

Developing a Healthy Junior High Ministry

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There may be no more important, challenging and just plain fun ministry in the church as that which is done with junior high young people.

Granted, some adults would roll their eyes at that statement.

Nevertheless, those hooked on ministry to, with and among God's young people between the ages of 12 and 15 would agree. The "important" and "challenging" might get little argument. It is the "fun" description which is up for debate. On a good day, those adults who enjoy playing crazy games, listening to hurts and hopes, and serving along side a group of God's most unpredictable people might win that debate.

Who Should Minister to Junior High Youth

Wayne Rice, author of *Junior High Ministry* (Zondervan), says that junior highers are often neglected by the church. He says adults are intimidated by their restlessness and behavior extremes. Too often the result is that "the junior high is simply put on hold while we wait for him (or her) to grow into someone to whom we are better equipped to minister."

Rice maintains that "junior high ministry can bring personal satisfaction and a sense of accomplishment unequalled anywhere else." The key, he says, is to understand the sweeping physical, social, mental, emotional, and spiritual changes taking place in the adolescent. It's important for those who work with junior highers to have some understanding of adolescent development. But mostly, it's crucial that they:

- like junior highers
- are able to empathize with the problems, needs and feelings of junior highers
- possess a good dose of patience
- function as an adult friend, not another junior higher
- have a sense of humor
- are able to remember (without undergoing hypnosis) what it was like to be a junior higher
- are willing and able to offer the necessary time to work with this age group

Once you've convinced yourself (or whatever committee or person is necessary) of the high calling of youth ministry with junior high people, it's time to begin.

Getting Started

Start by forming a task force of junior highers and adults who fit the above description. They may be parents (whose young people don't mind them being involved), young adults, those middle-aged, or senior citizens.

Then, decide on the purpose of junior high ministry at your church. You may even want to form your own mission statement if one doesn't already exist. For instance, "the purpose of junior high ministry at First Church is to provide a safe, friendly place for junior highers to have fun, grow in their faith, and serve God." Decide how that will be done, and under what structure:

- How often will the group meet? Decide whether to meet weekly, two or three times a month, monthly, or maybe only quarterly.
- What day of the week/time? A weeknight from 6:30-8P.M? Sunday from 3:30-5P.M. or 6:30-8P.M.? A Sunday morning, hour-long "breakfast club?"
- What will happen when the young people and adults gather? In their book, *Involving Youth in Youth Ministry* (Group Books), Thom and Joani Schultz report how their church's planning task force came up with this structure for meetings:
 - Community-Building Experience
 - Singing
 - The Learning Part (lesson content)
 - Affirmation Experience
 - Prayer
 - Specific Closure Experience
 - Refreshments

Other steps in developing this new ministry will be to:

1. recruit and train leadership;
2. decide what the role of adults and youth leaders will be (this may involve writing job descriptions);
3. survey young people about their wants and needs; and
4. set a schedule.

Leadership may already exist on the task force, but be creative in finding additional people. Although parents often have the highest level of interest and commitment in "getting something going" for their sons and daughters, they are not the only potential advisors. Utilize other church members, such as high school or college students, singles and couples of any age, an official "youth group grandma and grandpa." Involve them in Youth Group planning, and train them with curriculum and video tapes that are available. Contact your synod or the national church office for helpful leadership training ideas.

Perhaps your task force will decide the adult leaders should: help lead activities, supervise and provide "crowd control," support the group and help youth lead, be good listeners, participate along with the youth in all activities, share their faith, not take over. You may want youth leaders to:

- help lead activities
- be willing to work with adult leaders
- be responsible
- help plan and organize
- set a good example for other youth by participating willingly
- share their faith.

Learn About the Young People in Your Ministry

Discover what young people in your church want to do or discuss a "youth group." Develop your own survey, offering concerns/ideas that are easily checked.

Offer blank space for their ideas. For instance:

My Top Five Worries or Concerns Are:

- making and keeping friends
- getting good grades
- divorce
- drinking and drug abuse
- my relationship with God
- money
- sexuality concerns
- suicide
- making a sports "team"
- feeling good about myself
- getting along with my parents
- loneliness
- death
- other _____
- other _____

Five Things I'd Like to do with Other Youth at Church Are:

- go on a retreat
- help other people
- join an athletic team
- play games
- discuss issues important to me
- go to a museum
- attend a sporting event
- attend a concert
- learn more about God
- hear a great speaker
- meet kids at other churches
- go skiing
- watch videos
- get support from an adult friend
- serve my church

The book, *Determining Your Needs in Youth Ministry* (GROUP), has many sample surveys and suggestions for writing and taking them.

More Ideas

Once you've developed and taken surveys from your junior high members, meet to plan the year (or at least the first six months). Try to provide a variety of experiences for your church's youth. They're not all athletes, nor are they all interested in digging into Bible stories. Focus on fun, because that's what hooks junior highers. But, remember the one who brings you together: Jesus Christ. Even at a "fun" event, find a way to include devotions and prayer. Occasionally offer opportunities to serve. Junior highers like to work on, and complete, projects. They might appear to be God's most self-centered people, but they're also some of the most sensitive in the body of Christ. Give them a chance to live, serve others, and feel good about themselves.

Once the leadership is gathered and trained, the masses have been surveyed, and the structure decided and program planned, begin to publicize, publicize, and publicize. Continue to minister with God's young members who bring spirit, doubt, caring, creativity, tears, love and laughter to the body of Christ.

And, be assured there may be no more important, challenging and just plain fun ministry in the church as that which is done with junior high young people.