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Dean

Characteristics of a Healthy Youth Ministry

By Kenda Creasy Dean

Congregations that succeed in nurturing the faith of young people tend to demonstrate certain key characteristics. What are the top characteristics of a healthy youth ministry?

11. Safe space. Young people need safe spaces (time, relationships, or physical space) where they can “be” themselves instead of trying to “prove” themselves. They need the emotional, relational, physical, and spiritual freedom to explore, to risk, and to fail in a safety net of love. A safe space yields permission to take risks, to move outside comfort zones, to initiate, and to lead. Healthy youth ministry creates a culture where young people can follow where Christ is leading them, with adults as guides but not programmers, permission givers rather than gate keepers, trail guides rather than tour operators.

10. A culture of creativity. Young people need practice in multiple “faith languages” — words and actions, art and prayer. Young people today live in a participatory culture, where they create cultural content as well as consume it. Treating youth primarily as consumers of worship, programming, and mission fails to recognize their creativity and makes church seem unwelcoming and archaic.

9. A culture of theological awareness. Youth ministry ought to help youth see their lives the way God sees them — which means becoming aware of theological

categories like grace, forgiveness, redemption, sin, and hope. Because so few churches do this well, kids growing up in churches today frame their lives in pretty much the same way as anybody else, which makes it tough to buck cultural norms that run contrary to the Gospel. Healthy youth ministry teaches young people to imagine themselves as participants in God’s story.

8. Integration into a congregation’s worship, mission, and discipleship formation at every level.

Teenagers need people to reflect back to them who they are. This “mirroring” is basic to the process of identity formation. Only in the church do young people begin to see themselves through the eyes of people who try to see them as God sees them: beloved,

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blessed, called. Interaction with Christian peers is part of this process, but adults are significant mirrors as well. Separating youth out from the larger congregation is both theologically irresponsible and a pragmatic mistake. Segmenting youth exclusively into “youth activities” leads young people to associate church with their peer groups — making “graduation” into the intergenerational faith community extremely difficult.

7. An authentic, fun, and passionate community of belonging. It doesn’t really matter if youth participate in a youth group, a choir, a drama troupe, a Bible study, a parachurch organization, or even the congregation as a whole. But teenagers need to feel like the church is a place they belong, and not just attend — a

place where they joyfully participate alongside others living in the same direction.

6. A team of adult youth leaders actively growing in faith. You can't lead where you don't go. Adult youth leaders need to model spiritual investment in themselves, in one another, and in the world because youth need examples of faithful, supportive, Christian community.

5. A congregation where people actively seek and talk about God. The 2003 Exemplary Youth Ministry Study convinced me that congregations where young people reliably develop mature faith “talk about God as the subject of sentences.” Talking about God indicates that people in a church are actively seeking God and believe God makes a difference. And, they talk to God as well as about God. God is alive and present and in their midst. God is doing things through them.

4. A congregation where people are visibly invested in youth. Congregations that impact young lives deeply invest in the infrastructure and leadership (lay and clergy) that make it happen. A supportive congregation is one where the whole community invests visibly in growing in faith together, and where teen-agers witness the fruits of this investment as people take risks on behalf of others in Christ's name. Supportive congregations give young people concrete evidence that they are known (“Hey, how did it go with that teacher who was giving you trouble?”), and challenge them to grow beyond who they already are, and into the person God has created them to become (“You can't smoke weed

here. I care about you too much to let you hurt yourself.”) They give youth opportunities to grow in their faith and to live into their vocations, naming teenagers' God-given gifts and inviting them to use those gifts on behalf of Christ in the church and in the world.

3. A senior pastor who is crazy about young people. If a congregation supports youth ministry, it will be clear because the senior pastor or head of staff talks about young people (positively) in public, includes them in leadership, embraces the faith development of parents, knows youth and their leaders by name, and makes himself or herself available to young people for spiritual conversations. The senior pastor is youth ministry's head cheerleader.

2. Parents who model faith and know that this matters to their kids. Parents are the most important youth ministers. The National Study of Youth and Religion found that having parents who are religiously active is the most important variable contributing to a teenager's faith identity and his or her ability to sustain that faith identity between high school and emerging adulthood. And if young people don't have religiously active parents, then churches need to be places where kids can find adults who will “adopt” them spiritually.

1. A commitment to Jesus Christ. Since Christians understand God as Triune through Jesus — whose life, death, and resurrection reveals not only who God is and who we are in relationship to God, but that God continues to act in our lives and in the world around us — doing youth ministry without Jesus is like doing dinner without food: you can come to the table, but there's nothing to eat. So why bother? †

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Quotable Leadership

Church people have long been good at collecting facts but poor at facing them.

Bob Jackson

An Opportunity for an Invitation

By Sondra Jones

While my husband and I were out recently, a young college student took our order at a fast food restaurant. Noticing her name tag, I commented that that was my mother's name and I loved it. She smiled and thanked me. Then when she asked for the order name, I told her my name and she said, "That is my mother's name!" We started talking while waiting for lunch to come, and then I handed her my business card and said, "It has been so great to meet you! I don't know if you have a church home or not, but would love to have you come visit us." She took the card and said, "Thank you! Where is your church? I am actually looking for one and was just thinking about that. How amazing that you invited me!"

Later that afternoon I heard from her, and we exchanged emails. I was so happy and surprised!

This is your server. I looked up your church website as soon as I got off work. I didn't realize you were the pastor! Wow. Anyway, I definitely want to visit

your church on Sunday. I really think this is a sign, because I've been looking for a church for a little while but nowhere so far has really felt "right." I just have a really good feeling about this. I've prayed a lot about it and feel like I need to be somewhere where I can draw closer to God.

What an amazing day this has been. I'm so happy right now! I was feeling a little confused and frustrated this week, wondering why God hadn't shown me where I was supposed to be — usually it doesn't take very long — but now I know. I'm so glad you gave me your card. That was just perfect.

I arranged to meet her when she arrived the following Sunday.

I never know when I give out my card what people think or will do. When it feels right, I do it. God is always giving me such nice surprises! ✦

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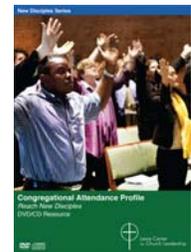
The Right Question

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