

Toward a True Lifespan Ministry

By Peter Bowden

In our Unitarian Universalist congregations, we retain only 10% of the children we raise as UU's. Why do we lose 90% of our born UU's? I believe it is because they are not integrated into our community early enough and that ministry to children and youth is perceived as being significantly different from our adult offerings. Though our culture is starting to change, historically we have maintained a system that is designed to encourage them to leave.

Ministry with children has a tradition of strong small groups (classes) and worship (chapel). After coming of age, ministry for our youth has focused on a single strong group (the youth group) lead by adult advisors, with little worship outside of the group and minimal connection to the larger church. Our adult ministry has been centered on Sunday worship.

In the context of small group ministry the problem of retaining born UU's makes sense. We start children off with strong small groups and dynamic participatory worship, move them to a nearly 100% small group experience, and then ask them to move to attending adult church services. For the majority of born UU's, pew-based church isn't going to cut it. Once you give them intimate and meaningful small groups you can never take that away. If you do, you lose them. It doesn't matter how old they are. As an adult who has participated in a small group ministry would you attend a church without a small group ministry?

Where does this leave us today? To retain them we have to create small groups for adults of all ages – youth, young adults, and adults. In doing so we can create continuity in the ministry we offer and move youth into our adult community efficiently, preferably before they have the chance to graduate from high school.

It is my opinion that we need to focus our attention and resources on cultivating an explicit culture of small group ministry in our congregations for people of all ages. Just as we talk about integrating small group ministry into the life of the church (the adult church), so too must we integrate it into our children and youth ministries. This involves using similar meeting formats and language with people of all ages and starting formal small group ministry at an earlier age.

Small Groups: Instead of talking about classes, talk about small groups. This alone will create a connection with “small group” ministry and further serve to distinguish church groups from school classes.

Common Format: Right now a huge percentage of all groups in our congregations have adopted a basic format for their gatherings. This includes an opening ritual, check-in, core topic or activity, likes/wishes (a group process check) and closing ritual. Regardless of what core content is covered, this basic format can be used with children of all ages.

Empowerment with a goal: When our children “come of age” we start to shift from teaching to empowering and advising. In many congregations the meaning of empowerment is not clear. Leadership development is very clear in the small group ministry model. We empower individuals to lead small groups of 8-10 people, ask them to mentor less experienced group members helping them step into leadership roles, and expect new leaders to share our faith with others by leading new groups. Can we do this with youth? Absolutely! Go ahead and ask them...

In our youth small group ministries we can share a lifespan vision of small groups, give all youth experience both participating in and leading small groups, show them how to mentor their peers as leaders and equip all outgoing youth with the resources they need to start small groups wherever they go.

Closing the Gap: The best place to create leaders for our young adult and campus groups is in our youth small group ministries. When our youth leave youth group as seasoned small group leaders they will start ministries wherever they go. We need to equip them to do this important work.

Adult Ministry: An important step in creating a continuous lifespan shared ministry model is to see that our youth and young adult ministries are adult ministries. Instead of being the end of our children's ministry, these should be intentional starts to participation in adult ministry.

When we use an intentional small group ministry model for the basis of our youth programs, youth leaders and advisors can be integrated into the support structure of the adult small group ministry system, meeting monthly with the minister or lay coaches. Youth and advisors need to be connected to the adult ministry of the church if this ministry is to be successful.

Age Affinity Groups: There is no question that many youth and young adults desire to be in groups with their peers. When we support these age affinity groups but include them in a larger adult small group ministry system, youth will no longer be looking to get away from children. Instead, they will feel valued and respected as participants and leaders within the adult community. They will know they belong with us.

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If you are working with small group ministry and age based affinity groups Peter would love to hear from you. Contact him at (401) 855-0037 or peter@smallgroupministry.net.

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