

## **7 signs of a Pro-youth Church**

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### **The 7 Signs of a Pro-Youth Church**

We investigated six of the most youth-friendly churches in North America to discover their secrets to powerful ministry among young people

- "The key to a youth-friendly church is getting kids involved."
- "Just like our checkbooks say a lot about what's important to us, the church's budget says a lot about what's important to the congregation."
- "We're so focused on our mission that it's penetrated and captured the rest of the church."
- "My congregation is more concerned about me making connections with kids than spending time in my office."

by Rick Lawrence

A few months ago we asked denominational leaders to single out the most youth-friendly churches in North America. We gathered their nominations and narrowed our focus to six churches. Then we did extensive interviews\* with each church to discover their recipes for effective ministry with kids. We were looking for common threads—characteristics that surfaced in every church. And we found seven qualities that stood out, over and over...

### **#1—Teenagers have significant responsibilities in the church.**

If we had to pick one characteristic that defines youth-friendly churches, this would be it. The six churches we studied repeatedly pointed to the host of ways they offer kids opportunities for important service.

For example, Melinda Rutherford at Victoria Community Church in Rancho Cucamonga, California, says, "We don't underestimate our youth. We realize that even though they're young, they're willing to take on a lot of responsibility. So many of them will talk about the ministry so openly—in their schools and community, not just here at church."

Rutherford says last year the church's teenagers staffed a huge summer Fun Fest (similar to vacation Bible school). During the four-week program that included a week of leader training, 43 teenagers served almost 1,000 children in the community.

Throughout the year, VCC teenagers serve as leaders in the children's church program, the nursery, and the music program—almost every area of church ministry. Rutherford says, "I think sometimes we're afraid to give kids responsibility. But when you give it to them, they just take it and run with it. We have kids whose families don't even go to church here, but they come with a friend to youth group. Next thing you know they're serving on a ministry team."

At Free Methodist Church in McPherson, Kansas, youth pastor Al Mellinger says he works hard to make sure his church sees young people in ministry roles. Last year he took three teams of teenagers to Hungary, Greece, and Peru for missions work. Kids also do ministry locally through the Salvation Army and the town's homeless shelter. At church teenagers teach Sunday school and serve on the worship team and choir. The church even hires kids to do

occasional office work

"At first," Mellinger says, "kids were a little skeptical of a church that let them minister and teach. But now it's the norm—it's almost expected that there are kids leading. And I've noticed that teenagers' attendance is much higher if teenagers are leading—kids want to hear about other kids' lives and how Christianity impacts them."

At Cathedral in the Pines in Beaumont, Texas, youth pastor Monty Kelley's group specializes in kid-to-kid ministry. Last Thanksgiving his group members led a Celebrate Families event in the community. At kid-friendly hangouts around town, they handed out information on building better families. "The key to a youth-friendly church is getting kids involved," says Kelley. "I can't throw a big enough party or do enough programs to make them interested. But doing outreach, getting involved, lights a fire in them—it keeps them involved."

## **#2—The church supports its youth ministry with finances and staff positions.**

Youth-friendly churches they make youth ministry a priority where it really matters—in the budget.

Ten years ago, when Calvary Evangelical Free Church in Stoughton, Wisconsin, had 180 members, the congregation hired John Kalil as its full-time youth pastor. It was a tangible expression of the church's commitment to its young people. Now, a decade later, the church is building a new facility specifically designed for its youth ministry. John says, "Just like our checkbooks say a lot about what's important to us, the church's budget says a lot about what's important to the congregation. It costs a lot to run a creative student ministry, and the church is definitely financially committed to doing that."

Jim Burgen says his church makes sure the youth ministry has the money and staffers it needs to succeed. "We've never been told no," he says. "As long as it in some way meets the needs of the people, the church is behind it. They ask, 'What do you need?' It's like doing youth ministry at Disney World."

And Rick Janzen of Dalmeny Bible Church in Dalmeny, Saskatchewan, says his church "supports youth across-the-board, especially financially."

## **#3—Kids are integrated into the life of the whole church, not just the youth group.**

Kalil says, "Our students are allowed to help shape the church—they're never told they can't participate in a ministry area or project. They're welcomed into church life, and the church enjoys having them involved."

## **#4—The church has a vision statement for youth ministry and communicates it often and well.**

All six youth-friendly churches we studied had a formal vision statement for youth ministry. A few examples:

•Cathedral in the Pines—Youth leaders crafted an acronym—WIFE—as their mission statement. It stands for Worship, Instruction, Fellowship, and Expression to the World. Youth pastor Monty Kelley says, "We base ourselves on the early churches in Acts. These churches worked because they followed this prescription. We're focused on going into the community, not staying within ourselves."

### **#5—The church's young people enjoy long-term, home-grown youth ministry leadership.**

We discovered that almost all our six youth-friendly churches had long-term youth leaders with adult helpers who grew up in the church's youth ministry.

Al Mellinger says half of his staffers are former students who are reproducing what they learned through his ministry. "When people ask me, 'How does your ministry work so well?' I say, 'You have to do it for the long haul—it's not something that will happen in a year or two.' When you impart your vision to two or three, and they impart it to two or three, you grow your staff. When I move on, we'll hire someone who's been part of the program to take my place in leadership. We've probably trained 25 to 30 people through our program to do ministry." Rick Janzen says, "Sponsors are an essential part of our ministry. I can't do it all. And our sponsors are eager to minister—they grew up in the church and want to keep the youth ministry going."

### **#6—The church has an outreach mentality and a youth-welcoming reputation.**

Community outreach is a ministry passion for all six churches in our study. Monty Kelley says, "All departments in our church are outreach-oriented. We did a Thanksgiving service with other religions in the area—we invited a Buddhist priest, a Hindu leader, and a Muslim leader. If we send missionaries overseas, why can't we do it here? We have to be friends with people so we can understand where they're coming from."

Kelley also takes the unusual step of encouraging kids to check out other church youth programs. "We're just one segment of the family of God," he says. "It's important that teenagers don't feel pressured to come back here. But we make it known they're welcome. It just blows them away."

John Kalil spends much of his time building relationships with kids away from the church. He coaches, talks with kids after school, and speaks at school assemblies and club meetings. "My congregation is more concerned about me making connections with kids than spending time in my office," he says.

Jim Burgen's group members lead outreach clubs on high school campuses, do volunteer work in Louisville's inner city, and work projects for senior citizens. The goal, he says, is "to be radically committed to God and to love one another unconditionally. I don't care why new kids come to our group, but let's make sure they never leave. We've got to keep our arms open wide."

Rick Janzen's group is split 50/50 between churched and unchurched young people. He emphasizes to kids that outreach is an everyday occupation. So his young people are always inviting unchurched peers to the group. Since the church is close to a school, many kids grab a friend and show up at Janzen's after-school drop-in program. "Some youth are overwhelmed," he says. "They can't believe it when they see that the church supports them. They can't

believe people really care this much."

**#7—Church leaders plan the main worship service with all ages in mind.**

The main worship service sets the tone for most churches. And that's why all six of our churches make sure their worship time is kid-friendly. John Kalil says, "We're the only church in the area that has a Saturday evening contemporary service with a worship band, drama team, and cutting-edge music. Our students take an active part in leading this worship service."

Jim Burgen says his church's decision to plan a separate youth service backfired. Though kids took ownership of the service, church leaders soon soured on the idea. Burgen says, "They decided it wasn't healthy in the long term—eventually there would be no niche in the church for kids after they graduated from high school. Now we encourage youth to bring adults to worship and vice versa. God wants to teach us something together rather than separately."

So how do you know if your church has a youth-friendly reputation in your community? Evaluate yourself using these seven characteristics—on a continuum from strong to weak, where do you fall? Then ask your kids about their peers' perception of your church. Expect to hear things you never noticed. And use what you hear to shore up your weak spots and celebrate your impact.