

# Ten Ways

## TO CULTIVATE YOUTH LEADERSHIP



God calls all Christians to lead well within their spheres of influence, and leadership development is part of the discipleship process. One important strategy for engaging and retaining youth and young adults is to awaken the leadership gifts within them and give them opportunities to practice their leadership skills. Here are 10 ways to help identify, encourage, and make space for young leaders within your congregation.

### 1 START AT AN EARLY AGE

Studies have shown that many students begin to shy away from areas of leadership after elementary school. But for girls this often happens at an even earlier age. According to a report by the Girl Scouts of America, at age 6 girls start to think they cannot be as smart as boys and men. At age 9 their confidence often peaks. In grade 6 girls begin to think they have to choose between leadership or being liked. Help younger children identify positive leadership models and behaviors and encourage them when they are demonstrating those behaviors.

### 2 GIVE YOUTH A VOICE

Respect, empathize, and listen! Develop intentional ways to give youth a voice in the congregation's decision-making processes. Be transparent about how decisions are made so that youth know where to go for support for their own initiatives. Host intergenerational "listen and learn" circles in which people from various generations can express and listen to various viewpoints on important topics, decisions, and challenges that their faith community is wrestling with. Find ways to gather input from people of all ages.

### 3 INVITE YOUTH TO PARTICIPATE FULLY IN CHURCH LIFE

Move from age-segregated tasks to intergenerational service and ministry. Help all members of the community find ways to contribute to the life and health of the community. Apply the *ladder of engagement* to the dimensions of church life. Help seasoned leaders learn how to "work themselves out of a job" while trusting that the Holy Spirit will use them in new ways in the future. Allow younger leaders to experience real and significant leadership with support but without being micromanaged.

### 4 HELP YOUTH DISCOVER THEIR LEADERSHIP GIFTS

Give youth opportunities to discover and use their *spiritual gifts*. Make use of assessment tests like StrengthsFinder, Myers-Briggs, and *DISC*. Help students lean into their calling, and find ways to equip and support them in it. Be sure to emphasize the diversity of gifts, personality types, leadership styles, expertise, and life experience on leadership teams and in leadership training. Celebrate the variety of gifts that the Holy Spirit gives and works through to support the body of Christ. Don't assume a leadership fit; give time for asking questions, discussion, and reflection. In profession of faith preparation, invite youth to consider how they will faithfully share in the life of the church.

## 5 HIGHLIGHT AND CELEBRATE YOUTH LEADERSHIP GIFTS IN WORSHIP

Cast a vision for leading worship as opposed to performing during worship, highlighting how each of us can lead from within the corporate gathering. Help students find ways to contribute to all aspects of worship, not just music. Dream: what would it look like to mentor young people in preaching, curating worship services, speaking into sermon themes, contributing to visual arts, or leading worship support teams?

## 6 CONDUCT A YOUTH LEADERSHIP ROLES INVENTORY

List ALL the possible leadership roles that youth can take on in the church. List the different types of supports and training that might be necessary for new leaders to step into these roles. Hold Leadership/Service/Ministry Discovery days, giving students an opportunity to sample different areas of service and leadership that support the overall ministry of the congregation. Encourage youth to shadow ministry leaders.

## 7 SET GOALS FOR YOUTH REPRESENTATION IN LEADERSHIP

Set a goal of having 25 percent of your leadership representation be under age 25, or 30 percent under age 30, for all of your ministry teams, including council. Encourage seasoned leaders to look beyond their immediate peer groups for new leaders who can join them. As you look for new young leaders, incorporate gender and ethnic diversity and put in place supports for this diversity. Consider appointing a Leadership Shepherd.

## 8 INTENTIONALLY GROW A MENTORING/COACHING CULTURE

Developing youth leaders will entail a culture shift for many churches. Understanding a congregation's existing leadership culture will help in identifying where change might be necessary and where there might be resistance to this change. Encourage seasoned leaders to model being coached and coaching others. Draw on these relationships to cast ministry vision and to create a learning community in your congregation. Use a variety of coaching and mentoring models (such as *reverse mentoring*, peer mentoring, and discipleship triads) to recognize a variety of relational and learning needs.

## 9 PROVIDE LEADERSHIP TRAINING

Ensure that training links to church values, theology, and culture and that it permeates all departments. Leverage experiential learning—the hallmark of leadership development—and regularly gather young leaders together to help them grow deeper in their leadership capacity. Emphasize holistic leadership growth, which could include discussions about character, competence, godly confidence, humility, authority, power, stewardship, and so on.

## 10 REMEMBER THAT THIS IS A LONG-TERM PROJECT

Cultivating a youth leadership culture is not simply creating a new program. Taking small, intentional steps or experiments while examining their impact and efficacy will help to produce lasting change for the future. As your church culture changes, share stories of where youth leadership is taking hold.

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