



## Youth Ministry and Intergenerational Connections: A Guide for Congregations

*Draft developed at the Youth Ministry Renaissance Module in November 2018 by Bob Miess, Amanda Graff, Asha Philar, Kiersten Moore, Deborah Weiner and Tracy Sprowls. Adapted in 2020 for the Canadian Unitarian Council by Asha Philar - CUC Youth and Young Adult Ministry Development.*

"An intergenerational congregation goes out of its way to welcome all individuals, helps them connect in a way that is meaningful, includes their lives in the patterns of weekly worship, and blesses them in their uniqueness. It invites their perspectives and help, whether for a special service, social action initiative, ongoing committee, or other project."

- Jill Schwendeman - *When Youth Lead (UUA, 2007)*

Youth<sup>1</sup> are a vital part of a healthy multigenerational congregation! Many youth find social connection and spiritual growth through youth group and age-specific activities and events. But even in congregations with a critical mass of youth, it's crucial that youth are meaningfully involved in congregational life and develop supportive intergenerational relationships. This approach is sometimes called "whole church youth ministry" - where everyone feels responsible for ministering to and with youth. When youth are embraced by their whole congregation, they are more likely to feel valued, to feel they belong in Unitarian Universalism, and to stay involved into adulthood.

If youth attend your congregation, and if you're working to become a more welcoming and inclusive faith home to all generations, this guide is for you. If there are no youth present right now, this guide can help your congregation prepare for a thriving youth ministry in the future.

Great youth ministry requires intentional and ongoing work by congregational leaders, staff, parents, youth advisors, and youth themselves. It also benefits from clear structures that support youth activities and enable youth participation in every aspect of congregational life. This resource provides ideas to create and strengthen those structures, with specific actions to take and people or groups who could hold responsibility. There are so many ways to engage youth - we encourage congregations to adapt this guide and the ideas within, and add new ideas that are relevant to your context. As much as possible, this work should involve ongoing consultation with youth and youth ministry stakeholders.

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<sup>1</sup> The Canadian Unitarian Council uses the 14-19 age range for youth, but each congregation can decide what age range is most appropriate for them.

It is often helpful to consult with your Canadian Unitarian Council staff, who can provide additional guidance, resources, ideas, and connections with other congregations. Email the CUC: [youth@cuc.ca](mailto:youth@cuc.ca). Be sure to check out the many other resources available on the CUC website: [cuc.ca/congregations-leaders/youth-ministry](http://cuc.ca/congregations-leaders/youth-ministry)

In addition to the ideas below, these questions can help your congregation reflect on current successes and challenges:

- a) Where and how do people of different ages find connection in your congregation?
- b) What are some opportunities and possibilities for greater connections and relationships building?
- c) Who should be involved to help push these ideas forward?
- d) Which rituals, activities and processes are sacred and central to your congregation, and how do they, or could they foster multigenerational connections? These could include:
  - Worship
  - Leadership and governance
  - Membership
  - Social and environmental justice
  - Pledging and fundraising
  - Coffee hour
  - Staff selection and ministerial search
  - Pastoral care and caring mechanisms

## Ideas for Fostering Congregational Youth Ministry

### Youth Group

Idea	Person/Group	Actions & Timeline
<b>Create a model of youth programming that is authentically youth based</b>	Youth leaders, youth advisors, DRE <sup>2</sup> , parents	- Consult with stakeholders in youth ministry, congregational leaders and staff. - If youth group is active, hold a visioning session that recaps past successes and challenges, and sets some goals for the next year. - Include inquiry and feedback from different cohorts of the congregation, especially considering budget, available volunteers, staff capacity and the congregation's goals for youth ministry.

<sup>2</sup> The term "DRE" is used in this guide to refer to paid or volunteer religious educators who oversee religious education/exploration in a congregation, and whose responsibility includes youth. These positions have a variety of names in congregations.

<p><b>Create connections between congregational leaders and youth group</b></p>	<p>DRE, minister and adults involved in, or leading programs youth may want to engage with</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Brainstorm specific adults or groups in the congregation that would be open to building connections with youth, and having youth be involved in the activities they lead.</li> <li>- With youth, identify areas of congregational life that interest them (worship planning, social justice, music, etc.)</li> <li>- Personal outreach to those with connections to congregational groups and activities.</li> <li>- DRE/minister and youth advisors host orientation meeting for adults interested in working with youth.</li> <li>- Youth can invite congregational leaders to youth group meeting to get to know each other and learn more about their area of work.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Engage new adult allies and advisors in youth ministry</b></p>	<p>DRE, minister, youth advisors</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Identify opportunities for adults beyond youth advisors to be engaged with youth in safe and healthy ways.</li> <li>- Offer a range of time commitments so that more people can become involved and develop comfort working with youth.</li> <li>- Advertise opportunities in Sunday morning announcements, newsletter, flyers at church.</li> <li>- Working with youth ministry team (see below), make a plan to select and vet adults to ensure they will be safe and positive around youth.</li> <li>- When looking for new youth advisors, draw on this pool of people who have been vetted and have experience with the youth group.</li> </ul>

### Youth Ministry Support Structure

Idea	Person/Group	Actions & Timeline
<p><b>Create a “youth ministry team” or similar structure that supports the youth group and facilitates intergenerational connections</b></p>	<p>DRE, youth advisors, youth, parents,</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Determine how a multi-stakeholder team can fill in gaps to support the youth group (recruiting volunteers, fundraising, supporting advisors, etc.)</li> </ul>

	congregational leaders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Identify ways that this team can facilitate youth involvement in the larger congregation (by promoting volunteer opportunities, building relationships between youth and congregational leaders, etc.)</li> <li>- Determine the ideal size and membership of this team, based on its goals.</li> <li>- Create a simple description of the group so that it's clear to all involved.</li> </ul>
<b>Create channels of communication between youth and other parts of the congregation</b>	DRE, advisors, minister, other staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Use the youth ministry team to enhance communication between the youth group and the rest of the congregation.</li> <li>- Brainstorm ways for this team to help youth communicate with the congregation (through the newsletter, website, Sunday morning, social media, etc.)</li> <li>- Identify opportunities and regular times for staff and leaders to be in touch with the youth group (by attending a youth group meeting, holding a special town hall, having an after service discussion, etc.)</li> </ul>

### Congregational Programs and Activities

<b>Idea</b>	<b>Person/Group</b>	<b>Actions &amp; Timeline</b>
<b>Youth participate in setting the social justice agenda</b>	Social justice / environmental committees	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Invite committee members into the youth space to engage them, instead of saying "youth are welcome to participate" in an outside committee.</li> <li>- Hold a planning/visioning session at the beginning of church year, and check in later in the year.</li> <li>- Identify specific issues that youth are interested in, and ways that they could take action within and beyond the congregation.</li> </ul>
<b>Shared learning and mentorship between youth, young adults and elders</b>	Social justice / environmental	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Plan a sharing circle or "fishbowl" activity to connect people of different ages around a topic</li> </ul>

	committees	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- I.e.: Climate change discussion where youth can share how they feel, and how they want to take action. Elders can share lessons from their own activism.</li> <li>- Elders can support youth social justice and environmental projects, offering ideas and organizing strategies.</li> <li>- Create opportunities for young adults and youth to get to know each other and share experiences with activism (a fishbowl or other discussion, “speed dating” format, etc.)</li> </ul>
<b>Promote food related events that nourish the body and soul</b>	Members and leaders who have affinity for food-based community building	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Ideas include a community dinner, making a meal together, cooking for a social cause, or a food-based fundraiser.</li> <li>- Partner with social justice groups in the congregation who would like to develop relationships with youth.</li> <li>- Establish a calendar to help strategically plan events throughout the year, advertise in advance to ensure good attendance.</li> <li>- Schedule youth participation into the youth program calendar, as long as there is youth buy-in.</li> </ul>
<b>Broaden participation and accessibility to congregational activities</b>	Coordinating committees for congregational activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Invite planners of congregational activities and initiatives to engage with youth proactively, in a format that works for youth.</li> <li>- Evaluate current and future activities with multigenerational participation in mind.</li> <li>- If leaders seek youth participation, include youth and youth advocates in planning at the beginning instead of adding in that consideration at the end.</li> <li>- Use a diversity and equity lens for all our activities to ensure that everyone is welcome and included.</li> </ul>

## Sunday Morning and Worship

Idea	Person/Group	Actions & Timeline
<b>Create opportunities for youth worship associates</b>	Minister <sup>3</sup> and worship committee	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Consult with youth to ask if/how they are interested in being involved in worship leading.</li> <li>- Outline opportunities for youth involvement in leading worship (doing readings, music, planning services, ideas for future topics, offering sermons/homilies, etc.)</li> <li>- Set-up mentorship between interested youth and individual worship associates to help bridge youth into new roles.</li> <li>- Clearly communicate role expectations and provide support to learn new skills.</li> </ul>
<b>Increase visible diversity and leadership in worship</b>	Minister and worship committee	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Work to increase youth and young adult leadership in services so young people see themselves reflected in the service.</li> <li>- Invite participation from outside groups, when it feels authentic and there is a good relationship.</li> </ul>
<b>Youth involvement in greeting and welcoming</b>	Greeters and membership/welcome committee	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Invite youth to be greeters on Sunday morning, and solicit ideas from youth about making the service more welcoming.</li> <li>- For interested youth, provide training and guidance on greeting and welcoming people of all ages.</li> <li>- Train greeters to work with youth, which may involve a quick heads up about youth involvement, or a more extensive training about appropriate ways to interact with youth.</li> </ul>
<b>Encourage youth coffee hour participation and intergenerational connections</b>	Minister, DRE, coffee hour coordinators or membership team	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Advisors and DRE explicitly invite youth group to coffee hour - can be every week or once a month.</li> <li>- Create different spaces for people to connect, including couches, clusters of chairs and tables, a reading corner, etc.</li> <li>- Have question cards on tables to start conversations. Encourage youth and adults to join those tables.</li> <li>- Have board games, or other activities that children, youth and</li> </ul>

<sup>3</sup> “Minister” refers to a paid minister, or lay leaders responsible for planning and leading worship services

		<p>young adults would enjoy (ask those groups for their ideas).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- If this is a new initiative, promote to the whole congregation on Sunday morning, through the newsletter and bulletins.</li> </ul>
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## Communication and Social Media

Idea	Person/Group	Actions & Timeline
<b>Use Instagram to share youth updates with other youth and the congregation</b>	Youth share responsibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Instagram update with pictures from Sunday morning activities or recent youth events that youth want to share.</li> <li>- Post weekly on Monday.</li> <li>- Can post on a youth group account, or the congregation's account if there is one.</li> </ul>
<b>Provide newsletter updates about youth activities</b>	Youth advisors, DRE and/or youth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Include a photo and short update about youth group activities in each congregational newsletter.</li> <li>- Many congregations have a quarterly newsletter with more information than the weekly bulletin - this is a great venue to include and update about youth activities.</li> </ul>
<b>Regular Facebook pop culture connection to churchwide theme for parents of youth</b>	DRE or youth advisors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Post an article or share a post that relates to the congregational theme (if applicable), or UU values in some way.</li> <li>- Encourage parents to share the content and discuss with their youth.</li> <li>- Weekly (suggest Wednesdays)</li> </ul>
<b>Regular email or blog post to parents of youth, with resources</b>	DRE or Youth Coordinator <sup>4</sup>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Connect with parents regularly through a short email or newsletter.</li> <li>- Include key parenting resources, pictures, updates about recent activities, and notices of upcoming events.</li> </ul>

<sup>4</sup> "Youth Coordinator" refers to a paid staff person who has responsibility for youth program coordination. This is likely a part time position that acts as a weekly youth advisor, plans activities and communicates with parents and youth.

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Ideally, use Mailchimp or other email service that can show whether parents are opening and reading the emails.</li> <li>- Re-evaluate if this becomes too much work, or emails aren't being opened.</li> <li>- Suggested timeline: Bi-Monthly on Tuesday late afternoon (emails are more likely to be read at this time)</li> </ul>
<b>Share a Youtube song, prayer, or other video on the monthly theme</b>	DRE or Youth coordinator	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- This can be shared through social media, a youth group newsletter, or other means (perhaps a message group).</li> <li>- Recommend sharing with youth and their families.</li> <li>- Suggested timeline: Every week on Fridays</li> </ul>
<b>Set up a message group with youth for easier communication</b>	DRE or Youth Coordinator	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Youth do not generally check email often, so it's helpful to set up another way to communicate with them.</li> <li>- Options: a youth-only group, a group that includes parents, and/or a separate parents-only group that helps parents chat with each other.</li> <li>- Use this group to send information about upcoming events, to encourage youth leadership for upcoming activities.</li> <li>- Suggestions: Groupme (text message group), Instagram direct messaging group, WhatsApp group, Slack or other apps.</li> <li>- There should always be two adults present in message groups and conversations to ensure safer communication.</li> </ul>

## Beyond the Congregation

Idea	Person/Group	Actions & Timeline
<b>Create a spreadsheet to track events in youth's lives</b>	DRE establishes, but maintained by adult allies/mentors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Create a spreadsheet or other document to keep track of events that can be marked by the youth group and/or the congregation.</li> <li>- Events might include youth birthdays, milestones and important transitions, life events, sports events, performances, graduations and other achievements, anniversaries of difficult events.</li> </ul>



		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- A small group of adult mentors can contact parents to get a list of events important to each family.</li> <li>- Mentors responsible for updating the spreadsheet regularly.</li> </ul>
<b>Assemble a group of adult mentors and allies to show up for youth outside of the congregation</b>	DRE, Youth Coordinator, minister	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Recruit adults who can build healthy and safe relationships with youth, and show up to support them outside of congregational activities.</li> <li>- See the “Youth Group” section above for ideas on recruiting and involving adult mentors and allies, beyond youth advisors and parents.</li> <li>- Ensure that all adults have required safety checks and understand boundaries.</li> <li>- Mentors use the spreadsheet of youth life events and keep it updated.</li> <li>- Let people assign themselves to follow up in various ways on each of the events.</li> <li>- Examples include: attending a youth’s school play or sports event, sending cards for graduation or other milestone, showing up to support in a difficult time, etc.</li> <li>- Look to ministers and lay pastoral care teams for assistance when youth need emotional support.</li> </ul>
<b>Celebrate youth milestones in the larger congregation</b>	Mentor team, DRE, advisors and/or social media person	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Mentor team can find ways for the congregation to mark youth milestones like graduation, awards or personal events.</li> <li>- Ideas: announce on Sunday morning, include in the newsletter, on social media or the website, send cards, etc. (get permission from parents and youth first!)</li> <li>- Set up an easy way for people to submit requests or ideas (make contact info available, or have a standard email address).</li> </ul>

## Pastoral Care

Idea	Person/Group	Actions & Timeline
<b>Proactively reach out to youth and parents</b>	DRE with parents and youth, minister or pastoral care team	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Minister or pastoral care team connect with youth group or individual youth regularly.</li> <li>- Reach out to parents to offer support and make sure they know how to access pastoral care.</li> <li>- Plan a parents coffee hour chat to offer support and help them share stories and advice about areas of concern (school, social media, bullying, etc.)</li> </ul>
<b>Connect minister with youth</b>	DRE and advisors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Encourage minister to regularly spend time with youth on their own terms.</li> <li>- Work with youth group to plan a fun event where they can connect with the minister (ice cream social, pizza night, games, etc.)</li> </ul>

## Moving Forward

There are so many ways to move toward a “whole church youth ministry” approach, but don’t be daunted by the list above! Reflect on how you can take action in your own congregational role, or your role within youth ministry. Reach out to others, share this document and choose a few ideas to try out.

This work takes a long time, so be patient, celebrate successes, learn from failures, re-evaluate your next steps. CUC staff can also help advise and share resources. Email the CUC at [youth@cuc.ca](mailto:youth@cuc.ca). Be sure to check out the many resources available on the CUC website:

[cuc.ca/congregations-leaders/youth-ministry/youth-ministry-resources](http://cuc.ca/congregations-leaders/youth-ministry/youth-ministry-resources)

“In every congregation, there are myriad quiet ministries. Each person, from the youngest baby to the quietest adult, can be a minister to those around them in ways that may not be obvious but are still important to the life of the congregation. In this broad sense, “ministry” refers to our interactions with one another that enrich, comfort, and challenge our spiritual selves.

More than committee structures or program offerings, this open-hearted relatedness defines us as a community of faith. One expression of this is simply the ministry of presence, taking part in the congregation and being with one another attentively in the context of our faith.”

- Jill Schwendeman - *When Youth Lead* (UUA, 2007)

