



Youth Ministry Academy

Youth Ministry Training

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Youth Ministry
Discipleship -
Community and
Belonging

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Lesson Fourteen: Youth Ministry Discipleship—Community and Belonging

Lesson Introduction

Session Overview

- Biblical Theological Foundations
- Games and Play as Trust-Builders
- Small Groups as Arenas of Belonging
- Hospitality and Assimilation
- Intergenerational Community

Learner Objectives

At the end of this session you should:

- Understand how to effectively establish community and fellowship with and among youth
- Organize and nurture different types of small groups
- Develop different expressions of Christian hospitality

Introduction

Teenagers are profoundly sensitive to and shaped by other people in their social contexts: Parents, peers, media, and hopefully for Christians, their church congregation. This session will point out the unique character of Christian community as built on its biblical and theological foundations. On this foundation, various practices and programs can be effective in building Christian community, such as playing games, participating in small groups and intergenerational activities, and offering hospitality.

Lesson Body

Biblical and Theological Foundations for Christian Community

Jesus is not just for me—He’s also for us. In fact, the Bible—from Genesis to Revelation—asserts individual spiritual growth in the context of community. Christians are to live in community because of the very nature of God as a Trinity, which is the prime spiritual community. Reflecting the divine community, the Church is:

- The covenant people of God the Father
- The Body of Christ, the Son
- A community born on Pentecost and held together by the Holy Spirit

For instance, when thinking about personal spiritual growth in community consider the following:

- Genesis 17: God establishes covenant with Abram/Abraham to be his God and the God of Abram’s descendants.

- Exodus 19—24: Covenant people formed by God at Mt. Sinai and guided by practical ways of life that lies behind the Ten Commandments and The Law.
- Jeremiah 29: God promises to bring Jewish exiles home from Babylon to Palestine, as His covenant people (not a promise for individual prosperity).
- Luke 6: Jesus selects a group of 12 men to be His closest followers.
- Acts 2: The Holy Spirit comes upon a group of believers, forming them into a faith community, who devote themselves to teaching, fellowship, prayer, and sharing of material goods.
- Romans 12: We are all members of the body of Christ—a living sacrifice.
- 1 Corinthians 12: Paul’s explanations of Christian believers as members of the Body of Christ

If God lives “in community” as the Trinity (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit), should it surprise us that God works “through” community in shaping persons... both as individuals but also as a people, God’s people, Christ’s disciples, bound together by the Holy Spirit. If we expect youth to grow spiritually, we must understand that often they will do this “together” in community.

Games and Play as Trust-Builders

It is said that “play is the work of children.” Since teenagers still display many characteristics of childhood, it stands to reason that games and a playful atmosphere will be important as a means to healthy human development. In addition, games and play can have a theological role in that they can be a way of keeping Sabbath. With all the pressures and stresses that teens face, taking time out of their hectic schedules to play can be a way to connect with the person God created them to be.

More directly, games serve as youth ministry aids by building community, acceptance, and a sense of belonging. Furthermore, games are ideal “come-and-see” entry-level activities that are non-threatening for visitors and regular attendees alike.

Small Groups as Arenas for Belonging

One of the most effective practices for helping teens feel a sense of belonging is using small groups. Participation in small groups helps socialize students into Christian faith. Peers have a strong influence in building not only self identity, but also a strong faith. With at least one adult youth worker to guide and facilitate, small groups can be a major element of a strong youth ministry.

Short-term groups can be used effectively to carry out some tasks of the youth ministry program, such as planning and carrying out social events, or road trips. Small groups can also be used during a lesson or Bible study to involve more people in discussion or to study lengthy scripture passages within a brief period of time as a “divide and conquer” strategy.

Long-term groups comprised of the same members who meet regularly are another means of small group ministry. Regardless of their chosen task—studying the Bible, providing support, encouragement, and accountability, or developing discipleship and leadership—the real benefit of long-term groups is found in the process of meeting. The mere experience of being together with other Christian teens will allow relationships to form and grow, which in turn has a powerful effect on fostering a sense of belonging, acceptance, and community.

Jim Burns and Mike DeVries, in the *An Uncommon Youth Ministry*, observe that there are several reasons for developing small groups in youth ministry under the C.A.R.E outline.

C = Connect. Small groups provide a place where young people can consistently relate to a few people, forming the basis for true community.

A = Accountability. Small groups provide a place where young people may be held lovingly accountable as they seek to apply spiritual truths. Small groups provide an environment where honesty and transparency make spiritual growth possible.

R = Relevancy. Small groups serve as a place that students can struggle with and learn the relevancy of the Bible in their lives. Small groups allow youth struggle with doubts and in-depth questions while discovering just how relevant scripture is for their day.

E= Encouragement. Small groups provide a setting where people can see close up where God is at work in lives of young people and offer both affirmation and encouragement for what God is doing. This form of encouragement leads to deep change in youth.

All youth groups do not “arrive” at this level of CARE immediately. Burns and DeVries note that healthy small groups often go through different levels of intimacy and growth as youth begin to learn about one another.

1. History–giving: Learning each others’ stories as young people open up to each other;
2. Sense of Warmth and Affection: Caring and valuing each other as people;
3. Deeper Sharing: Feeling safe enough to be vulnerable and honest;
4. Depth: Seeing the group as family and having a sense of belonging.

Youth workers face two common mistakes: either skipping the first two levels and pushing too quickly for deep sharing (often a threatening approach) or just staying within the first two level without ever seeking to take the group “deeper” into intimacy. It is important to note that leading a small group requires different “skills” for each level the group experiences. Early small group leaders may be more directive and focus on reducing anxiety until people begin to know each other. Later, the youth worker may have to learn to “let go” of leadership but still monitor the level of intimacy and self-disclosure (particularly among young people). Creating a safe, dynamic, and open atmosphere assists groups. Learning how to ask questions, listen carefully, and tolerate silence may help the group move to deeper levels of understanding in following God.

Often groups learn to openly share with one another based on good discussions, which require good questions.

Flow:

- Start with general questions that are non-threatening and call for little or no self-disclosure. What is your favorite meal, event, entertainment?
- Move to general, but more serious questions that call for analytical thinking and moderate levels of self-disclosure. Why did Jesus say this? How would the world be different if more people followed Paul's advice?
- End with personal questions that call for self-evaluation and voluntary self-disclosure. What do you think of God's invitation? What changes might you make in your life to show your love for God?

Stimulate Thinking:

- Ask questions that call for a review of the facts or questions that measure your group's knowledge. According to Mark 10:45, why did Jesus come to earth?
- Ask broad, open-ended questions. Avoid questions that youth can answer with a simple yes or no. Instead of asking should Christians live a holy life? You might ask What do you think it means to live a holy life?
- Ask people to "unpack" their thinking. How did you arrive at your answer? Why do you believe that?
- Ask follow-up questions for clarification or more information. Is this what you mean? Can you elaborate? Tell us more. Can you give an example?
- Ask your group to analyze an idea. How does this compare with _____? Why do you think that is true?
- Ask what consequences an idea or action might have. What if everyone did that? What would happen if we followed that to its logical conclusion? If you did this would it lead to the kind of life you want to live?
- Promote active listening. Ask someone to summarize their friend's response or to offer a response to another youth's comment.
- Keep pointing people back to the passage to make sure they are making accurate observations, not jumping to conclusions that are unsupported by scripture.

Getting Personal:

- Ask for people's opinions.
- Ask for people's feelings.
- Withhold judgment. Do not try to extend a judgment. Say, "Thanks for sharing" rather than indicating whether an answer is correct or incorrect.
- If the person exhibits faulty thinking or shaky theology, use analytical questions above instead of direct disagreement or correction.

Among the marks of a healthy small group are accountability and encouragement. Spiritual formation authority Richard Foster describes a “formula” for safe accountability and affirmation in a small group:

- Encouragement—as often as possible
- Advice—once in a great while
- Correction—only when absolutely necessary
- Judgment—never

Remember that the goal remains to help a group create a sense of community and to grow in grace. Often this takes time. Groups usually begin tentatively with youth just getting to know one another and understanding their place in a community. Often groups go through a difficult period of “storming” as youth, and youth workers, sort out their roles and contributions to the group. This is often the most dangerous time, one when it might be too easy to give up on the group. However, with patient leadership and guidance many groups “grow through” these difficult times to become close community.

Hospitality and Assimilation

Hospitality and belonging are not only good Christian practices in and of themselves; they also serve as the initial phases of evangelism. Relationship provides the front door to evangelism and missional ministry. Often how we receive new young people, how we describe them, help them to understand our community, and connect them to other young people or groups, prove important. Think for a moment, who, if anyone, greets teenagers who come to your church or youth meetings? Do you have specific activities that seem important for the youth group but may isolate new visitors?

Learning how to gather information from visitors without embarrassing them, following up with a note, phone call or personal visit demonstrates hospitality. Following up on young people later, including members of the youth group who miss extended periods, also demonstrates hospitality over the long term.

When youth experience a well-led small group setting that includes belonging, hospitality and acceptance, they experience a level of community that helps them respond to others as well.

Remember that good group leaders:

- Encourage participation
- Invite everyone to talk
- Facilitate discussion
- Stimulate new questions
- Ask clear, interesting questions
- Affirm the significance of each person’s opinion, experience, values, or faith

Creating a community that proves warm and acceptable often requires a caring, guiding attitude and thoughtful context. Youth workers begin with a good environment. Often seating works best in circular, semi-circular, or horseshoe arrangements with level, comfortable seating that matches

the purpose of the group. Practice discretion; encourage youth to agree that what is said in group stays in group unless the comments create real problems for health and safety. Model respect, trust and acceptance. Encourage questioning, remember that there is no such thing as a dumb question. All opinions and ideas are worthwhile (although not all are equally valid). You can disagree with an opinion, but respect the person. Avoid sarcasm, put-downs, etc. Listening is as important as speaking, so only one person should speak at a time. Remember, youth workers should guide the discussion to keep it on topic. Remain flexible. Focus on people over plans but do not allow exceptions to become the rule. Remember participation is a major goal of discussion but also allow people to “pass” if the question is too threatening. Youth workers should invite, encourage, direct participation but no one should be forced to share.

Intergenerational Community

Beyond small group experiences in the youth group, youth workers must ask some crucial questions about the role of youth in the larger life of the church. How do we understand our ministry with young people in light of the total community of faith? We must understand that church remains larger than our specific age-level ministry.

Youth need to be part of a larger community of faith. Young people need to have direct interaction with other adults and even with youth and children younger than themselves. The fact remains when a young person connects to a church, involved in local ministries and engaged in decision making, the greater the sense of community. Youth workers should be aware of how teenagers are supremely sensitive to finding and knowing their place in a variety of social settings—at home, at school, on sports teams, in their neighborhoods, and the larger world. Building Christian community shares many of the same dynamics as other forms of community: acceptance, participation, sense of belonging, peer influence, cooperation, encouragement, tolerance, honesty, friendship, and so on. Therefore, workers would do well to know and practice effective ways of providing opportunities for all these things to occur.

However, Christian community has a distinct “flavor” and unique elements that go beyond a generic “best friends forever” atmosphere that might be encountered in other settings. Christian community views friendships as disciple-making relationships, not necessarily private and intimate relationships based on shared interests and/or personalities. As Kenda Creasy Dean and Ron Foster note in *The Godbearing Life*, spiritual friends pull us toward our journey with God. Christian unity comes not from attraction, but from the union Jesus seeks with each person. Support, encouragement, vulnerability and all the other element of friendships are good, but not enough, in and of themselves. Christians seek communion, more than mere community for community’s sake. A circle of Christian friends is rooted in God’s friendship with us.

Application

Develop a plan for developing stronger sense of community within your youth group.

Identify one or two specific areas where you might strengthen and suggest strategies that might be developed to help youth gain a stronger sense of community

Identify two to three possible opportunities for youth to intersect with other members of your church. Begin with natural connections but also explore new possibilities for intersections.

Discussion Guide for Mentor and Participant

In what ways can games help foster and nurture a sense of community in a youth ministry? What games have you observed or played that discriminate against players who are not particularly athletic? What are some games that should be avoided because they tend to eliminate “losers” from the game, rather than keep everyone involved and participating?

What language do you use to refer to visitors? (Guests, strangers, new people, prospects, friends?) How long (or how many visits) does it take for your church and churched teens to accept a guest as “one of us?” Who, if anyone, greets teenagers who come to your church or youth meetings? How are guests connected/introduced to individuals and groups?

Do youth feel “connected” with the rest of your church? Do young people have chances to make friends with other adults? Do they participate in the regular ministries and feel they belong in ministry?



Nazarene Youth International

