

# Ways to “Do” Youth Ministry in Congregations

Not sure where to start with youth ministry in your congregation? Here are some ideas for ways to involve and support youth in the life of your church. This resource is organized by the number of youth you have, offering some thoughts on what works best for each size, and is primarily geared to youth advisors. Even when you have many youth, we encourage you to remember that youth group isn't the only way for youth to be active in our congregations. See *Starting a Youth Group* for more information on the details of how to get a youth group off the ground.



## **Leadership support for all youth**

Youth can be excellent congregational leaders. From serving on the Board of Trustees or Parish Committee to participating in social action planning, from teaching religious education to acting as a worship associate, many aspects of our congregational life are enriched when youth who have grown up in our religious community are involved. It is important for advisors to advocate for youth inclusion, including helping committees think through how to be welcoming of youth members, and can support them, since youth can easily be the only person from their age group involved in a multigenerational activity. Youth leaders also need peer support, so consider how to get the youth leaders (youth group or not) together *in addition to* whatever youth group meeting you may have.

### **Few Youth (1-5)**

Group meetings at this size are hard to sustain, but there are many other areas you can explore for a vibrant youth ministry. It is helpful to have trained youth advisors for support.

#### **Congregational Involvement**

Find out what activities interest the youth and help them find ways to be involved in those areas. Perhaps the minister could meet with each youth as part of this process. The key element here is to help the youth find a place in the church to be more fully involved. Music, children's religious education (RE), committee work, worship, and A/V support are all areas that we have seen be popular for youth involvement. Trained advisors should check in with youth, advocate for their inclusion and help support them as they explore their involvement.

#### **Youth Group/ social opportunities**

While you might not have a typical youth group, scheduling social opportunities for the few youth you do have to spend time together, perhaps watch a movie and have a discussion, share a meal, or otherwise socialize with their peer group is an important ministry. Youth in your congregation may be the only Unitarian Universalists in their schools. Providing opportunities to connect with peers that share their faith tradition is invaluable.

#### **Curricula**

Using a structured curriculum can be a way to delve into a topic as a group. The Tapestry of Faith series on the UUA website has several options, including advice on starting a small group ministry. With few youth, however, you'll want to be careful how often you schedule sessions.

#### **Connections beyond the congregation**

Seek out opportunities to connect with UU youth beyond your congregation. For small groups, this can be an eye-opening opportunity to connect with a wider circle of UU youth and experience things that would otherwise be impossible or impractical. Clusters can offer curricula, organize overnights or plan projects. Attending district, regional or national events can open up even more experiences, as well as additional opportunities for leadership.



### **Small Group of Youth (5-15)**

You might have enough participants to start a youth group, but conflicting schedules, priorities and interests might not make that a feasible option. You can also do all these other things *and* have a youth group that meets semi-regularly.

### **Congregational involvement**

Find out what activities interest your youth and help them find ways to be involved in those areas, perhaps in groups of 2 or 3. Perhaps the minister could meet with each youth as part of this process. The key element here is to help the youth find a place to be more fully involved. Music, children's religious education, committee work, worship, and A/V support are all areas that we have seen be popular for youth involvement. Trained advisors should check in with youth, advocate for their inclusion and help support them as they explore their involvement.

### **Youth Group**

Starting a youth group can be a wonderful thing. Visit [www.uua.org/youth](http://www.uua.org/youth) for information on starting a youth group. With a group of this size, it likely makes sense to lead it informally (that is, no elected positions) and to share the leadership among the group. You may not have a large enough group to have consistent weekly meetings, but explore having a monthly meeting with a topic and activities and also a monthly social get-together. Remember that some youth are not interested in youth group, so consider what other options are available for their involvement, too.

### **Curricula**

Using a structured curriculum can be a way to delve into a topic as a group. The Tapestry of Faith series on the UUA website has several options. You may choose to do curricula one Sunday a month, and bring other activities into youth group on other weeks, or you may decide to do curricula every Sunday morning during services and also have a youth group meeting in the evenings.

### **Connections beyond the congregation**

Opportunities to connect with UU youth beyond your congregation can be enriching for your youth who will get to experience the broader UU community. Clusters can offer curricula, organize overnights or plan projects.



Attending district, regional or national events can open up even more experiences, as well as opportunities for leadership. Consider attending these events as a group, and discussing what new ideas you can bring back from each event to your home congregation.

### **Large Group of Youth (15-30)**

This size of group is great if you're hoping to sustain a regular youth group meeting, but don't forget that there are more ways to be involved in your congregation.

#### **Congregational involvement**

Find out what interests the youth and help them find ways to be involved in those areas. It may be as simple as just asking what they think they would like to do. Others may need a more in-depth conversation. Music, children's religious education, committee work, worship, and A/V support are all areas that we have seen be popular for youth involvement. Advisors should check in with youth, advocate for their inclusion and help support them as they explore their involvement. Some of these can be hard if youth group is during services and the youth want to be involved in both – consider that when scheduling your group's meetings and activities.

#### **Youth Group**

With a group of this size, you may consider having elected leaders, or rotating leadership, responsible for planning. You will likely be able to sustain attendance for weekly meetings. Be sure to balance the types of activities. Also remember that some youth are not interested in youth group, so consider what other options are available for their involvement, too. Visit [www.uua.org/youth](http://www.uua.org/youth) for programming ideas and start-up resources. Finally, at this size you will need to pay attention to transition into and out of youth group at the limits of your group's age range. How can you ensure incoming 9<sup>th</sup> graders feel welcome, or outgoing 12<sup>th</sup> graders feel supported in the next phase of their lives?

#### **Curricula**

Using a structured curriculum is a great way to offer in-depth faith development opportunities for your youth. The Tapestry of Faith series on the UUA website has several options, including programs on ethics, poetry and interfaith social justice. You may choose to do curricula one



Sunday a month in group, every Sunday morning during services and also have a youth group meeting in the evenings, or even as part of a lock-in.

### **Connections beyond the congregation**

Connecting with UU youth beyond your congregation can expand your youth's imagination of what their involvement with church can look like. These gatherings give youth the opportunity to share stories about what life is like in their home congregation, and youth often come back from such events energized and eager to do more. Clusters can offer curricula, organize overnights or plan projects. Attending district, regional and national events can open up even more experiences, as well as opportunities for leadership. With a group this size, you could even consider hosting a cluster event and inviting others to join you in your space for a day, overnight, or weekend.

### **Very Large Group of Youth (30+)**

If you already have this many youth, chances are you have some sort of youth options in place, but if you're looking to reboot your program, consider these elements.



#### **Congregational involvement**

Your group as a whole is likely a strong presence in the congregation, and can serve as the lead organizer for multigenerational events like social action projects or fundraisers. Find out what interests the youth individually and as a group, and help them find ways to be involved in those areas. Some of these can be hard if youth group is during services and the youth want to be involved in both – consider that when scheduling your group's meetings and activities.

#### **Youth Group**

With a group of this size, you'll likely need elected leaders who help keep the group organized. It may be as general as a quarterly elected team of facilitators, or you may elect for specific roles for the year (facilitator, social action chair, worship coordinator, etc.). Make sure you are planning ahead in developing upcoming leaders to manage the cycles of graduating leaders. Explore ways to have each youth experience leadership within the group and ways for the group to move outside of

itself and into the congregation. Visit [www.uua.org/youth](http://www.uua.org/youth) for programming ideas and start-up resources.

### **Curricula**

Using one or more structured curricula is a great way to offer in-depth faith development opportunities for your youth throughout their time in your congregation. The Tapestry of Faith series on the UUA website has several options, and at this size you might be able to have different curricula running for different ages or interests among your youth. You may choose to do curricula one Sunday a month in group, every Sunday morning during services and also have a youth group meeting in the evenings, or even as part of a lock-in.

### **Connections beyond the congregation**

At this size, you will likely be an exceptionally strong program among UU churches in your area. Consider being known as a host for regional or cluster gatherings, which will also give you a chance to share the healthy approach to ministry that has kept your group thriving. It could be as easy as reaching out to the smaller youth group at the church down the road and inviting them to participate in your planned afternoon of volunteering. Hosting larger gatherings will also provide new types of leadership challenges and opportunities for your youth group members. Attending district, regional and national events can open up even more experiences, as well as opportunities for leadership.

