

Critical Ingredient in Youth Ministry – You!

Tera Little

Lifespan Religious Education Consultant

Pacific Southwest District, UUA

What does it take to have a vibrant youth ministry group? There are several keys to its success, but the most important ingredient is solid adult advisors. Without one or two dedicated adults who view this as their ministry to the congregation, youth ministry will be on shaky ground.

Youth empowerment is the foundation upon which we as Unitarian Universalists build our philosophy of youth ministry. Critical components for our groups are community building, worship, learning, social action, leadership, and good youth-adult relations. Youth empowerment must be an intentional goal and must have active adults working with youth ministry to make it happen. Without adult participation there is no youth empowerment. Youth empowerment does not equal adult abandonment, as happened with the Liberal Religious Youth movement in the late '60s and '70s. Youth empowerment is a living partnership between youth and adults, one in which power is shared and in which adults recognize the power they bring into the relationship.

Youth ministry is supportive adults giving youth the tools to effectively read their own road map in life. The advisor acts as guide, pointing out trouble spots and making sure the map is turned the right way, while respecting that the youth has the intelligence and skills to do the reading herself. This idea is more fully presented in the Ministry with Youth training of the Renaissance program.

Youth ministry is about way more than just hanging out with youth at church on Sunday. Working with youth calls us adults to put our best foot forward; it can try our patience, exasperate us, or bring up our own issues from adolescence. Youth bring so much of themselves into the youth ministry program; being an effective advisor requires us to meet them with honesty and respect. This work demands that we present our authentic selves to the community – anything less, and the youth just don't buy it.

Ongoing, meaningful training and support to the youth advisors is crucial. Training should cover issues including: maintaining appropriate boundaries; keeping the youth group safe – physically, emotionally, sexually, spiritually; building community within the group; and creating a well-balanced program. Advisors should receive direct supervision from a minister or director of religious education who can coach them when difficult issues arise in the youth group and who can offer ongoing guidance, wisdom, and encouragement.

Youth ministry is an essential component of our congregations. We need consistent, trained adult advisors in order to make the vision of transformational, life-affirming youth ministry come alive. We need you!