

YOUTH MINISTRY DISCERNMENT PROCESS¹

The *Journey to Adulthood* program is not a Sunday School curriculum or a youth group—although it does include both of those elements. It is a way for a congregation and families to walk with young people as they move from childhood to adulthood. So, the discernment and start-up process for J2A is different from getting a committee together to pick a Church School curriculum or recruiting Youth Group leaders. The J2A discernment and start-up process is designed to reshape the way the congregation relates to young people.

Forming a Discernment Group

The first step is to discern how God is leading the congregation to live and work with youth. This discernment process may lead to using the *Journey to Adulthood* program or it may lead the congregation in another direction. We urge you to use the following process regardless—especially if you have not made a decision.

The first step is for a clergyperson and two or three laity to meet, discuss this following process, and pray for God’s guidance. This team will then ask as many people in the congregation as possible: “Who do you know who has a heart for youth?” Ask everyone—children, youth, adults, and older adults—but ask them *in person*, not by general announcement. Record the names suggested with the reasons why they suggested that person. Do not limit the list by eliminating anyone for any reason. Urge those suggesting people to simply answer the question. We are not worried about whether they “too busy,” “not likely to see themselves as a Youth Leader,” etc. The people who are invited to join the discernment group can make those decisions for themselves.

The original team reconvenes and compiles a master list. Again, do not eliminate anyone. Review your next steps and pray for God’s guidance. Invite everyone on the list to join the discernment group. Explain that the discernment group will meet for 60-90 minutes every week (or every other week) to discern how God is leading your congregation to live and work with youth. This group should plan to meet for at least six months—although some groups have taken up to a year before they move to the next stage. There is no assumption that these group members will take on any particular role in whatever is discerned as the future direction. Pray that God will call a group of about 15-20 people—even if this is a large portion of your congregation. Some groups have included almost half of the congregation. In any case, follow *God’s* leading. If only five people respond to the invitation, meet with five people.

The Discernment Process

When the group meets, the clergy (and Director of Religious Education or other staff person responsible for youth) explains the purpose and process of the discernment group. The group’s role is to pray and listen for God’s guidance as they reflect on how this congregation is called to

¹The original Youth Ministry Discernment Process (above) is expanded here based on the experience of J2A users and research by the Youth Ministry and Spirituality Project. © 2001, Linda L. Grenz, used with permission; added to the J2A program February 2001.

live and work with youth. The process ² the group follows is:

Opening Ritual—Recognizing God

- E.g., light a candle, observe two minutes of silence or sing a specific song together (the same one or two so they become a ritual that signals the start of the group’s time together).

Check-in—Recognizing Each Other

- Ask: How are you? What has happened since we last met that you want to/need to share with the group? What do you need to say in order for you to “be here” fully?

Community Check-In—Recognizing Our Communal Practice

- How are we doing as a group? Are there any issues we need to address? Is there anything we want to do differently? What did we do that we especially want to repeat? (This step was skipped by some groups.)

Practice—Attending to God

- Lectio Divina:
- Read a passage of Scripture
- Ask people to listen to it again as it is read a second time—slowly. Invite them to listen for a word or phrase that they are drawn to. Then in the silence afterwards, repeat that phrase to themselves over and over, listening to whatever God may be saying to them without necessarily following a train of thought. Simply repeat the word or phrase and see what theme, image, words, story, etc. emerge. Leave about 3 minutes of silence in the beginning. After several weeks gradually extend that to about 5 minutes of silence.
- Invite people to simply “rest” in God’s presence. If they find themselves distracted, simply note the thought and let it go. Try to just “be” rather than thinking about anything. Give people about two minutes of silence and then read the passage one last time.
- Invite people to share anything they want about their experience. After several weeks, conclude each time by asking the group if they see any themes emerging. Don’t push it—there may not be any yet. Eventually some probably will emerge. Simply note them.

Question—Attending to Our Call/Mission

- Discuss: Given what we’ve shared/heard, what is our call? In the beginning this will take more time than the next step; later the time balance is likely to shift.

Planning—Engaging Our Call

- In the beginning your planning may only be to meet again, to agree to pray daily, etc.

²This process is used by Mark Yaconelli, the Director of The Youth Ministry and Spirituality Project (YMSP) and others involved in this research project which was designed to identify “what works” in spiritual formation for youth. Yaconelli acknowledges that J2A incorporates and amplifies most of what they have learned thus far. We are pleased to have an opportunity to improve on our material by incorporating learnings from the Project. On-going work of the YMSP is funded by the Lilly Foundation.

Over time you may plan ways to communicate with others in the congregation, plan how to include this discernment process in the prayers during the Sunday service, plan to talk with others, plan to look at/visit other youth ministry programs, etc. Eventually, a direction will emerge and this time will become more focused as you decide what you will do and how to implement it. This is the group that will then decide who will do what.

Closing Prayer—Offering Ourselves/Our Efforts to God

- Develop a closing prayer ritual that is not just a quick prayer. Rather, spend at least five minutes with silence, opportunity to offer individual prayers, etc. Find a way to make this a deep and meaningful prayer time. Close with some ritual you repeat each time—saying the Lord’s Prayer, singing a hymn or chant together, etc.

Selecting Leaders

This process works because the spiritual needs of the participants are being met. In other words, this is not a committee—it is a *spiritual formation process*. As you come toward the time to decide on a program and leaders, invite group members to say what call they feel drawn to. Remind them that some are called to lead the youth group(s), others are called to be support people. In several groups, older adults have taken on the role of prayer supporters and advocates—advocating for youth in adult contexts within the congregation.

Discernment of roles is a communal process. So, not only do the members say what they feel called to do, others say what they have heard and observed about each other. This is not pressuring people to take on a specific role—rather it is a process of helping each other discern what God is calling each one to do and be. The group will want to talk about what roles are needed, what qualities and skills are needed, what the expectations are, etc. When it comes to designating the youth group leaders, have a clear idea of the basic qualities you want the youth leaders to have. In J2A the following qualities are suggested:

- There are two primary Youth Leaders for each group—one male and one female
- The Youth Leaders are, preferably, not married to each other and, as comical as this may sound, *should not be likely to fall in love with each other*—the goal is to model adult, cross-gender friendship and partnership
- Neither of the Youth Leaders is related to a member of the group
- They have a relaxed demeanor and a demanding heart
- They are not easily shocked, but easily amused
- They are faithful participants in the life and worship of the congregation
- They are willing to try new ideas and explore new relationships
- They are flexible
- They are kind
- They are emotionally stable and secure, with a healthy dose of self-esteem
- They are willing to function as role models
- Finally, be extremely clear with your prospects about the time commitment. Youth Leaders are asked to make a two-year commitment. We recommend two years on, two years off, even for the most zealous and dedicated youth worker. Along the same lines, we do *not* recommend that Youth Leaders move along (from Rite-13 to J2A, from J2A to YAC) with the young people. Parting is difficult but necessary. All of the participants will benefit from new relationships every two years.

The clergy and any staff member responsible for youth must be involved in this discussion and ensure that the people who are emerging as youth leaders are appropriate. It is possible that someone who is inappropriate will say that he/she feels called to be a leader. But, if that person has boundary issues and gets too enmeshed with youth emotionally, or over-identifies with youth (acts like he/she is one of them) or has a reputation of possible sexual misconduct, the congregational leaders are responsible for making sure that this is addressed and that this person is not one of the primary youth leaders. They can still be involved in the ministry but they need to be paired with someone with appropriate boundaries and they need to be willing to actively work on strengthening their boundaries—preferably through professional counseling.

Clergy and staff generally “know” (consciously or unconsciously) who is likely to be problematic as a youth leader. The problem is that congregational leaders are often unwilling to prevent such persons from being involved with youth—especially if they “volunteer.” The task of the professional and lay leaders of a congregation is to ensure that the congregation acts in a responsible manner. This means being sensitive to and caring about *all* people. But above all it means protecting children and youth! That often takes courage. Think ahead and figure out how to handle this. In some cases the discernment group can and will give this person direct feedback and will help him/her find an appropriate role. In other cases, the congregation’s leaders will need to set firm limits and adhere to them. The ultimate responsibility lies with the clergy and lay leaders of the congregation who must not allow a discernment process to relieve them of that responsibility.

Youth Ministry Team

Once the group has discerned what program and/or direction the life and work with youth will take in your congregation, the group shifts into being the Youth Ministry Team. It continues to meet. During the discernment process, at the transition time and in the weeks ahead, some group members will drop out and others will join. The group should occasionally talk about, pray for, and invite others to join. And, as word spreads, others will be drawn to this ministry.

The outcome of this process generally is a team of six to ten people who provide leadership in youth ministry. In addition, it develops a group of people who are advocates for and supporters of youth ministry. Because there is a support group in place, people who might otherwise feel inadequate or anxious about leading a youth group are willing to do so knowing they have a group they can talk with and people they trust who will pray for them and step in and help out when needed. Instead of the usual way of finding a couple of people willing to be talked into being the youth leaders (and then left to their own devices), this process moves a larger contingent of the congregation to being active participants in and supporters of youth ministry. This makes youth ministry leadership less isolating, gives youth more adults who care about them, and ensures a greater likelihood of a healthy, successful formation process for youth.