can bring up shared insights and new ideas.
 - Consultations with specific groups of people can create safer space (i.e. youth-only, youth advisors, board members, staff, parents, etc.)
- Analyze the data and feedback received through consultations with stakeholders. Look for patterns, and make sure that youth voices are prioritized.
- Assemble a small group to draft a document summarizing the feedback received, and outlining a draft vision statement.
- Seek feedback from stakeholders, especially those involved in the consultation process.



- Consider budget implications, staff resources, parental involvement, upcoming changes in the congregation, and other factors that might impact the success of your youth ministry.
- Finalize the vision document or statement (remember - keep it simple, focus on the goal of this process, not on finding the perfect language or format).
- Share the vision and ensure that it's accessible to youth, adult allies and the congregation.

Using the vision to evaluate congregational youth ministry

It's a great idea to take the time to evaluate how you're doing, related to the congregation's youth ministry vision. Is the current youth program meeting the goals that were set out? Do changes need to be made to the ways youth are involved in congregational life? What supports are needed to make sure that youth are having the desired experience? How can partnerships with other congregations, or attendance at regional and national events help support your youth ministry vision?

If it is possible, set up a meeting with the stakeholders once a year, or more often, to discuss how the congregation is living up to the vision. Take the opportunity to celebrate all the great things about your youth ministry and build on past successes!

Key Youth Ministry Concepts

Youth ministry is the broad term describing the many ways that youth develop a UU identity and participate in the life of the congregation. This can include a regular youth group, youth cons, leadership, social justice and more. Youth group can be a central component of congregational youth ministry, but it should not be the only way that youth participate in UU community. Multigenerational relationships are essential to youth feeling that they are a part of their congregation and our faith.

See the [Web of Youth Ministry](#) for a good summary of the many aspects of youth ministry.

Youth ministry helps youth ask and answer questions like:

- What does it mean to be a Unitarian Universalist?
- Can I believe anything?
- How do I live the UU principles in the world and in my daily life?
- What gives me strength?
- What type of person am I? Who do I want to become?
- How should I treat others, and how do I want to be treated?
- How can we create communities where everyone feels safe and welcome?
- What kinds of spiritual practices and beliefs matter to me and have meaning to me now?
- How do I relate to people of other ages and identities?
- What am I doing with my life, and how do I navigate the transitions I'm going through?



Examples of Youth Ministry Visions and Definitions

Definition of Youth Ministry (from the UUA's *Consultation on Ministry To and With Youth Report*)

“Unitarian Universalist youth ministry is a collaboration between youth, their families, and adults to create authentic, anti-racist, anti-oppressive and multicultural communities that empower and support:

- The spiritual, religious, and ethical development of youth grounded in Unitarian Universalist identity;
- Mutual love, respect, and trust between and among youth and adults;
- Relationship-based ministry and peer support;
- A youth-driven ministry of justice that calls all of us to live out our values in the world.

Like all ministry, ministry with youth is the responsibility of the whole congregation and the whole community.”

Pacific Western Region (PWR) Youth Ministry Vision:

“PWR youth ministry supports communities of high school youth and adult collaborators dedicated to:

- Supporting faith formation experiences which create lifelong Unitarian Universalists,
- Increasing opportunities for learning and spiritual growth, while fostering personal resilience,
- Promoting leadership discernment, development, and difference making, AND
- Focusing on supporting traditionally marginalized populations with the goal of building Beloved Community.”

Youth Empowerment

Youth empowerment is an essential part of Unitarian Universalist youth ministry. Adults who were youth or advisors during the time of YRUU (the program and framework for youth ministry pre-2007) will remember a time when youth empowerment was the primary goal of youth group. At that time, youth empowerment often meant a lack of adult support and guidance, and sometimes created an oppositional relationship between youth and adults.

Today, we recognize that there are many aspects of youth programming, and that youth empowerment is not the only goal of youth ministry. We also know that youth can best develop a sense of UU identity, leadership skills and the ability to take responsibility while in a *supportive relationship with adults*. It's no longer about leaving youth to their own devices - youth empowerment should be rooted in covenant and trust between adults and youth.

What is Youth Empowerment?

A definition from the [Consultation on Ministry To and With Youth Report](#) (UUA)

“Youth empowerment 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 community. This covenantal practice is based on the following set of guiding principles:



- **Love and trust** between youth and adults, between youth and youth, and between adults and adults
 - **Mentoring relationships** among children, youth, and adults, which draw from direct experience and wisdom
 - The development of **youth confidence** and **self-identity** through building community, learning to use one's voice effectively, and realizing a more robust expression of themselves
 - Encouragement for all to grow together in **accountability**
 - Youth defining their issues and **participating in the decisions** that impact youth communities and the larger multigenerational communities we share
 - Youth and adults having access to information through **direct and honest communication** expressed with grace, humility, and respect
 - **Trust** in the competence of youth and the authenticity of their insights
 - **Appreciation** of the prophetic wisdom and energy of youth to be agents of social change, justice, and service
 - The recognition that **youth ministry is an integral Unitarian Universalist ministry** and part of our collective past, present, and future"
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Youth Program Age Ranges

The age range for most CUC-sponsored youth events is 14-19. Junior youth (12-13) may be allowed to attend some parts of a youth con program, with advance notice and agreement from the CUC, congregation and parents.

Youth program age ranges vary across Canada, while in the U.S. "youth" are generally considered to be 14-18 and in high school. Canadian youth programs tend to focus on youth in high school as well, but may include junior youth and/or youth up to 20 years old. Extending the age range to 19 or 20 allows older youth to choose when to bridge to young adulthood. This process can be difficult for some and might take some adult support to help them discern the best time to move on.

Older youth can provide continuity, culture-transfer and leadership to a youth group, but may also become disinterested in attending a youth group dominated by 12-14 year olds. On the other end, **junior youth** might not have their needs met or feel comfortable in a group with 19 and 20 year olds. Keep in mind that youth outside of the 14-19 age range will not be able to attend most regional and national youth events, so that will be something to negotiate if you have a different age range at your congregation.

Setting an age range

It's up to you, not the CUC, to decide what works for your congregation and your youth. The decision should be made in consultation with youth advisors, religious education staff and volunteers, your minister (if applicable), and with youth and parents. You may need to change the age range and approach as numbers shift over the years.

Some congregations have an active junior youth group (generally grades 6-8 or middle school) as well as a senior youth group. Activities may be shared, separated by age, or a



combination of both. The junior youth group will need more adult support and structure, while senior youth can take increasing leadership and responsibility.

Questions to consider when determining an age range for your youth program:

- How many youth do you have? Are there enough youth to form a healthy and vibrant group, or two separate groups?
- What is the maturity level of younger and older youth? Would they be able to form a cohesive group?
- What are the ages of current youth that are not served by any other RE class or program?
- What are the demographics of older children in RE (what is the youth group going to look like in 2 to 3 years)?
- Do you have staff with responsibility for youth that can help support a youth program?
- If not, is there room in the budget to hire a youth coordinator or paid youth advisor?
- How many volunteers are willing and available to act as advisors, mentors and other adult volunteers? Take into account the need for safe youth-adult ratios (8:1 is best practice) and having 2 adults present with youth at all times.
- Do you have the physical space to have two concurrent youth groups?
- Are you planning to run Grade 7-9 or Grade 10-12 OWL in the near future? (We recommend running OWL only for the ages specified in each curriculum)
- Do older youth have other roles or ways to be involved in the congregation? (I.e. helping with worship, paid or volunteer childcare, helping with children's RE, etc.)

Each congregation should consider these questions and set an age range that best suits their local context, with room to re-evaluate as needs change.

About this generation of youth

While creating a youth ministry vision, it is important to consider the specific needs and interests of this generation of youth. Generational theory is based on large trends that apply to an age group, so not every trait applies to every individual. But it can be a useful tool to understand the cultural reality of current youth. These traits are likely to change quickly as society shifts.

"Emerging adulthood is a critical developmental stage — a time when young people deepen their understanding of their identities and relationships, take on new responsibilities and define their individual truths. It is a period marked by transition and exploration, of wandering and wondering, choosing and becoming. Emerging adulthood can be a period of great volatility, marked by exploration and experimentation with new identities and roles." (MHCC)

Compared to the generation of teenagers before them, youth who are currently in high school are later in passing certain milestones, including:

- Learning to drive later
- Waiting longer to have sex
- Dating less



- Moving out of the house at an older age
- Getting part time jobs later
- Waiting to try alcohol and drugs

Today's youth also tend to spend less time with friends outside of school, venture out of the house less often and spend more time with their parents. They generally have closer relationships with parents than previous generations, and parental guidance carries significant weight.

They are more likely than previous generations to experience anxiety, depression, other mood disorders and struggle with mental health issues. On the positive side, youth are also more open about these issues, and support and treatment are more widely available. Youth often report feeling disconnected, lonely and isolated despite being constantly connected to peers through phones and social media.

Adults working with UU youth over time have observed that compared to previous generations, today's youth are:

- Less resistant to adult authority
- More likely to defer to adults in decision making
- Sometimes reluctant to offer their own ideas or opinions
- Sometimes uncomfortable making decisions, especially when given a lot of options
- Less interested in "doing everything themselves" as a matter of principle
- Often very busy, with numerous activities and commitments each week
- Able to develop leadership skills and take on leadership roles through school and extracurricular activities
- Highly committed to academics, and likely to feel pressure at school
- Likely to be planning ahead for university or college, even in early high school
- Blessed with many options for social connection - online and in-person. Therefore, youth group may not be as much of a social niche as it used to be
- Well schooled in many social issues, more open and accepting, and treat inclusion as a given
- Having trouble committing to longer term activities, like showing up to youth group every week
- Very connected with friends near and far, so there may be less incentive to attend in-person youth group activities and youth cons

We need to adapt to generational changes by shifting the balance of youth-adult leadership and providing opportunities for youth to be spiritually nurtured, cared for and supported as they develop new skills.