



# How Youth Lead

An update on Unitarian Universalist youth leadership



**Office of Youth and Young Adult Ministries**  
Unitarian Universalist Association  
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Youth Leadership Events and Opportunities Summer 2011- Fall 2012	Youth Participation
<b>National Roles/Events</b> (Youth Caucus staff, YMAC, Youth Observer, UUA focus groups, Multicultural Leadership School, UNO Youth Envoys, Nat’l Youth Justice Summit)	<b>106</b>
<b>General Assembly Youth Caucus Attendees</b>	<b>307</b>
<b>Leadership Schools/Staff</b> (GoldMine schools, Midwest Leadership School)	<b>108</b>
<b>District Trainings</b> (Chrysalis: leadership development, spirituality development, chaplain; conference planning)	<b>229</b>
<b>District Leadership/Committees</b> DYSCs, YACs, district board members	<b>235</b>
<b><i>Estimated Leadership Total</i></b>	<b><i>800</i></b>
<b>Local, District, Regional Event Attendees</b> Conferences, rallies, clusters, local trainings, etc.	<b>2500 (est.)</b>

## I. Overview

### Introduction

Among the member congregations and faith communities in the Unitarian Universalist Association there has been an evolution in the past decade in youth ministry. Engagement with religious professionals, shifting denominational opportunities for leadership, and a renewed focus on youth safety are some of the most prominent changes. Even the term “ministry” is a shift from a former focus on youth “programs,” meant to convey a deeper sense of spiritual purpose. Though some of these changes have been more difficult than others we endeavor to carry the lessons of the past forward to ask “what is important for the future?” Today, the UUA embraces youth ministry that is multigenerational, multicultural, spirit-centered and congregationally-rooted. Youth ministry includes spiritual development, beloved community, justice making, faith exploration, multigenerational relationships, pastoral care, identity formation and covenantal leadership. This approach to youth ministry, which focuses on the quality of faithful experience for youth participants, is reflective of the UUA Board of Trustee’s global ends to make our congregations “intentionally multigenerational and multicultural” in which “participants deepen their spiritual lives.”

This report focuses on leadership as one aspect of youth ministry and how UU youth are leading in our faith communities today. In practice, a critical part of ensuring opportunities for youth leadership is educating adult leaders about how to offer those opportunities; however, this report does not include adult trainings such as the Youth Ministry Renaissance module and is limited to addressing the policy set for youth leadership by the UUA Board:

**Policy 2.14.10:** “The President shall not... operate without ensuring that youth leadership is integrated within our Association at all levels.”

Written from the point of view of the Office of Youth and Young Adult Ministries, this report describes the vision and approach for UUA youth ministry, explains current opportunities at the national, regional/district and local levels, offers strategies for engaging youth input in denominational governance, and suggests future prospects and challenges for youth ministry. Per the recommendation of the Youth Ministry Working Group (see below), the UUA defines “youth” as “grades 9-12 (or the equivalent).”

### Vision and Approach

At the UUA we approach youth ministry with the overarching goal of providing the thousands of current UU high school students with profound experiences of spiritual depth in order to: 1) value them as current members of our faith communities, thus practicing and modeling affirmation of each individual’s inherent worth and dignity; and, 2) help them develop a lifelong commitment to, and leadership and sense of belonging within Unitarian Universalism. We embrace the call for youth ministry to be the responsibility of every Unitarian Universalist of every age and in every part of the Association, first described in the 2009 Youth Ministry Working Group Recommendations. Together with the 2009 report

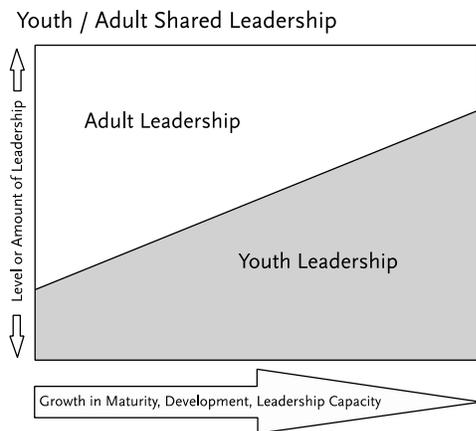
## ***How Youth Lead – An update on Unitarian Universalist youth leadership***

of the Mosaic Project assessment for ministry with youth and young adults of color, the Working Group report forms the foundation for youth ministry at the national, district/regional and, increasingly, congregational levels. Both resulted from extensive, multi-year, open-ended and inclusive processes.

The Working Group and Mosaic Project reports illustrate a vision for UU youth ministry that is multicultural, multigenerational, spirit-centered and at home in UU congregations and faith communities. And though this vision is derived from an internal process, it mirrors the broader trends observed around what meaningful engagement with religion looks like for the Millennial generation. Research from the Search Institute holds up the “[40 Developmental Assets](#)” that are necessary for healthy adolescent development, many of which can be found in UU youth ministry programs, and the [National Study on Youth and Religion](#) has shown that faiths which practice liberal values and promote multigenerational relationships are most successful in retaining their youth into adulthood.

### **Youth Leadership**

Grounded in the vision set forth by the Working Group and Mosaic Project reports, the UUA considers youth leadership to be a shared, constantly evolving and developmentally appropriate partnership between youth and adults:



The Spectrum of Shared Leadership illustrates how youth take on more responsibility as they grow in maturity and leadership capacity. Note that there are always roles for both groups, and one never eclipses the other. It is the responsibility of adults to assess where youth are on the spectrum and adjust their support and coaching to match it, recognizing that where individuals and groups of youth fall along the spectrum may change quickly or slowly, may vary for different leadership skills or venues, and will fluctuate from week to week and year to year.

The UUA uses this model to train ministers, religious educators and youth advisors; to respond to and advocate for youth ministry issues; and to anchor its approach to UUA youth events, which focus on capacity-building. We strongly believe this approach has led to more positive experiences for the many youth involved in these events, as echoed in participant surveys. The UUA also supports leadership experiences, such as the GoldMine Leadership School, that embrace this approach, which are described below in the District/Regional Leadership Opportunities section.

Finally, we also recognize that applying this model to different situations requires us to affirm that there are many legitimate styles of leadership, from serving on a board or committee to being an advocate among one’s peers, from organizing events behind the scenes to facilitating programs on stage in the spotlight. Offering multiple routes to leadership involvement makes it easier for youth with different

leadership styles to participate in a way that is helpful and comfortable for them. The UUA regularly incorporates feedback from youth and adults to become more responsive and effective.

## **II. National Leadership Opportunities**

All offices of the UUA have worked over the past few years to improve their consideration of youth ministry needs and engagement with current UU youth. For example, the Web Team intentionally recruits youth testers for its web testing evaluations. Youth inclusion has been facilitated by consistent advocacy from and partnering with the Office of Youth and Young Adult Ministries, as well as the establishment of a new set of Youth Inclusion Guidelines to set safety and inclusion standards for youth involvement in UUA groups and events.

Additionally, the UUA offers a varied and well-received series of opportunities at the national or denominational level for current youth leaders. These offerings are designed to serve the breadth of interests and leadership styles found among UU youth. Though not described in this report, the Youth Observer and Youth Trustee to the UUA Board of Trustees are also national leadership opportunities.

**Luminary Leaders** – A new initiative to recognize youth leaders throughout the UUA, highlight the tremendous gifts that youth bring to our communities, and provide opportunities for youth to connect with their peers and get involved with the work of the larger Association. The application-based program provides formal commendation for recognized leaders, who are then able to communicate with one another virtually and at specialized in-person gatherings (e.g. at General Assembly), and also will be tapped for other venues of leadership involvement (e.g. serving on UUA taskforces). Luminary Leaders can also receive specializations in areas such as worship & spirituality, social justice & social action, or community building. Developed with a focus group of nearly 30 youth from across the country, Luminary Leaders recognizes youth with a diversity of leadership experiences and styles. [www.uua.org/luminary](http://www.uua.org/luminary)

**General Assembly Youth Caucus and Youth Caucus Staff** – General Assembly, the annual meeting of the Unitarian Universalist Association, is open to people of all ages. Youth Caucus offers programming at GA geared especially for youth and includes workshops, meetings to discuss GA business, networking and other social opportunities, and worship. The Synergy Bridging Worship is a particular highlight for those youth bridging into young adulthood. Youth Caucus is a program of the Office of Youth and Young Adult Ministries and is led by a team of youth and adult volunteers selected from across the country to shape the programming which youth attendees experience. Youth Caucus staff volunteers receive hands-on training and skill development from the UUA, and work throughout the year to design and



lead Youth Caucus programs. [www.uua.org/youth/events/gacaucus](http://www.uua.org/youth/events/gacaucus)

**Multicultural Leadership School** - Designed specifically for youth and young adults of color (ages 15-30), this three-and-a-half day school features experienced facilitators who are intentional in providing participants with experiences that foster relationship building, leadership skills, racial/ethnic identity development, inter-cultural collaboration and deepening of faith identity.

**National Youth Justice Summit** - This immersive, transformative three-week social justice training hosted by the UU College of Social Justice for youth offers interactive social justice education and real-world experience, grounded in UU values and practices. Youth will learn about systems of race, class, gender and heterosexism, build the skills to do effective social justice work, and serve in an internship. Participants will explore our robust history of UU social justice work and be sustained by spiritual practices and vibrant worship. The 2013 NYJS will be an expansion of the successful 2012 one-week event.

**UU United Nations Office Youth Envoys and Intergenerational Spring Seminar** – The UU United Nations Office promotes youth leadership through their Youth Envoy program and an annual intensive Intergenerational Spring Seminar. Youth envoys partner with adult envoys to act as a link between a congregation and the UU-UNO, reporting on what their congregation and youth group are doing to advance the United Nations and the Millennium Development Goals and informing their local community on the work of the UU-UNO. Attendees at the Spring Seminar gain a deep understanding of topics of global concern in an engaging, intergenerational environment, listen to insightful speakers from around the world, and take on leadership roles in planning and execution. Additionally, the UU-UNO has worked this spring to host two weekend congregational Youth Justice Conferences in the Washington, DC and Boston areas.

**Youth Ministry Advisory Committee** – As an advisory group to the UUA President, this group of youth, adults and young adults offer recommendations on emerging areas of youth ministry. They are currently focused on youth/minister relationships, bridging into young adulthood, youth worship and silenced issues (e.g. special needs youth, economic accessibility).

### **III. Regional and District Leadership Opportunities**

Among the five regions and nineteen districts of the UUA there are widely ranging events and programs offered in youth ministry and leadership. Leadership schools, Chrysalis trainings, governance assemblies and youth-adult committees are some of the most prominent, but there are also countless youth conferences, rallies, trainings, cluster gatherings, camps, institutes and service trips throughout the year that give youth the chance to enhance their leadership skills. The Southern Region in particular has become adept at including youth leadership training as a track at other events, such as cluster gatherings or district summer institutes (e.g. SWUUSI).



**Leadership Schools** – These in-depth week-long experiences, typically scheduled in the summer, offer opportunities for participants to gain leadership skills, deepen their faith and build connections with youth from other congregations. Some are exclusively for youth while others are multigenerational. Here is a selection of recent and upcoming leadership schools:

- [Pacific Northwest GoldMine Youth Leadership School](#) (Pacific Northwest District) – This annual school is highly competitive for the youth in the PNWD.
- [Midwest Youth Leadership School](#) (Mid-America Region) – With a larger attendance, this annual school is also co-located with an adult leadership school.
- [CERG Goldmine 2013 Youth Leadership School](#) – The first youth leadership school for the entire CERG Region will be held in July 2013 in conjunction with the adult UU Leadership Team Institute (UULTI).
- [Metro New York GoldMine 2012 Youth Leadership School](#) – In its second year, the MNYD school updated the curriculum to include a service project and time with adult advisors.
- [New England GoldMine 2013 Youth Leadership School](#) – Set to reprise its successful 2011 debut, this leadership school will be held in Maine this July.

**Chrysalis Trainings** – A series of trainings for youth and adults around themes in youth ministry, including leadership development, spirituality development, youth chaplains and youth advisors. Chrysalis training manuals are maintained by the UUA for events hosted by clusters, districts and regions. Chrysalis materials have also been adapted and included in a range of other trainings.

**Regional/District Assemblies** – Increasingly, districts and regions are viewing their annual business meetings as excellent opportunities for youth leadership and multigenerational gathering. For example, the April 2013 [St. Lawrence District Assembly](#) is multigenerational and includes a youth caucus, a youth-hosted coffee house and workshops on being a youth ally and youth service trips.

**YACs, DYSCs and Boards** – In the past few decades, UUA districts have traditionally supported youth-adult committees (YACs) or district youth steering committees (DYSCs) as youth leadership and conference planning organizations. Jointly run by youth and adults, these groups offer youth the chance to take on new responsibilities for organizing events with their peers and deepening in religious community. The following districts currently support a district youth leadership group:

- Metro New York (YAC)
- Joseph Priestly (DYSC)
- Ohio-Meadville (YAC)
- St. Lawrence (YAC)
- Heartland (DYSC)
- Mountain Desert (YAC)
- Pacific Northwest (YES Team)
- Pacific Central (YRUU)

Additionally, a number of district boards have a regular youth participant:

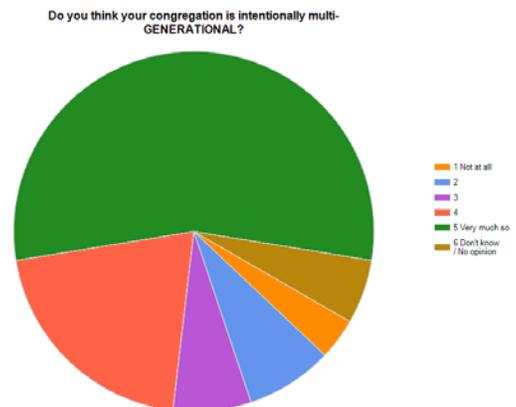
- Ohio-Meadville – District Liaison
- St. Lawrence – Youth Representative
- Central Midwest – Youth Trustee
- Pacific Southwest – Youth Member
- Pacific Central – YRUU Representative

#### IV. Local Leadership Opportunities

Local congregations are the bedrock of youth ministry and offer the highest number of youth avenues for religious leadership. Lay leadership for youth within congregations can include leading or participating in worship, teaching religious education classes, joining the board, teams or committees, or being a leader of one’s youth group. In the [2009 congregational survey](#) conducted in response to the 2008 General Assembly Youth and Young Adult Empowerment Responsive Resolution we found most congregations offer a range of youth leadership opportunities, though there is certainly room for improvement:

- 90% have youth leading worship sometimes or often
- 88% have youth providing music sometimes or often
- 38% have youth as religious education teachers
- 43% offer anti-racism/multiculturalism training open to youth
- Only 7% had youth on the worship committee or governing board
- Though not asked, many participants reported youth leadership in social justice & service
- 40% of respondents provided financial support for youth leadership (e.g. scholarship for leadership institutes or district events)

In the 2012 survey of youth, young adults and persons of color conducted to prepare a UUA Board Global Ends Monitoring Report, 76% of youth described their congregation as “intentionally multigenerational” (4 or 5 on a 5 point scale), and 32% of youth reported participating in leadership training in the past year. These figures confirm the trend seen in the 2009 survey of opportunities available for youth in congregations but with still more to be done to offer every youth the chance to engage in faithful leadership.



Dozens of curricular programs and resources are available for local congregations to develop the skills of their youth leaders, here are three examples in the areas of interfaith action, multiculturalism/anti-racism and social justice:

[\*\*A Chorus of Faiths\*\*](#) - Part of a joint venture of the UUA and the Interfaith Youth Core (founded by Eboo Patel), these sessions develop UU youth as interfaith leaders. Youth explore values of service to our community and religious pluralism through stories from our Sources and personal storytelling, and coordinate an interfaith service. This is part of the Tapestry of Faith series.

**Youth Multiculturalism and Anti-Racism** – A brand new program currently being tested by six youth groups across the country, this flexible curriculum introduces high school students to multiculturalism and anti-racism and invites them to take the first steps on a life-long commitment grounded in their UU faith. Tentatively titled *Building Beloved Community*, it emphasizes experiential learning, multimedia skill building, and will be jointly led by youth and adult facilitators.

[\*\*When Youth Lead: A Guide to Intergenerational Social Justice Ministry\*\*](#) – For sale through the UUA Bookstore, this manual offers guidance, suggestions and advice for constructing and maintaining a healthy and spiritually vital youth ministry. Social justice work is an effective tool for bringing the generations together and the items included in this resource have the potential to build rich partnerships among children, youth, adults and elders.

Additionally, the UUA offers a wealth of free, downloadable resources, links and references geared towards youth ministry and youth leadership on the UUA website, **available at** [www.uua.org/youth](http://www.uua.org/youth).

## **V. Strategies for Youth Leadership Participation**

The UUA needs to solicit feedback from current youth on its policies, programs and governance, in ways that are mutually enriching for those youth. Youth find it meaningful to contribute to denominational-level leadership when it is relevant to their experience as a UU and when the opportunities to do so are tailored to their gifts and limitations. Creating ways of participating in governance which match youth experiences is about adapting the dominant leadership culture to fit their realities, and is critical to ensuring that youth feel positive about their involvement and want to continue to participate as they move into adulthood.

Traditionally within the UUA, “youth input” has been synonymous with having individual youth be adult-equivalent members of committees or staff groups. However, full presence and participation is only one of the myriad of ways to involve youth in denominational leadership, and may or may not be the best option for a given group or situation. This section describes a full range of approaches for youth involvement and their tradeoffs. When determining which approach to use it is critical to keep in mind the economic, cultural, developmental, cognitive/emotional and ability-based accessibility of the youth whom a group is trying to reach. *All of the strategies described in this section can be used separately or in conjunction with one another to address each unique need for participation.*

**Youth members** – This traditional approach is cost- and time-intensive but also may yield a rich contribution from a youth voice on a wide range of issues. Generally, for youth members to have a

good experience in these environments that tend to be dominated by older adults, it requires the group as a whole to shift its culture, as well as the focused energies of a mentor to help the youth adjust. It is also necessary for adults to clarify their expectations of youth members about representing other youth versus their own thoughts and ideas, and to not perceive youth as tokens. The Youth Ministry Working Group recommended that youth serve in pairs or small teams, though this adds to the cost and effort of participation. The current structures of most UUA boards and committees, which involve advance application, multi-year terms and extensive meetings that often require cross-country travel, construct real barriers to youth participation.

**Ad hoc participation** – Getting youth involved for a time-limited basis (usually less than six months) is often a more realistic commitment for high school students. Inviting youth to contribute on a one-time basis, such as attending a single meeting or joining a subcommittee/taskforce, is more feasible for everyone than full participation and membership, creates more opportunities for more youth to be included, and can also generate excellent feedback on a limited number of issues, though youth participating on an ad hoc basis may lack institutional knowledge or background understanding.

**Focus/advisory groups** – These present an opportunity for deep feedback from a diversity of voices around a set of issues or questions that can better fit the lifestyle constraints of high school students. Focus groups or advisory groups are typically composed of recommended participants that span a good diversity of geography, gender, ethnicity, etc., and can be as small as five or as large as twenty participants. They can be conducted online/by phone, or in person at an existing event (such as a youth conference or district assembly). They often expect participants to read briefing materials and/or complete follow-up surveys. Groups can also review existing plans. There is limited capacity for the same group to be ongoing or meet frequently.

**Surveys** – Produce the broadest possible feedback on discrete questions or issues, typically conducted online. It is relatively easy to get responses, especially if a randomized sample is not required, because the survey link can be quickly forwarded. However, successful surveys cannot be too long or have complicated questions, and should make intuitive sense to respondents. Surveys have the additional benefit of demonstrating the responsiveness of the body conducting the survey.

**Social Media** – The primary value of social media in this context is as a quick way to share and disseminate information. Taking advantage of the network available on sites such as Facebook, Twitter and Tumblr, maintaining social media contacts across multiple platforms allows groups to distribute information, opportunities and updates, and to see what others in the field are sharing in areas of interest. High school students use a variety of platforms, and social media strategies for youth must cover multiple sites and networks. Social networks require ongoing, though minimal, investment to build up and sustain (e.g. regular tweets or Facebook updates, engaging with other users, etc.), so that they are already active when information needs to be shared. Also, while social media sites are great for fast communications or getting one's message out, only sites or users who have large numbers of followers are able to regularly jumpstart more substantive conversations.

**Direct outreach** – This is the simplest, though least rigorous, way to gather ongoing input from youth. Get to know them and ask them questions! Such conversations can provide a “gut check,” seek reactions to pending questions, or help denominational leaders work through an idea. Obviously, it is incumbent upon adult leaders who reach out to youth to refrain from universalizing the experiences of a small number of youth, and to keep them informed of the result of their input.

## **VI. Looking Ahead**

Youth ministry is no different from any other aspect of UU ministry in that it faces logistical and resource challenges in realizing its vision. Our youth are often busy with school, homework, extracurricular activities, sports, arts and countless other commitments that restrain their ability to participate in church life. Because they are so disparately located in most of the country, it is expensive for our youth to gather together in person. Staff, volunteers and adult religious professionals have dozens of other responsibilities competing for their attention and are not always good conduits to or advocates for our youth (this is particularly true for youth advisors who, if they are paid at all, often only receive compensation for a few hours a week).

In general, tactics for overcoming these challenges include working within existing personal networks with which our youth are already connected (e.g. district YACs), “piggy-backing” onto existing events which youth are already attending (e.g. General Assembly), and promoting long-term online engagement to amplify the impact of in-person experiences. Two exciting forthcoming projects from the Office of Youth and Young Adult Ministries will offer additional national youth leadership opportunities that try to take into account these constraints:

**Summer Seminary** – This three-day intensive retreat for junior and senior youth will explore vocational discernment for aspiring ministers and religious educators. Working with the Credentialing and Professional Development Office, we are planning a pilot program for the summer of 2013 that will hopefully be expanded in upcoming years and located at different seminaries across the country.

**Youth Social Media Interns** – To help us communicate directly with high school UUs we plan to work remotely with two to four social media interns during the 2013-14 school year.

Regardless of the challenges, it is our duty and in our long-term interest to ensure that youth ministry continues to be a priority for Unitarian Universalism and that future developments in youth ministry and leadership remain grounded in youth voices so that they are inclusive and effective.