

Investing in Youth and Young Adults

One of the problematic areas of membership for many congregations is that of youth and young adults (age 18–35). There is a tension between wanting youth to be involved in the congregation and the need of youth for a healthy separation as part of their development. When can young people become members? How can children be recognized as members of the congregation community? Are young adults welcomed into leadership? Does membership in a district young adult group discourage membership in a congregation? In this chapter we will consider the application of the three categories described above (Identification, Affiliation, and Membership) to the situations of youth and young adults.

We say that young people represent the future of the church. However, we often push them to the periphery, rather than welcoming them into the congregation. Meg Muckenhaupt writes,

Here are the four easy steps to denominational death:

1. Separation—Gather together the most energetic, creative, socially conscious new members of your church in one big room. Let's call them the "Boosters." Tell them that they're special, wonderful people. Continue by telling them that they're so amazing that they have different needs from the rest of the congregation, which would be better
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filled by meeting with other Boosters than bothering with the rest of the church.

2. Isolation—Arrange for the Boosters to have their own meetings at times when no one else is in the building. Encourage them to take on new leadership roles and responsibilities but only in groups made up entirely of Boosters. Casually mention that non-Booster committees are “boring” and “don’t get anything done.”
3. Disaffection—Lead small-group services where each Booster gets to talk about his or her own problems, but isn’t required to respond to what anyone else has to say. They’ll get used to concentrating on themselves instead of learning how to listen and worship as part of a congregation. If a few of the Boosters do sneak off and attend the regular Sunday-morning service, they’ll complain that the service is “boring” and “doesn’t speak to me,” and leave.
4. Rejection—After the Boosters have been meeting for a few years, tell them that they can no longer use the church. Do not invite them to New U classes. Let them find their own heartbroken way back—they will if they’re *really* UU, after all.

The scheme is guaranteed to be effective. After a few years, only weary refugees from other religions will be left in your church—hardly a group that can maintain its numbers, much less threaten the right-thinking world with a liberal faith.

There’s even a name for this plan. It’s called YRUU. And you wonder where all the young adults are. . . .¹

Youth

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For our discussion, youth are people under the age of eighteen. Some have parents who consider themselves Unitarian Universalists, while others don’t. Most of these youth would self-identify as UUs, particularly those who have had several years of participation in an effective religious education program. For youth the question is not one of formal membership but of connection to the larger congregation. Are they just attendees at the church school, or are they recognized as members of the larger congregational community?

The questions are, “Has the religious education that youth have received helped prepare and motivate them for the step of affiliation and eventual membership?” “Are they moving along the path of maturational and incarnational growth?” “Do the curricula teach age-appropriate understandings of the meaning of membership in a UU congregation?” “Do they learn how the church really runs?” “About the relationship between this congregation and

other UU congregations?” Sheri M. Prud’homme, a lifespan religious education consultant, says, “I have noticed that it tends to be easier for adults in their twenties and thirties who were not raised in the UU church to find homes in congregations. On some level, our youth ministries are not preparing our youth to be adult members of our congregations.”²

Affiliation often begins with a child dedication ceremony in which an infant is accepted into the congregation. Some congregations have a ceremony that welcomes newly arrived older children into the congregation. These ceremonies are important recognitions of affiliation.

Especially for youth, affiliation often means connection at the district or continental level. This occurs for several reasons:

- As children grow, their horizons widen and they seek wider connections outside the congregation, just as they seek connections outside the home.
- Local congregations often don’t have a large enough cohort of a narrow age range to form a viable group.
- District and continental programs are richer and more varied because they serve a larger group.
- There is often more adult support, including professional staff, at the district and national levels than at the local level.

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Sometimes a congregation sees these connections as competitive, taking youth away. Instead, these groups should be seen as opportunities to encourage youth’s development of their UU identity.

Children

The question of children becoming members is complex. Congregational practices vary widely, from no restrictions on youth membership to a minimum age requirement of eighteen. Why is there such a variety of practices?

- Because every congregation sets its own criteria for membership.
- Because the UUA makes no recommendations about age criteria for membership.
- Because it is mistakenly believed that minors can’t be legal members.³ (Congregations should check their state’s or province’s statutes to see whether there are restrictions on allowing minors to make financial decisions.)
- Because it is believed that youth cannot fulfill the obligations of membership.
- Because each congregation evolved its own practices differently.
- Because adults believe that children don’t wish to become members.

When we asked youth about membership we received quite uniform opinions. Here is a typical example:

I am seventeen years old and a member of Foothills Unitarian Church in Fort Collins, CO. The topic of youth membership is especially relevant to our church because in May the Congregational Meeting voted to approve a bylaw change concerning membership that was proposed by our youth group. Under the old bylaws, membership was restricted to those eighteen years or older. The new bylaws allow anyone to become a member, provided they go through a membership class or suitable substitute. . . . A membership class or other requirement of some kind gives the feeling (regardless of age) that membership is important and not something to be taken lightly.

The bylaw change was passed almost unanimously, and we already have had seven youth (including myself) join the church. Although we won't be able to see the effects of this decision until the next congregational meeting this spring, I feel that our church is better off having made a statement that it values people regardless of age.

And another:

I feel very strongly that no age should be imposed on membership because different people choose to become members at different times. . . . I feel that UU Principles compel our congregations to allow anyone who chooses to become a member to become a member.

I really hope that your work encourages congregations to stop treating youth as second-rate UUs and when they become members to stop ignoring their potential to lead and actually teach adults quite a bit. For these reasons I would be against having a second category for youth membership; yes we are different but we don't need to be shut off any more from our faith. We want to be UUs and although we have different needs we try to meet them ourselves through YRUU and be active congregation members when we are given the chance.

While we have no intention of infringing on the member congregations' right to set their own criteria for membership, we believe that considering the issue of youth membership will help congregations to clarify their views of the meaning of membership. If a congregation has established clear requirements for adult membership, it can then review those requirements to see how they can apply to youth. If the requirements are well defined, we see no reason to have an arbitrary age limitation. Young people will be able to meet the requirements at differing ages, depending on their maturity and congregation experience.

Many congregations have a Coming of Age program that marks the transition from childhood to youth. Participation in such a program might be rec-

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ognized as equivalent to the new member classes given for adults. The completion of this program is a particularly appropriate time to invite youth to become members. It is a time when they are most connected and willing to consider joining. The argument that they are soon going to leave for college or other venues is specious. Youth need to be welcomed into the UU community, and this connection would encourage them to continue their UU affiliation as they move on.

Some congregations have established a special category of Youth Member. This may be just a way to avoid paying to the UUA's Annual Fund by not counting them as adult members. However, the UUA bylaws are clear that anyone who can vote is a member.⁴ Of course, if the basis of the Fair Share contribution is changed this will cease to be a motivation.

Congregations need to value youth for their contributions, but not exploit them by just asking them to do tasks like baby sitting or dish washing. It is, for most congregations, *not* a good idea to have a designated seat for a youth on the board of trustees. If a youth is qualified and interested, he/she can be nominated and elected through the regular process. Too often, a designated youth is not sufficiently prepared or interested and soon drops away, not having had a good experience.

One of the questions that occurs for all ages, but particularly affects youth, is whether or not to have a minimum pledge amount. Here is one answer:

If churches really understood and valued all of the contributions that they need to survive, these questions become a bit irrelevant. Anyone, regardless of age, ability, color, native tongue, or economic class can contribute something to the effective running of a church. This over-emphasis on money as a measure of commitment to church keeps youth and children from being able to be members, but it also throws off the balance of power in churches and is the birth of bad politics. (As in so-and-so has a little more say in the color of the sanctuary walls because so-and-so is paying to have them painted. And we all know that's the least of it.) Yes, I think all members should be canvassed every year to re-evaluate their pledge to the church. . . . A re-evaluation of this kind would not only take into consideration the new abilities, resources, and skills of the member, but give her a chance to remember what the church means to her, what it merits from her as a member.

One religious educator suggests,

As a religious educator, the primary criterion I would use to determine whether an individual is old enough for congregational membership is whether the individual has reached Piaget's formal-operational stage of development (i.e., whether they can think abstractly). The formal-operational stage usually begins by about fourteen, but may come later. The bylaws of

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the congregation I work for state that “any person who is at least sixteen years of age, or who has completed the ninth grade” may become a member. I feel this is a good practical statement of my primary criterion, since successful completion of the ninth grade typically calls for abstract thinking, and by age sixteen most persons in our culture have reached the formal-operational stage.

Young Adults

Young adults are defined by the UUA’s Young Adult Ministries as age eighteen to thirty-five, but many of the older members are settled in their work and raising families. We therefore focus here on the younger of the young adults, age eighteen to twenty-five. This group is more likely to still be in school or in entry-level jobs. Why are they not found more often in our congregations? Sharon Hwang Colligan writes,

At most congregations I visit, I look around the pews and see a sea of older faces. There are maybe three young adults there. But when time comes for visitors to stand and be greeted, two of the three young adults stand up. Clearly, they are not going to stay. *But they came.* And then at coffee hour, when I ask the elders why there are no young adults in the congregation, the answer I most often get is that “young adults are not interested in church.” I think of all those young adult visitors, and I wonder what is not getting through.⁵

Young adults may come to identify as UUs by growing up in a UU congregation, or they may come as adults. They may find us through one of the many campus ministries at college, or they may connect through district or continental activities of the UU Young Adult/Campus Ministries Office. Frequently they are more involved with a district Young Adult group than with a local congregation. There are several reasons for this:

- Congregations, particularly smaller ones (and most of ours are smaller) may not have a large enough cohort of young adults to support specific programming for them.
- Congregations’ programs are primarily directed to families and older adults, which constitute the majority of most congregations.
- Young adults are frequently in transition, changing their jobs, schools, and housing. Staying connected to a group in a larger area may be easier.
- The communications style of young adults, such as using electronic communications rather than mail, may be different from the traditional methods of our congregations.

- The leadership of congregations is mostly older, making it hard for young adults to relate to them. Young adults are not invited into leadership positions.

The question is then, “How do we encourage young adults to affiliate with and become members of our congregations?” This happens most frequently when they have children and bring them for religious education. Does your congregation do things like the following to connect it with young adults in the congregation?

- Support district young adult programs by offering the use of the congregation’s facilities.
- Ask young adults what adult education programs would be of interest to them.
- Ask them when these programs should be offered. (They might not want to come at 9:00 on a Sunday morning.)
- Have older adults offer programs of interest to young adults either at the congregation or district levels. These might be on religious topics like ethics or theology or on more secular topics like writing skills.
- Invite young adults into leadership positions in the congregation. Actively recruit them, and then provide training and mentoring that will help them be effective. Although they are often busy, some do make time for volunteer activities. They often have special skills, like communications, finance, or publicity.
- Use contemporary music in the worship service, at least occasionally.
- Suggest to young adults in your congregation that when other young adults come to Sunday morning worship they invite the newcomers to join them for brunch afterward.
- Encourage your minister and lay leaders to meet with the young adult group in your congregation or district. Be clear that the ministry of the congregation is to young people as well as to older ones.
- Offer worship at other times as well as on Sunday morning. Young adults usually prefer a more informal and participative service, perhaps on a weekday evening.

Don’t assume that all new members are new to Unitarian Universalism. Sheri M. Prud’homme says, “Simply put, if our congregation’s worship life, educational programs, and spiritual practices cater to the New Unitarian Universalist, those who grew up Unitarian Universalist or those who have been members for over seven years will tend to look elsewhere for religious community.”⁶

Our purpose here is not to present a description of a fully developed program but to indicate that action by congregations is needed if we want to have young adults affiliate.

Membership barriers for young adults (YA) are different from those of youth. Age requirements are not the problem. Their main problem is the lack

Young adults' main problem is the lack of attention by the congregation to their needs and styles.

of attention by the congregation to their needs and styles. Financial requirements can be a significant barrier. Donna DiSciullo, Young Adult/Campus Ministries director for the UUA says,

With YAs being eighteen to thirty-five, you have a wide range of financial conditions. The younger group (eighteen to twenty-five) being the most transitory, financially strapped, low income. Others, especially the older YAs, don't want to be treated differently. At one GA, C*UUYAN⁷ even sold buttons saying, "I'm a YA and I pledge." I do think there needs to be more work done on the part of congregations on getting YAs involved in the life of the congregation beyond the traditional child care and furniture moving—like invitations to sit on committees and boards—and leadership training to enhance those skills.

Here is one young adult's perspective on membership:

I've never been able to put my finger on exactly what being a member (as opposed to a "friend") really means. OK, it means that one has voting privileges. It means a pledge is expected (as opposed to desirable). Of course one has certain privileges of use of church resources (fees for weddings are often reduced, for example). . . . Ultimately the obligation of being a member is to be a part of the collective whole. The privileges and any other obligations then are whatever the collective whole decides to award itself.

Here is another:

I don't really feel that the "meaning" is different for me because I am a young adult. Key obligation: Contribute time and finances. Key privileges: Voting on issues. Officially part of the community.

Of course, not all young adults are without funds. Recently, a young member of one of our congregations received several million dollars when the company he worked for went public. If we stop focusing on the cost of membership in payments to the UUA and district, we may be able to pay more attention to the relationship of potential members.

The UUA has been expending a great effort toward becoming an anti-racist institution. Many of our young adults have a broader experience with people of color than our adults. This will be even more marked in the future as the multi-racial children in our congregations mature. Here is one illustrative statement:

One of the most important ideas I learned from communities of color is that ethnicity *matters*. UUs have a keen awareness of each individual's profound spiritual need to be unique, to express and be acknowledged for who you

are. What UUs are less often able to perceive is that this spiritual need for uniqueness, to be who I am, extends into the collective or ethnic dimension.

I also learned that ethnicity is an especially strong part of young adult spiritual experience. Taking up the mantle of adulthood is taking up the legacy of the ancestors. Finding your calling as an adult is finding the way in which you will serve your people. If a young adult is not given an opportunity to reflect on this in a spiritual context, important developmental needs will not be met, and connections that could ground a person over a lifetime will not be made. The urgent young adult need to be a warrior, to serve, to lead, to make an impact on the world, risks being wasted in shallowness, misdirection, or despair.⁸

Campus Ministry

Campus ministry is different from young adult ministry. It takes place on college campuses but maintains a connection to a local congregation. Campus ministries have increased greatly over the past five years, due in large measure to the creation of a Young Adult/Campus Ministry staff at the UUA.

Campus ministries provide an *affiliation* for young adults, even if they are not members of a congregation. This affiliation maintains the contact that leads to future membership when the person moves to a new congregational community.

Why should congregations be interested in campus ministry? It is an outreach to young people that supports them in a transitional period in their lives and keeps them connected to Unitarian Universalism. It is both a service and an investment in the future, helping those served by providing a religious community and maintaining relationships with those who will become members of UU congregations later in life. In the past, some congregations marked the graduation from high school with a ceremony that essentially said “goodbye.” More recently there has been a shift to a “bridging ceremony,” which honors the change but emphasizes and encourages the continuing connection with Unitarian Universalism.

The connection can be maintained in many ways. You might see whether your congregation

- keeps young adults on the newsletter mailing list so they will know what is happening in their home congregation
- hosts a holiday gathering of young adults
- sends gift subscriptions to the *UU World* magazine or a college subscription to *Quest*, a publication of the Church of the Larger Fellowship
- sends HUUG’s Baskets (see the YA/CM Information Packet) to new college students in their area

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- offers rides to the congregation
- has a Host Homes program (connecting a UU student with a UU home)
- sponsors a campus ministry outreach program in your congregation

The bibliography lists many recently developed resources for both congregations and campus groups. They can easily be used if the congregation sees ministry to young adults on campus as an integral part of its outreach program.⁹

The Role of the Congregation

Congregations have a central role in keeping our youth and young adults connected with Unitarian Universalism.

Congregations have a central role in keeping our youth and young adults connected with Unitarian Universalism. Sheri Prud'homme says, "There are at least three reasons we can't give up on the congregations. (1) Congregations carry our movement through time. They have proven to be flexible and enduring. (2) They are the embodiment of our values, providing the very real container in which we live out what we believe. (3) They provide critical mass through which we can act collectively."

The issue, then, is whether our congregations can see how important young people are to their future and whether the congregations can then adapt to the needs and interests of youth and young adults. We urge you to consider ways in which you can support young people in their relationships with your congregation and how you can encourage them to develop within our faith.

Notes

1. Meg Muckenhoupt, "How to Kill a Religion," *Ferment: A Publication of the UU Young Adult/Campus Ministry Office* (Issue 13, January 2000): 6.
2. Sheri M. Prud'homme, Keynote address at ConCentric 2000 (Denton, MD, August 2000).
3. See Appendix B, "Legal Opinion on Youth Membership."
4. The "Members of Member Societies" section of the UUA bylaws states, "For the purposes of these Bylaws, a member of a member society is any individual who pursuant to its procedures has full or partial voting rights at business meetings of the society and who is certified as such by an authorized officer of the society" (Bylaws, Section C-3.11).
5. Sharon Hwang Colligan, "Children of the Same Tribe" (paper presented at UUA General Assembly, Nashville, TN, June 2000), 17. Visit www.circle-maker.org/cdt.html to order copies.
6. Prud'homme, op. cit.

7. C*UUYAN Continental UU Young Adult Network. The community of young adults that encourages the formation, growth, and networking of UU young adult groups and provides leadership training and experience for young adults. C*UUYAN is a sponsored program of the UUA—hence its YA/CM program arm.
8. Colligan, op. cit.
9. All referenced resources can be reviewed and ordered on the UUA website at www.uua.org/ya-cm.
10. Prud'homme, op. cit.

