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# Staffing your youth ministry program

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Your youth committee has suggested programs for the next three months. You call volunteers who might help plan and run the programs and you hear the words "Sorry, no" so many times your head is spinning. The reasons begin to sound similar after a while—not enough time, too busy, other commitments. You do what any reasonable person would do, you bring a proposal to the youth committee to recommend that your congregation hire a youth director.

Wouldn't it be great to have someone to plan and organize your whole youth program? Someone else could do the detail work, line up volunteers, really work with the young people. It's the obvious answer to your problems.

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*Are you asking the right people? Nothing can be more frustrating than doing a job you don't enjoy  
or  
can't do without a sense of competence.*

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## Before you act

What seems like the obvious answer is not always the best answer. Hiring a staff person to work with youth *can* be a good decision—we'll get into that in a bit—but sometimes it isn't. For many congregations, it is a band-aid solution to a problem. It helps heal but it doesn't prevent future problems.

What does this mean? If you are a parent, or if you have ever worked as a babysitter, you know the way young children react when babysitters come. Babysitters are perfectly capable, competent people, but they aren't mom or dad. They don't know all of the little rituals that are important to bedtime. They can sometimes be a lot more fun than parents. But having a babysitter usually means that parents are doing something that the children aren't welcome to do and that translates as rejection.

This example may be a bit extreme, but it is important that your youth committee ask themselves if they are interested in hiring someone to do something that their congregation really should be doing. Effective youth ministry happens in congregations where young people are loved, respected and included in all aspects of congregational life. Caring adult members of the congregation are vital for young people to feel part of the community of believers. "Hiring out" the work of adults will not replace the need for young people to feel that they belong to and with adults in the congregation.

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*Look for someone with program skills plus the maturity and knowledge to handle working with young people in a professional way.*

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## **Making it work**

Before you recommend hiring a staff person to work with your youth ministry program, ask yourselves how you can improve your work with volunteers. Sometimes, by making a few changes in how you use volunteers, you can alleviate the need for a paid staff person. Try answering the following questions:

- ***Are we realistic in asking people to do reasonable tasks?*** Sometimes we expect too much from people. We ask them to make a long-term commitment or to do something that will take an inordinate amount of time. Look at what needs to be done. Break it into reasonable tasks. Someone might be willing to attend every youth event if they do not have to also prepare refreshments and arrange transportation. Someone else may not enjoy youth activities but might enjoy organizing refreshments.
- ***Are you asking the right people?*** Nothing can be more frustrating than doing a job you don't enjoy or can't do without a sense of competence. Ask people with good relational skills to work directly with the youth. Those who are good at details can assist with planning.
- ***How are you supporting your volunteers?*** Can you send them a subscription to a youth ministry resource magazine? How about paying their way to attend a workshop sponsored by your synod? Volunteers deserve to be treated with respect for their gifts and one of the best ways to show respect is to provide avenues for them to have further training. Also, see that they have what they need to do their job. They may need a key to get into the church building, access to a computer to assist with the youth newsletter or a limited budget to pay for expenses such as their registration for a youth event.
- ***Are you thinking creatively about volunteer recruitment?*** How about the new couple who are attending the pastors' class and will join the church in a few

months? They have expressed their interest in getting involved with the church and the pastor feels they may have gifts to offer. Or the senior citizen who loves to bake. She might feel honored to be asked to bake for youth group meetings if someone would stop by her house to pick it up on their way to the meeting. Teams of parents or other adults may rotate responsibilities for certain events or meetings. Perhaps the parents of young children would be happy to be your youth sponsors if someone would baby-sit for their young children during meetings. Many adults may not have thought about helping out and they probably won't respond to a newsletter article. If they are personally asked, especially by the youth, they may be eager to say yes.

- ***Are you thanking your volunteers?*** It is normal for us to respond well to being appreciated. Thank people, again and again and again. Thank people in person, with a note and in an article in the newsletter. Plan a special activity at the end of the year for volunteers. Let people know how special you think they are. They will probably say yes again.

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*Your program will be strongest when a team of committed youth and adults work together to provide leadership.*

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## **We still need paid staff**

If you feel you have given working with volunteers a good try and you still need a paid staff person, then it may be the best decision for you. A paid youth director will give you consistency and should assure you of having a person who relates well with young people for all of your programs. The right person can provide a needed boost to your entire congregational ministry. One of the most critical aspects of youth ministry is that it is relational, and a caring person who knows all of the young people and personally supports them in their faith journey can be a significant addition to your youth ministry efforts.

Contact your synod office. Let them know of your interest in adding a staff person. They may have a staff member or may be able to recommend someone who could help you write a job description, determine a fair salary for your area and promote the position.

It is important that you find the right person for your congregation. Involve youth in every step, from writing the job description to interviewing and making the final selection. Look for someone with program skills plus the maturity and knowledge to handle working with young people in a professional way. The person should feel comfortable with your community, other congregational staff and members of the congregation.

Once you have selected a youth director, support them. Your youth committee is more important than ever. You can work with your staff person to offer assistance, advice and counsel for their work. The role of volunteers will remain important. A youth ministry program should not revolve around the personality or skills of one person. Your program will be strongest when a team of committed youth and adults work together to provide

leadership. A good youth director will relate to and care about youth and adults in the congregation in a responsible way and will facilitate the leadership of others.

Whether or not you choose to have a youth director, the young people and adults who volunteer to serve in leadership roles are important to a strong youth ministry program. Offer regular, prayerful support for all who offer their time, talents and resources to further the gospel.

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Contributed by *Deb Yandala*.

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