

DIVERSE YOUTH MINISTRIES

BELONGING, BLESSING, AND BELIEVING IN
CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY





DISCIPLESHIP MINISTRIES

The United Methodist Church

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INTRODUCTION

As it is, there are many members, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you', nor again the head to the feet, 'I have no need of you.'

1 Corinthians 12

Imagine the scene – a group of teenagers, all from the same school, in a community where most families look the same, make similar amounts of money, and they are being led by a youth ministry leader who grew up in a similar town to this one. They gather in a youth room at a local church. Up on the board is the topic for their discussion today in big block letters: DIVERSITY. It is an honorable conversation to have, and from Isaiah 43 to Acts 2 the Bible continually illustrates for us the division-destroying power of God's welcoming communities. *How we pursue diversity in our Christian communities with youth matters.* The thoughts and suggestions that follow can help lead young people to better understand and participate in diverse youth ministry no matter the make-up of their community.

United Methodist ministries can excel at creating diverse communities that nurture deep discipleship in young people. We can introduce young Christians to one another across ethnic and cultural barriers by working together on the central mission of the church - sharing the love and grace of Jesus Christ with the world. Missional projects can serve as the beginning of faith-filled relationships. Those relationships can lead to a better understanding of the beautiful diversity of cultures with which God has blessed us. Specific ministries that meet unique needs of distinct cultural groups can grow from within communities of hospitality. Further reflection on all ministry experiences can give us a holy understanding of how God calls us to be together, celebrating our uniqueness and sharing together in God's justice, mercy and grace.

DRAWING US TOGETHER

*Do not press me to leave you
or to turn back from following you!
Where you go, I will go;
where you lodge, I will lodge;
your people shall be my people,
and your God my God.*

Ruth 1:16

In the story of Ruth and Naomi we see a diverse community created when two people from distinct backgrounds walk alongside each other, work together, and create a future together with God's help. Their story is filled with the kinds of "bind us together" moments that can give youth ministries a starting place to pursue diverse relationships across cultural groups. We hope each local church will look for the friends traveling nearby who could be claimed as sisters and brothers in Christ.

For instance, high school students living on both sides of an urban/suburban divide can get together for a weekend retreat at the nearby United Methodist camp, work together rehabbing cabins there, and experience the blessings of their new broadening community of faith. Or a youth ministry could gather youth from across ethnic lines to create a praise band that speaks in the rich musical languages of "all the nations."

As Turpin and Walker write in **Nurturing Different Dreams: Youth Ministry across Lines of Difference** we can "build solidarity and mutual transformation thorough 'dialogue, mutual critique, and political action' with those who are not like us."¹ It is this engagement - political, liturgical, but most importantly missional, that can be the starting place for powerfully diverse youth ministry experiences.

Whether a shared mission trip, worship service or outreach to local schools, putting our hands together for God's goodness can draw us toward one another as we share God's blessings

for the world. In offering these hands-on connections between young people, we help them understand how they belong to one another. From this new community then we set the stage for deeper spiritual reflection on the beauty of diversity among God's creation.

BLESSING EACH AS THEY NEED BLESSING

There was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb.

Revelation 7:9-12

Even as we begin to create beautifully diverse youth ministries, the biblical narrative is quick to illustrate the difference between unity and sameness. It is important to note when unique ministry programs are needed to address the distinctiveness of diverse communities of youth. Ministries may need to provide programs in the various languages of the youth involved. They may need to make accommodations for youth with hearing or sight impairments, youth on the autism spectrum, or youth with other developmental needs.

SPECIAL NEEDS

The United Methodist Church continues its commitment to disability and its place within the church, as well as the world at large. Paragraphs 140 and 162(H) in the Book of Discipline reinforce the idea that we, as a body, are obligated to welcome all into the body of Christ regardless of ability, mental capacity, diagnosis or physical disability. Paragraph 265 reminds us that each local church should have a Disability Awareness Sunday, one of four special Sundays in the year. Yet, welcoming and recognizing disability as diversity in youth ministry should be more than just a 'once-a-year' kind of thing.

Youth ministry should be physically and socially accessible to people with special needs or disabilities. Develop a culture that uses inclusive language and showcases hospitality, regardless of a person's mental or physical development. Refer to the people in this group as people, not as their condition (say "a person with a disability" instead of "a disabled person") Look around the church, and notice who is not in attendance. Intentionally reach out within your community, both to parents and youth, to discuss what your church could offer for them in terms of connection. Parents of special needs children know their own kids' needs very well, and deserve to be heard. Local schools are also excellent resources to discover how your congregation can create a welcoming space and attitude.

Many accommodations are not difficult, nor expensive, but they do require intentionality. Be cognizant of lighting in your space, and provide seating for all abilities. Limit scents and fragrances. Say hello, be hospitable, but don't be overly nice. Be authentically you. Provide captioning and large print materials. Last but not least, remember that ministry should be inclusive of persons with disabilities, not just a program for people with disabilities.

The following section is an example of what a church or youth ministry might do in an inclusive response to a specific disability.

THE DEAF COMMUNITY

Making accommodations for Deaf youth should be seen as a blessing, not a burden. The visual use of hands, usually American Sign Language (ASL) in the US, to communicate can spark interest among teens who can hear. Anyone can learn ASL and incorporate ASL in acts of praise and worship. Deaf teens do not want to be seen as outsiders who speak a different language, but as potential partners in Christ's ministry and mission. Forming sincere relationships with Deaf teens can introduce a new language in your faith community.

These relationships can also expand your church's witness among a community that has often been overlooked by the Church. Paragraph 653(e) of the *Book of Discipline* states that each Annual Conference shall have a committee on disability concerns, and those structures should be referenced as support for inclusivity.

Set the environment for welcoming Deaf teens by:

- Providing qualified interpreters whenever possible, and especially on special events like youth mission trips, retreats, overnights, camps, etc
- Provide interpreted worship (at least) on Christmas, Easter, and other special Sundays so that the whole family can participate
- Offer a gym night, or other fellowship activity for Deaf teens from a local school
- Partner with a Deaf teen to help teach ASL for a Deaf mission fundraiser

Most of all, pray for insights and contacts in your local Deaf community and connect outside your church to discover Deaf people, and their needs.

ECONOMICS

If you have middle school students from both wealthy and poor communities, for instance, then you may need to help each develop faith-based practices from differing angles. One small group could support another in sacrificial giving, yet another might be organized as a prayer group for those caught up in the violence of impoverished neighborhoods. These need not be segregated groups, but could offer healthy arenas for specific conversations and action.

Such communities of young people that deconstruct the divisions of class, power and economics will need to get comfortable dealing in the currency of respect – which

isn't always the same as "equality." As Turpin and Walker write, "Respect may not always be expressed through equal behavior." Rather, we should provide a variety of experiences that help youth honor their unique realities, and empower them to raise up the valleys in their lives and make the mountains low, as Isaiah 40 suggests.

The Detroit Renaissance District Urban Youth Ministry Alliance² is one example of a youth ministry identifying particular needs of urban youth pursuing their Christian faith. Their annual summer camp features keynote speakers and programs to help youth address challenges in their own neighborhoods. Topics may range from street gangs to homelessness, and include the very different challenges that their suburban peers face like drug abuse and pressures to participate in unjust economic privilege.

By recognizing and respecting the unique challenges our youth face, and the unique tribes from which they come, we make room for blessing each other as each needs to be blessed. This honors different cultural heritages and makes them a part of our new community. It also offers youth from different backgrounds the chance to bless one another as their gifts complement the needs of their neighbors. Communities of youth already grounded in active Christian discipleship and mission together are best prepared for the honest opportunity to be a blessing in each others' lives.

BELIEVING BOLDLY

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.

Matthew 28:19-20

Diverse youth ministries that begin with active faith practices together and encourage deep exploration of the different

gifts and needs of their young people are well prepared for the Great Commission Jesus gave the church. If we seek out relationships across cultural divides in our youth ministries, then our evangelism and faith sharing with “all the nations” seems a more accessible task for the church in general. Such authentic communities can help young people believe again in a church, which has too often modeled separateness and antagonistic relationships across cultures.

Simply showcasing the diversity of our youth ministries can be a bold witness to the church and the world. The church, for instance, that holds a “mission investment party” for youth from distinct cultural communities around a metro area, can show congregations who are usually alienated how to get together across their socio/economic boundaries. Or the diverse youth community created at a Chrysalis spiritual retreat weekend can introduce new young people to the power of God’s vision for multicultural Christian experiences. These communities can be the place where action together leads to transformative relationships and a revived belief in a savior who seeks all of us.

CONCLUSION

Youth who belong together as conspirators in the missional work of the church know that their unique gifts are honored and respected. They benefit from the specific blessings of this church for their particular context and gain relationships with others who can support them in their Christian discipleship. From this new community they can come to believe deeply in the power of the Holy Spirit to unite and lift up. We celebrate each diverse youth ministry that can help youth bestow this blessing on the world.



ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- United Methodist Committee on Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing Ministries: <http://www.umcdhm.org/>
- DisAbility Ministries Committee of the UMC: <http://www.umdisabilityministries.org/>
- Resources of Disability Ministries (PDF): <http://www.umcmmission.org/ArticleDocuments/478/disabilityresources.pdf.aspx?Embed=Y>

¹ NURTURING DIFFERENT DREAMS: YOUTH MINISTRY ACROSS LINES OF DIFFERENCE BY KATHERINE TURPIN, ANNE CARTER WALKER; WITH QUOTE FROM A FEMINIST ETHIC OF RISK BY SHARON D. WELCH

² MORE AT UMYUA.COM