

Youth as Congregational Members

In some of our congregations youth are permitted to be full members, while in others, membership is restricted by age. This resource shares why it is a good idea to open membership up to youth in your congregation and addresses some of the common questions that come up during that process.

Five Reasons It's a Good Idea

1. It recognizes that youth are a vital part of the congregation.

Permitting youth membership makes a statement that youth aren't just add-ons to their parents or tag-alongs, but valued, included members of your community.

2. It empowers youth to make a choice about their religious affiliation.

Choosing to become a member of the congregation is not a small choice. It gives youth the ability to make a commitment to the congregation and to Unitarian Universalism in a tangible, concrete way. Becoming a member is their choice, no one else's.

3. It instills a sense of belonging.

Becoming a member reinforces that this is their community and that they are an important part of it. It's not just someplace that they go; it is their congregation.

4. Youth opinions on congregational business matter.

Including youth in the business of your congregation as voting members is incredibly important. The congregation is theirs as well, and providing them with a say in the congregational governance reflects this.

5. It is good for stewardship.

Youth who become members of congregation can make an annual financial pledge. Even if it is only \$25 per year, this practice instills a long-term commitment to financial stewardship.

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Answers to Common Questions

When should youth be allowed to be members?

Different congregations have answered this differently. Some say age 16. Others say a youth may join after completing Coming of Age. What's important is that the conversation happens with all stakeholders – youth, religious professionals, parents, membership committee, etc.

We require a membership class. Should youth have to take it?

This is a situational question. Do you require adults who are new to the congregation but not to Unitarian Universalism to take it? Is it an intro-level course in Unitarian Universalism or is it about the congregation and the responsibility of membership? The important thing here is to not sell short your youth's understanding and experience of Unitarian Universalism. Perhaps your Coming of Age class is the only requirement you'd like to have. Or perhaps inviting the youth to participate in the membership class by sharing their experience growing up in the congregation is a way to both have them be part of the class and honor their history and experience.

How should we welcome youth members?

At the very least, you should welcome youth in the same way you welcome adult members. You may also want to consider an opportunity for one-on-one conversation with your minister. If you welcome members during a Sunday service, consider having youth involved in the planning as the whole congregation welcomes new members.

My state/locality prohibits those under 18 from organizational memberships dealing with [various issues]. Wouldn't that prohibit them from congregational membership?

This question comes up a lot with regards to financial decisions or decisions with legal liability. As always, consult your congregation's legal counsel about any liability and your area's laws. What some congregations have done as a work-around to this issue is to create a membership level in their bylaws that differs from the "full" adult membership. It allows the youth to participate as members in all the ways except those that are prohibited. In the financial example, they are able to vote on all decisions except those related to finances.

