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# Peer Ministry—An Education of the Heart

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Picture yourself talking to a group of youth and asking them to raise their hands if they know someone who:

- has parents going through a separation or divorce;
- is struggling with an eating disorder;
- is misusing drugs or alcohol;
- is involved in gang activity;
- has been hurt by a relationship;
- has been abused;
- has tried to commit suicide;
- is struggling with sexual issues.

Adults are often stunned to realize the tough issues that surround our young people on a daily basis. Even more humbling is to realize that when a youth needs help with such issues they turn first to another youth. One way congregations can help young people help each other is by introducing peer ministry training. Peer ministry is an intentional way of training youth who want to know what to do when their friends are struggling.

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## A peer minister

- ...loves God, others, and self.
- ...is genuine and empathetic.
- ...helps clarify concerns and values.
- ...listens.
- ...explores alternatives and consequences.
- ...knows what questions to ask.
- ...checks assumptions.
- ...realizes not all problems can be solved.
- ...realizes that not all people want to be helped.
- ...knows when and how to make referrals.
- ...welcomes outsiders.
- ...prays for others and their own needs.

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## Three necessary peer ministry elements

## **Training**

Solid training is essential. Step-by-step training and practice teaches participants how to help their friends. Training empowers young people to be Christ's disciples in a hurting world. Peer ministers are encouraged to reach out—to care about those in need and take action.

## **Growth in Christian faith and values**

Peer ministers become examples to others. Love for Christ, a willingness to pray, openness to talk about faith, and interest in the Bible become lifestyle elements. Young people learn they are important to their church because the church recognizes them as vital participants in ministry.

## **Passionate services to others**

Peer ministers form lifelong habits of "doing unto the least of these." They willingly take on leadership and service projects. Their service is best used when they are involved relationally with others.

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## **Peer ministry models**

### **Mentor and support model**

Some congregations train peer ministers to be mentors or a support to another youth during a particular struggle.

One youth minister described a dad who recently joined their church with two boys, one in junior high and an upper elementary youth. The family was going through a divorce and had never participated in a church. A peer minister was asked to meet weekly with each boy as they worked through family changes and became familiar with the church.

Another group of peer ministers met a high school girl on the school steps to welcome her back from drug treatment. The group wanted the girl to know that she would have friends that accept and support her.

A third group has become mentors to confirmation youth; they meet monthly during one of the class times to share faith, life challenges, and to pray together.

### **Leadership model**

Some groups become leadership teams for retreats, after-school programs, or function as small group discussion leaders.

One group found that peer ministers make sensitive discussion leaders for their high school youth group. Their small groups became known as safe places to talk. Their youth group grew from an average of 15 youth to an average of 80 youth every Monday night.

Another group used their peer ministers as retreat and camping leaders for confirmation youth. The church soon discovered that most of their junior high kids wanted to continue involvement after confirmation so that they, too, could become peer ministers and help on retreats and camps.

### **Everyday life model**

Other groups train youth to use their skills in everyday living among friends and families.

One youth minister meets with his peer ministers weekly. They aren't assigned projects or people, but are asked each week: "How was your training practical to you this week? What issues are your friends struggling with?" The youth share concerns, pray, and continue to grow in their skills.

They've learned that ministry is not always programmed by a church, but that ministry happens in everyday settings.

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## **Key steps to successful peer ministry**

### **Step 1: Vision of ministry**

Congregational youth leaders need to develop a vision of how they want to involve their youth after they are trained, using the three models previously listed as guides. The decision may depend on existing programs, community needs, and the size of the congregation. However, a selling point of peer ministry is that there are ways to tailor it to any size congregation.

### **Step 2: Trained adults**

Dedicated adults need to be trained to facilitate the program and supervise the service.

### **Step 3: Inviting participants**

Churches train youth in groups of 6 to 12. Leaders may recruit youth who've show an interest in peer ministry or that they care for others.

Many churches strive for a diverse group, including active and non-active youth, youth from different schools, different friendship groups, and varying cultural backgrounds. This insures that the group's service and outreach will be to more than just the existing core youth group.

### **Step 4: Training**

Training may be done once a week, during a retreat, or a combination of both. Youth learn best if they have time to learn each new skill and then practice the skill in their own life setting.

### **Step 5: Supervision of mission**

After youth are trained, they are given opportunities to implement what they have learned according to the church's vision for peer ministry. The group meets regularly with an adult supervisor to evaluate and receive support and ongoing training.

Peer ministry works because it is about what is most important to youth—their friendships. Young people discover that peer ministry is about being a better friend. One peer ministry group made sweatshirts. The front said, "Peer Ministry." The back read, "It's not a job, it's an attitude!" Peer ministers don't just learn about values and faith, they live it.

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