



The art of invitation

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Invite \in-vīt\:

- to request the presence or participation of*
 - to request formally*
 - to urge politely: WELCOME*
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The wonderful thing about being invited

Imagine the curious expressions on the faces of Peter, Andrew, James and John when Jesus invites them to follow ([Matthew 4:18-22](#)). Jesus seems to offer no details, promises or position descriptions as to what will happen or how life will change for the prospective disciples. One can only imagine that something about Jesus' act of invitation is sincere, compelling and heartfelt, and is met with a hunger or curiosity of how life might be different if the invitation is accepted. At Jesus' invitation, Peter, Andrew, James and John put down their nets and follow—and so their wonderful and difficult journeys of faith, service, and witness begin. With only their curiosity and a sense of probability or possibility, the disciples become part of something taking shape that will leave their lives and ours forever changed. See what happens when people are invited to share in faith, community, and ministry!

In a time when so many things, organizations, and people are competing for the attention and participation of youth, the fine art of invitation as part of ministry is more important than ever. It seems so simple and obvious, yet is often neglected as a means of including

and affirming young people—even if they never show up. Browse your Old and New Testament and read the stories of witnessing, ministry, outreach, preaching, or prophecy. God's Word and promises are spread widely without the prerequisite or guarantee that the recipients will be responsive, jump for joy, repent, follow, or even believe. Proclamation and invitation are done with trust in the power and workings of God's Spirit—and lots of hope.

Cut the strings

Think of an invitation as an act of grace. Avoid attaching requirements or expectations to it. Offer it because you care for and value the person; you want them to share in the blessings of God's Word and presence, and would celebrate their involvement. An invitation with lots of requirements and strings attached can have an opposite, unwelcoming effect (e.g., you're welcome only if you attend a percentage of youth meetings during the year, make a long-term commitment, fulfill a quota for attending worship or Sunday School, or join the congregation). It may even unintentionally communicate a message that God only wants or loves us if we can successfully do x, y or z first.

At the same time, there are circumstances under which specific expectations are appropriate and for everyone's benefit (e.g., full participation in a retreat, help with fundraising, attending preparation or orientation meetings before an event, signing or agreeing to a community covenant, parent or guardian permission to participate in an activity, etc.). Look for underlying causes or circumstances if necessary expectations or requirements pose problems or hesitation in someone. Finding a creative solution or alternative before saying "no" to someone can be a welcome expression of grace and caring while maintaining the value or necessity of certain expectations or guidelines. For example, the solution for a young person who can't make all the fundraisers for a youth gathering may be to let a parent, related adult, or sibling stand in for them and work in their place. Search for creative solutions that underscore your desire for everyone to be involved in the church's mission and ministry.

Don't mistake invitation for:

- **Permission giving** ("You have my permission to participate... I am the gatekeeper.")
- **A sign of acceptance** ("Because I notice and like you, I'll invite you.")
- **Rights of passage** ("You are welcome now that you are the right age and have passed the entrance requirements.")

Suggestions for sharpening your artistic skills of invitation

Invite, invite, invite...

...and invite. Don't stop inviting someone just because they've never responded or

because they are sporadic in their participation. On the other hand, don't be a nag or bearer of guilt. Keep young people in the loop of communication through:

- A smile and a few inviting words ("Hey, there's a Bible study this Thursday night. I think you'd enjoy it. Come on by if you can.")
- Learning and remembering names and personal details. Greet people by name—it means a lot to be remembered.
- A telephone call every now and then.
- Newsletters
- Bulletin boards that are very visual, informative, and updated frequently.
- E-mail (but don't let technology replace personal contact and a real voice)
- Introducing young people to other young people.
- Encouraging young people to invite others to participate.
- A note, postcard, or birthday card (Say "hi" and let them know that they are in your prayers and thoughts. Invite them to something.)
- A personal check-in ("I haven't seen you in awhile. I hear you're working at Blue Castle Hamburgers now. How's it going with work and school?")
- Sharing leadership and responsibilities ("Could you help a couple of us do some planning for next Sunday's worship?" "I'd really value your suggestions and help with the youth ministry Web page.")
- ...more smiles and more inviting words.

Be observant

Notice the presence and "comings and goings" of youth in the congregation and community. Pay attention to what's going on in their lives and let them know that you are sincerely interested—without being invasive or nosy—in family problems or changes, group dynamics, school or community awards, impending graduations, work, talents, moves, illnesses or injuries, personal struggles, etc.

Keep numbers in perspective

Think through and talk about your mission, goals, hopes and how you will measure your effectiveness. If you measure strictly by the number of youth attending any given activity, important relationships and ministry may be overlooked. Think about it, recruiting twelve disciples doesn't sound like such a smashing success but the preaching, healing, caring, and service that happened through them over time do ([Luke 9:1-6](#)). God is present and active whether it's two people or a thousand—that's a promise. ([Matthew 28:16-20](#), [Matthew 18:20](#) and [Isaiah 55:10-11](#))

Stay in touch with families and parents

Keep parents and families in the loop of what's happening and your ministry goals even if they are not active in the congregation. Don't hesitate to call them and ask for assistance or help with tasks that are either easy to accomplish (e.g., driving, bringing snacks, or sharing their ideas) or that you are willing to train and prepare them for (e.g., being a mentor, volunteering as a retreat counselor, serving on a committee, or leading a devotion). However you plug them in, be sensitive to their role and presence in a group that may include one of their own children. And in the same way, be sensitive to the young person's feelings about having a parent involved as a potential leader or volunteer. If the parent of young person expresses awkwardness or reservation, look for ways of being involved that are more "behind the scenes" (e.g., phoning, praying, working on newsletters, retreat logistics, etc.).

One thing to keep in mind when recruiting adult help and leadership: Be aware of the balance of leadership so that it isn't weighted towards adults and parents and away from youth. Whenever possible, maintain a balance favoring responsibilities and opportunities for youth involvement and leadership.

Provide a challenge

As young people get involved, look for ways to help them stay engaged, learning, challenged, and active through meaningful and deepening experiences, relationships, worship, programs, and leadership. Work with the congregation and staff to incorporate youth in all aspects of the congregation's life (worship leadership and assistance, teaching, stewardship, committees and boards, social ministry, outreach, planning, music, everyday tasks, etc.). Encourage and affirm them along the way.

Invite to a safe place

While youth ministry involves some inherent and even desirable risks and challenges to those who follow, it should also be a place and occasion of safety—especially emotionally and physically. Risk and safety are not exclusive of each other. In the example of ropes and challenge courses, there is the potential for high levels of risk and challenge while at the same time great attention paid to safety and the individual's ability to determine ultimately what level of risk and challenge they will take on. Invite youth into a ministry and environment in which they can:

- pass when they feel uncomfortable talking about something.
- not feel pressured into activities or discussions beyond their level of trust or comfort.
- find adults who have been chosen and trained for ministry, and act in the best interest of the lives they are entrusted with.
- trust that someone is thinking about their physical safety through well planned activities and attention to risk management (e.g., bad weather, vehicle safety, getting lost, sickness or injury, conflicts).
- feel recognized and respected as an individual—personal quirks and all!
- feel confident of inviting their friends or family.

Pray

Post a list of youth on your office wall or refrigerator at home and pray for them frequently. Reflect on the concerns of specific youth and your surrounding community with your first cup of coffee at the beginning of your day. If you have a large congregation, divide up the prayer list of youth among other leaders and volunteers. Pray for those who are not present when you gather. Do so in a general way so as not to call unwelcome attention to an individual, unless there is a special need or concern (e.g., illness, traveling, a death in the family, in jail, etc.).

Invite, invite, invite

Does that sound redundant? It was meant to be. Don't ever stop inviting young people to share in the blessings of God's presence, promises, mission, and community.

An invitation to something wonderful

If you haven't done so already, weave words and gestures of invitation into the fabric of your everyday conversations and interactions with youth and parents. Consider it part of ministry. Of course, the other side of the coin is that there should be something of substance and importance that you are inviting people to be part of. Reflect on your mission, goals, ministry, and faith. How will you articulate these wonderful things in a simple yet compelling way? What is it you are inviting and calling youth to be part of?

No matter how you communicate it, an invitation to follow Christ and live in God's loving presence is an invitation to something wonderful and curious. Life will be different, new, sometimes surprising, and always challenging as the Spirit works in and through us.

Resources

- ELCA [evangelism resources for youth ministry](#)
 - ELCA [evangelism resources for Latino ministry](#)
 - ELCA [culture specific ministry resources](#)
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