

UUMA Executive Committee Consultation on Youth Ministry

April 10, 2007; 1:00-2:30 p.m.

Participants: Ken Sawyer, Mary Katherine Morn, Gail Geisenhainer, Don Southworth, Susan Manker-Seale, Jane Rzepka, Randy Becker, Thom Belote, Clyde Grubbs, Janette Lallier

Facilitators: Beth Dana, Jesse Jaeger, Shana Lynngood

Welcome and Introductions

Overview of the Consultation on Ministry To and With Youth

Desired Outcomes:

- More than just a one-size-fits-all youth ministry—a youth ministry that is robust, flexible, and diverse
- Denominational youth work that focuses on serving local congregations
- Mutually respectful and empowering relationships between youth and adults
- Anti-racism and anti-oppression infused within every part of youth ministry, with a recognition that there is not one "right" way of doing the work—providing a forum for youth identity development and institutional change
- A youth ministry that meets the spiritual needs of youth and increases the spiritual depth of our congregations
- Effective communication within, between, and among all areas of the Association.

Process Overview:

The Consultation on Ministry To and With Youth is a two-year process of gathering input from Unitarian Universalist youth ministry stakeholders. It will culminate in a Summit on Youth Ministry in July 2007, which will recommend changes to the way we do youth ministry throughout the Association.

Leading up to the Summit, we will gather input from:

YOUTH – In January and February 2006, 1400 youth ages 12-20 completed a survey about their experiences with UU youth ministry.

CONGREGATIONS – From April through September 2006, over 75 congregations held congregational conversations on youth ministry.

DISTRICTS – Every UUA district will hold a district gathering on youth ministry during the 2006-2007 church year. These will focus on how the Association and its districts can better serve youth at the local and district levels.

STAKEHOLDERS – Dozens of youth ministry stakeholder groups will also have conversations about youth ministry and contribute their input to the process. UUA staff are one of these crucial stakeholder groups.

Ministerial Involvement in the Process:

Survey – Ministers distributed the survey to youth in their congregations.

Congregational Conversations – Ministers participated in and facilitated congregational conversations on youth ministry.

District Gatherings – Ministers participated in and facilitated district gatherings on youth ministry.

Stakeholder Conversations –

Outreach: UUMA chapters (established contacts, mailed resource packets, visited chapter meetings), CENTER Days

Stakeholder Conversations: UUMA Executive Committee, Ministerial Fellowship Committee, Ministry & Professional Leadership Staff Group (UUA)

What We Have Learned

Youth Ministry Survey

- Respondents experience excellent/very good **support** from their parish minister (76%)
- **Spiritual development** and support:
 - **Congregation** is my spiritual home: 53%
 - **Youth group** meets my spiritual needs: 53%
 - **District** programs meet my spiritual needs: 70%
 - **Continental** programs meet my spiritual needs: 63%

Congregations and Religious Educators (input from Congregational Conversations on Youth Ministry and the 2006 LREDA Fall Conference)

- Ministerial **interaction** with youth **varies** widely
- **Ministerial support** is vital to youth ministry's success
- Need **education, training, skill-building, professional support** for adults working with youth; some adults lack knowledge to confidently work with youth
- Youth need to have more of a role in **Sunday services** – visibility, leadership, creativity – “a real problem with separateness”
- Need more opportunities for youth to learn about **UU history, faith, and identity**. Develop ways to articulate what they DO believe.

Ministerial Fellowship Committee Consultation – Ministerial Preparation

- MFC **essay** on ministry with children/youth – could be more effective with support from UU seminaries and better MFC “enforcement.”
- UU **theological schools** – develop course **material**, do intentional **recruitment, validate** youth ministry
- Requires **broad cultural change**, time, collaboration

Brainstorm: Vision

Questions to spark discussion:

1. What **qualities** and **skills** would the ideal minister possess in order to contribute to the strength and vitality of youth ministry?
2. Reflect on your own and your colleagues' ministry with youth – what have you seen or experienced that has been very positive?
 - Have the ability to gain youth's trust
 - Be aware of power dynamics going on within themselves, and don't use their relationship with youth to resolve these issues.
 - Build relationships with youth. Some adults have had hurtful experiences with youth (e.g. been insulted by a youth) and it takes a while for them to heal from these experiences. One way for this healing to happen is to build relationships with youth – have parties for youth, worship with youth. Adults can have a significant influence on shaping their relationship with youth.
 - Be authentic – youth will call adults out on this quicker than adults will. If the adult isn't comfortable, they can do more damage to themselves and to their relationship with youth.
 - Demonstrate clearly that they're living out their faith or their own personal values
 - Have a sense of humor. It's important to take some things lightly (e.g. being picked on as an authority figure).
 - Storytelling skills. Be able to explain things simply but not condescendingly – how does UU history/values relate to us? Somewhere between graduate school level and children's story level.
 - Values their relationship with young people. Makes time to build that relationship (time = value).
 - Relates to youth both as a group and as individuals. Some individual youth won't be with the group (might want to sing with adult choir, set up microphones on Sunday morning, have some other role in the life of the congregation).
 - Institutional systems need to value working with youth as an important skill for ministers. Ministerial search packets should mention youth ministry.
 - Take spiritual, cognitive, psychological, emotional development of our youth seriously and have knowledge about youth development. Sometimes this means enforcing rules and setting standards with youth.

Note: Sometimes we conflate “the minister” with “ministry.” We all minister in a context, with particular groups of people, in congregations of varying sizes and with varying numbers of youth. Ministry is the responsibility of the entire congregation. We need to make sure the conversation about youth ministry is broad – including *but not limited* to “the minister.”

Discussion: Driving Forces

Question to spark discussion: What is happening currently that is moving us toward our ideal?

- Youth ministry works when there's an overall vision to what's happening, as opposed to an event-focused ministry. What continuity will there be throughout a youth's involvement in the congregation?
- Youth groups that relate only to the congregation (not to district YRUU) that are healthy and lead the congregation in social justice (e.g. Pasadena, CA – 28 youth).
- Ministers can help bridge the disconnect between youth and the rest of the congregation (adults) by being there for youth more than we have been and being an important person in youth's lives. Many youth stay with Unitarian Universalism (through college etc.) because they have a connection with their minister. Sometimes ministers think they don't have time for it – but they need to make time.
- Youth relate to the community through music.
- Ministry with youth should be transformative. Sleep deprivation isn't quality transformative programming! We're getting clearer on expectations of youth and adults – there needs to be leadership from adults rather than abandonment.
- Youth ministry works best when the community recognizes that the spiritual needs of youth/young adults aren't monochromatic. Youth embrace a wide variety of spiritualities and worship styles.
- Adults share during joys and concerns that they used to be scared to work with youth, but once they did they have been inspired and taught so much (e.g. Framingham, MA).

Discussion: Restraining Forces

Question to spark discussion: What is happening currently that is working against achieving our ideal?

- Can feel like a “bucket of cold water in the face” when adults encounter categorizations and assumptions of youth. For example: all ministers do boring sermons, ministers are authority people, contemporary worship distinguishing itself from other worship. Ministers sometimes need to fight to be in relationship with youth.
- Lack of visibility of youth in worship.
- Institutional habits of our movement. We stick with the way we do things, or the way we've “always” done things. Not thinking/doing outside the box.
- Lack of a sense of urgency around serving/ministering with youth in a more profound and different way. Therefore, we keep doing things the way we always do them.
- Limited conflict management skills. Youth formation/development almost always involves some type of conflict. The default mode of adults seems to be conflict avoidance (i.e. avoid youth because they'll be gone in a couple years). Congregational leaders don't have a full enough basket of skills.
- We don't have a shared ideal at the Association level, though some congregations have their own ideals.

- Ministers face a challenge in that their role can't continue to grow and grow. They need to determine their priorities and the priorities of their congregation.
- We focus a lot more energy and attention on problems than on solutions.
- Widely-held assumptions can be obstacles to moving forward (e.g. leaders of congregations may be convinced that all youth leave, so they don't create something to encourage youth to stay).

Discussion: Opportunities and Strategies

Questions to spark discussion:

1. What is the role of the **UUMA** in advancing youth ministry and supporting ministerial engagement with youth?
 2. What can the **Association** do to advance youth ministry and support ministerial engagement with youth?
- Youth ministry **skill-building** opportunities for ministers at **chapter** meetings and **CENTER** Days
 - UUMA can tell the UUA that youth ministry is important, and encourage them to provide **youth ministry training for ministers**.
 - Training should address:
 - Going beyond one-size-fits-all model
 - Qualities and skills we brainstormed earlier
 - Conflict management skills
 - Ministers being scared of youth
 - Power and boundaries
 - Fun and challenging aspects of ministry with youth
 - **UUMA be available** to people who want to play larger role in youth ministry.
 - UUMA encourage ministers to think of themselves as **transformational leaders**. Ministers can make a huge difference in the way the board, staff, and congregational leaders relate to youth. Ministers need to learn enough about this to **promote the leadership of others** (they don't need to be the doers of it all).
 - Stop using "do" **language** ("I don't have time to do this"), and move toward the language of transformation and leadership. **Create a buzz** in your congregation.
 - UUMA put together a **book of success stories** from ministers working with youth. Would be easily available, with the hope of inspiring others to do ministry with youth.
 - **CENTER** days focused on **transformative leadership** and how we can better minister to under-served people. What are demographic groups we're not successfully ministering to?
 - **Intergenerational Sunday services** are wonderful – children and youth are involved and visible.
 - Susan Manker-Seale shared a story of youth coming up to her on Sunday and standing next to her. Children are waiting to be **seen, hugged, and nurtured**. **Youth are calling us** to be involved with them in a **meaningful** way.

- Develop a “**sheet of tricks**” for youth ministry. Or Youth Office could send out one “tip” a month – something simple that congregations, ministers, others can do to minister with youth. For example:
 - (For ministerial candidates) Ask to meet with the youth group.
 - Invite a youth to join the choir
 - Ask the youth group to help plan the flower communion service
 - Meet with the Coming of Age group
 - Learn the names of youth in your congregation
- Publicized and accountable **youth ministry structure** that all agree on and understand (i.e. resources, guidelines, support, opportunities for youth).

Closing Thoughts

Thank you! Be audacious! This is an opportunity for truth-telling.