

Purposeful Practices: Involving Youth in Life Ministry

So you've started a Life Team, and you want youth to be involved. Where do you begin? How do you start? Here are a few practical and purposeful ways your life group can promote partnerships with youth:

Provide Personal Invitations – Just like any other age group, relationships are important to youth. However, because young adults are used to being advertised to, they can also spot a fake persona from a mile away. Youth need real conversation with real people who really care about them. Their inboxes are full of emails asking them to buy this or do that. In fact, they're so used to the inundation that many youth don't even open emails unless they know the email is an important one. Connecting face to face not only creates a great first impression, but it also conveys you care about them as individuals. If you want to follow up with them later, send a text rather than an email; you're much more likely to receive a response.

Key into Issues Youth Care About – In general, youth are in touch with the social issues of the day. They're connected through social media accounts, vlogs, snaps, tweets, memes, and a variety of other sources. Most of them grew up with technology at their fingertips; in fact, they carry around a miniature computer in the shape of a phone. They've been exposed to the issues of the day—abortion, euthanasia, child trafficking, suicide, gender identity, pornography, gay marriage—and they recognize that there are two sides (or more!) to every issue. Youth have been navigating through a field full of social-commentary landmines for years, and while they often have a pulse on society's stance, they sometimes find themselves tripping over their own. Providing compassionate and logical answers to the life issues of the day, especially issues that encourage action, are not only appealing to youth but also essential to their moral, social, and intellectual development.

Focus on Activities – In general, today's youth thrive in environments where they can “do” something. They want to help solve a problem, share a message, or serve a neighbor. Life issues provide natural opportunities for youth to be active (and fulfill the service hours they need for school scholarships). A Life Team can function in a variety of ways, but there are four distinct “activity” categories that life groups might consider incorporating: service, celebration, worship, and education. Holding a clothing drive, collecting cans for a food pantry, or volunteering at a pregnancy care center make great service activities. Groups might celebrate life by throwing a baby shower for new mothers, hosting a back-to-school cookout for college students, or celebrating birthdays at a nursing home. Holding a Life Sunday provides an opportunity for worship. Finally, providing educational materials and workshops on suicide prevention, abortion, or how to respond to a homosexual friend are excellent ways to serve youth and encourage them to be involved.

Don't Mix and Match – No adult likes to be told he'll be participating in a service project only to show up and discover that the first 30 minutes are going to be spent socializing. He feels misled and maybe a little bitter over this “waste of time.” Too many of these experiences and he's not likely to volunteer his time anymore. The same is true for youth. Young people are used to being pulled in many directions. While they're not afraid of hard work, they also value their

downtime. Because of this, young people are used to setting boundaries between personal time and work time, and they realize they need to make choices that coincide with those boundaries. Because time is a valuable commodity to young people, they will have made a conscientious choice to be present at an event. In other words, they will believe that what they came for is important and worthwhile. However, if they're stuck doing something they didn't bargain for, they'll be disappointed, and they'll be much less likely to give the group a second try.

Make Expectations Clear – How long will the meeting be? What will be expected of participants? What specifically can I do to help? These are the types of questions youth need answered. While generalizations might build excitement, commitment requires specifics. Why? Part of the reason youth want specifics is because of the time factor mentioned above. But there's more. If youth are going to commit to an event, they want to know that the event will be well-run. Specifics are also important because new social settings can be uncomfortable for youth. Hiding behind a social-media persona is easy, but having real face-to-face conversations is risky. The more specific you can be about your reasonable expectations, the more likely youth will be willing to take the risk. Ask a youth to advertise on social-media accounts, help with registration, bring a cake, or help set up for a seminar rather than “volunteer to help out” at an event. Even as you ask though, remember to allow flexibility in how a young person carries out his or her assigned task. Mandating and micro-managing does more harm than good!

Don't Dump – It's often tempting to see “fresh blood” in an aging organization as a savior of sorts. Let's be honest, today's youth could prolong an organization's lifespan for another generation! While it's not wrong to want an organization to continue to grow or to pray that God would provide someone to carry the torch into the future, it's also not the best reason for involving youth in a life organization. Life organizations are, at their foundations, about valuing and upholding lives. And the lives of youth are included in that mission. While we hope youth will continue life ministries in the future, their passion for life ministries might take time to grow. Instead of seeing youth as an immediate answer to prayer, try seeing them as opportunities for relationship-building and mentoring. (Did you know that one of the marks of today's youth is a desire for mentors?) You may even find that as you encourage and mentor young people, you'll also be making new lifelong friends.

Give Youth a Voice – Finally, as you seek to include youth in your life organization, be sure to give them some ownership in it. Ask your youth what they'd like to learn about or how they'd like to serve; ask them which topics or activities might be meaningful. You can do this in a variety of ways – through conversation, a survey, or by having a couple of youth serve on your board. As you engage in guiding, encouraging, and growing youth leaders, give them the opportunity to make life ministries a personal passion, one that shapes their lives and the lives of others for years to come!

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