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# Calling and providing for youth ministry staff

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It's safe to assume that all congregations want their ministry with young people and their families to be effective and to grow.

Eventually, many congregations decide to invest time, energy, money and other resources in a staff person to give direction to their youth ministry. Some churches call an ordained youth pastor. Others call a youth director, youth minister or director of youth (and sometimes family) ministries.

Whatever the position title, many new staff people are doomed before they begin. Congregations decide that they need "someone to do the job," so they rush out and hire a young, energetic, dynamic person. Often, that person burns out in a few years, sometimes even a few months. Nothing can hurt the long-term effectiveness of a congregation's youth ministry like the revolving door syndrome of youth staff coming and going. Ministry with young people centers on trusting relationships, and congregations with a history of rapid turnover have a difficult time establishing effective youth ministry.

A congregation needs to address five basic steps before calling a person to begin his or her ministry.

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## **Step 1: Create A Team**

One of the church's most important ministries is making the Christian faith real and relevant in the lives of young people. Youth ministry staffing should be considered with a great deal of prayer, thought and planning. One of the most important steps a congregation can take is to first create a team.

The team should be no smaller than eight and no larger than 12 people. It should be comprised of a combination of young people with whom the individual will work--adult volunteers, parents, congregational council members, and at least one pastor or staff person who will serve in a supervisory role. These people are charged with examining the issues, writing a job description, and serving as a Call Committee. A broad-based team working together to discern God's hopes for your congregation can help ensure a good match.

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## **Step 2: Create A Vision**

### **...for the congregation**

This is one of the most important tasks, yet is the most frequently overlooked. Together the team should spend time discussing the congregation's vision for youth ministry:

- What do you wish your ministry with young people and their families to look like in one year, five years and even ten years?
- What do you hope for young people to know and to experience after being involved in your youth ministry?

A major part of your team's work should focus on those questions. If a vital part of your vision is outreach into the community, you will look for a very different person than if your vision focuses only on the nurturance of the young people within your congregation. Creating a vision statement is a strong way to communicate your congregation's commitment to quality ministry and to your goals. It will help as you advertise your position, and will serve as a filter through which your examination of candidates can occur. It also provides a way for potential candidates to evaluate their sense of call to your congregation.

### **...for the position**

As you develop a vision for your congregation, you will be developing a vision for the individual that you will be calling to serve. Your congregation's budget will become an important factor as well. As your vision grows, the answers to the following questions will become clear.

- Should we call a lay or ordained person? Generally, ordained candidates bring a greater level of education to the position. They also tend to cost more. Every person, ordained or lay, needs to be evaluated based on his or her skills, gifts, experience and training.

- Should we hire full-time or part-time? Although largely a financial decision, there are distinct differences in who you will interview based on this decision. Part-time staff are less likely to be trained to lead a youth ministry and might need more support from inside and outside the congregation. Part-time staff are also less likely to stay long-term. However, part-time staffing can be a good way for a congregation to work into a full-time person.
- Should we make use of a student or an intern? This is a cost-effective way of finding someone who is exploring youth and family ministry as a career. The downside is the revolving door syndrome that can hurt in the long run. Students and interns can be effective, but they need a strong committee or other source of support to carry the program from intern to intern or student to student.
- Should we cluster with another congregation? Especially in rural areas, many congregations are choosing to pool resources to share a staff person. These people generally are called to serve a community or school district. This can be a wonderful method of serving young people and their families in a cost-effective way. Still, there are issues; occasionally, individual congregations feel as though their own needs are being short-changed, and the youth staff person can feel pulled in different directions. Good communication and planning is crucial.
- Should we focus on youth or youth and family? "Youth and family ministry" has become a buzzword this decade, but it is still being defined. We know that we should expand our vision to include families--the primary faith center--but we're not sure how to do this yet. If you choose to have your staff person focus on families, you will need to look for a different person than if you choose to focus strictly on youth. A youth and family person needs training in family dynamics and systems, and needs to be skilled especially in working with adults.
- Are we hiring a "Lone Ranger" or a team player? Historically, the church has hired Lone Rangers to work with youth--those able to draw young people by the power of their personalities. The problem is that when they leave, the program frequently falls apart. It is much more important to call a team player who can work to unleash effective ministry in the congregation. Youth ministry professionals are moving away from the role of player to the role of coach, equipping congregations to take ownership of their ministry. A team player is a very different candidate than a Lone Ranger.

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### **Step 3: Create a Job Description**

A key issue in calling a staff person is the job description. This should be a specific document that outlines the expectations, responsibilities and accountabilities of the individual. It should begin with the purpose of the position, such as: "The director of Youth and Family Ministries works to encourage, inspire and nurture young people and their families in the Christian faith." The job description should also clearly identify which staff member supervises and supports the individual (most often this is a senior or associate pastor).

Specific responsibilities in this description should flow from your visioning process. If you choose to focus on outreach, how many contacts would you expect the person to make in the course of a week? For which programs will she be responsible? How will he

relate to other programs (such as Sunday school or confirmation)? What are the expectations in terms of the number of over-night events, or long-term summer trips?

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## **Step 4: Put Together a Package**

Because youth ministry staff people have been historically young and inexperienced, the perception is that they can be picked up inexpensively. As much as possible, the salary package you offer should reflect the vision your team has already created. If your vision calls for a more experienced or educated person, you should expect to pay more.

Currently there are many more good congregations looking for candidates than there are available candidates. This has implications for the salaries and benefits you offer.

Creating a salary and benefit package is about stewardship. It is about a congregation caring for its staff members. A youth ministry staff person should be fairly compensated for ministry.

Before you put together a package, take a look at the salary guidelines published annually by your synod office. If you're calling a lay person, compare those guidelines to what school teachers in your local school district with similar experience and education are paid. Consult with neighboring congregations that are similar in size.

Be sure to consider your community's cost of living. And don't forget about benefits such as health and life insurance, a pension plan, vacation, continuing education and books, and mileage reimbursement. A congregation should be prepared to spend \$23,000-\$45,000 for a full-time package.

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## **Step 5: Call a Person**

Finally, you are ready to begin your search. Advertise the position in a variety of places.

The difficult part is evaluating candidates. You might have the pastor or staff person who will supervise the person do an initial screening and narrow the field to three or four candidates to present to the committee or team. These questions can help in this screening interview:

- Does the person understand our vision? It is vitally important that she be able to work within your congregation's goals. She may be creative and gifted in a particular area, but that is an asset only if it fits with your vision and goals.

- Can the person articulate the Christian faith? Ask him about his faith experiences and influences. If he can't articulate his faith to you, he certainly can't explain it to young people.
- Will the person work well in your congregational climate? Will she fit in with the rest of the staff? Will she appreciate and support your style of leadership, or your congregation's style of worship?
- Does the candidate like young people? It may be too obvious, but a person must enjoy being with youth and families on their own turf.
- Can the supervisor work well with the candidate? The youth ministry professional/supervisor relationship is the most important one that you will forge.
- Is the candidate passionate about working with young people? Passion is something that cannot be taught. Programming, relationship building and event planning are teachable skills.

Finally, take your top candidates to your team. After composing interview questions, ask each candidate the same questions so the comparison is equitable. After each interview, pause for reflection. When you've reached consensus, a final step might be an interview with a senior pastor (if you're in a multi-staff setting) or the church council. Check the candidate's references. The best way to determine what she will do in your congregation is to know what she's done in the past.

Hopefully, hiring a youth (and family) ministry staff person is the beginning of a long and lasting relationship. But remember, your task as a congregation is not over when the call is extended. To help provide longevity in the position, you must continue to pray for, support and nurture your staff person. Give him regular evaluations, and provide for his continuing education. Encourage her to think of new and creative ideas for communicating the faith and continually challenge her to grow in her skills. Help him link to other youth ministry professionals in your community for networking and support.

## Help in Hiring

### Where to place advertisements for your position:

- The [ELCA Youth Ministry Network](#) Web site
- Local [synod or region](#) newsletters
- [The Lutheran Magazine](#)
- The [ELCA Employment Opportunities](#) listing
- Campus ministry bulletin boards and newsletters
- Outdoor ministry newsletters

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