

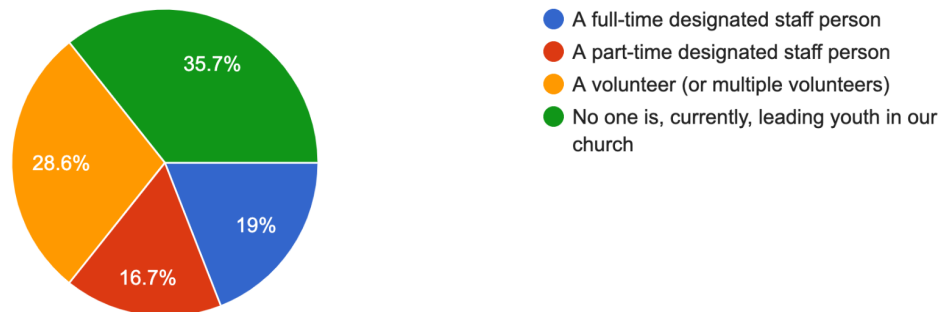
## YOUTH ENGAGEMENT PROJECT: RETAINING YOUTH IN CONGREGATIONAL LIFE

### FINDINGS FROM INTERVIEWS WITH YOUTH MINISTRY LEADERS AND SUMMARY OF SURVEY RESPONSES

The researchers interviewed twelve persons from the Presbytery of St. Augustine and from several other areas in Florida and around the country. The persons interviewed are currently or formerly employed in full-time and part-time positions in churches and are actively engaged in youth ministry. Their experience in this role ranges from five to thirty-five years, so these are individuals who have a strong sense of vocation to work with youth. The pie graph below is representative of the Presbytery of St. Augustine only and shows who is doing youth ministry in this particular presbytery.

Youth ministry leadership at your church is (select one)

42 responses



Nearly all of the interviewees track youth participation informally. That is, they keep a mental record of who attends and who is absent. They can go through their rolls and describe the participation level of their church's youth membership, and they are able to keep track of those youth participants who are not members of the church. With few exceptions, they do not keep a formal attendance record for their church activities.

When asked to report their retention rate for senior high students therefore, they can supply what they feel are reliable estimates but not hard data. Their estimates range from 25% to 80%, with the mean being 61% and the medium 65%.

When asked to identify the primary obstacle to church participation, youth ministers agree: kids are flooded with busyness, activities, pressures to achieve, part-time jobs, sports and other commitments. For many, the focus is on amassing a portfolio of accomplishments that increases

their chances of acceptance at the university they or their parents covet. Compared to these activities, attending the church youth group is relatively low on the list. A related factor that works against youth participation in church is that in many cases the parents themselves are not strong participants in the church. Finally, in most cases, there are often not enough volunteers who can show up consistently over time.

- Busyness
- Parents that are not involved
- Lack of consistent volunteers

This leads to a consideration of what works. This will not come as a surprise to anyone - every youth worker we contacted said the key to youth retention in church is consistent, caring relationships. They mentioned the importance of stability of youth ministry staff and volunteers over multiple years. For some, their intentional design for ministry is to have 4-5 adults personally connected to each young person in the church. Additionally, it is evident from interviews, and backed by Barna's research, that a sense of belonging in the church is key to keeping young people in church

(<https://www.barna.com/research/relationships-build-resilient-faith/>).

Further, many agreed that parental influence is very important in the retention of young people in church. If it is a priority for the parents for the family to participate in the worshipping community, then it is often true that youth and young adults are more likely to stay involved.

Beyond consistency, youth workers emphasized the need for a flexible, welcoming approach with multiple opportunities for engagement. For example, several youth ministers find that offering program elements on days other than Sunday is vital. In planning these programs, it strengthens participation to have input from and leadership by the youth so that they have an investment in the program. Relationships between youth workers and youth are strengthened outside of church programming through text conversations and showing up to youth activities like a basketball game or a performance.

Two additional factors that were mentioned seem contradictory on the surface but may in fact be complimentary. The value of exciting, fun trips and events was a common ingredient in successful programming. But youth will not stay involved over time unless there is more than fun being offered. Something of spiritual substance is what sets the church youth program apart from the many other social groups and activities kids have in their lives.

Kara Powell, Brad Griffin and Tyler Greenway's (of Fuller Youth Institute) research shows that in order to create a space hospitable to youth, church communities must invite, encourage and emphasize what they call the "3 Big Questions"

(<https://www.aymeducators.org/wp-content/uploads/Kara-Powell-Brad-Griffin-Tyler-Greenway-Identity-Belonging-and-Purpose-New-Research-on-3-Big-Questions-that-Can-Change-Every-Teen-ager.pdf>). These three questions being:

1. Who am I?

2. What is my purpose?
3. Where do I belong?

Of course the church's answers to these questions are "Christ and his church" but it is not enough to answer these questions for young people; rather young people need to be encouraged to ask these questions with the support of their community, and to be equipped by the church to seek the answers to these questions.

Our interviews with youth ministry professionals and volunteers are consistent with the findings out of Barna and Fuller Youth Institute.

In Summary...

Challenges:

- Busyness
- Parents that are not involved
- Lack of consistent volunteers

Keys to success:

- Relationships
- Stability in staff
- 5 loving adults who know each kid
- Parents as primary disciplers
- Multiple paths for engagement, not just youth group
- fun community building activity coupled with in depth and meaningful engagement

It would be our recommendation that congregations look for opportunities to both build on existing strengths that already exist, and address at least one challenge that feels particularly relevant. For example, a congregation seeking to increase retention might look for new ways to recruit volunteers and create sustainable realistic expectations concerning volunteering with the youth ministry. To support this they could look to Ministry Architect's "Volunteer Accelerator" curriculum, a design sprint tool aimed at increasing volunteer engagement. Another approach might be to take a list of each young person in 8th grade and map 5 loving adults from within the church alongside each name and ask them to pray for that student, engage them at church, and have at least one of these adults be a volunteer in the youth ministry. Finally, another example might be looking for multiple pathways for engagement, such as asking a young person to be in the choir, or to serve in Sunday school for younger students. Giving them ownership and a role of service and leadership would engage them in a new way and validate the gifts they have for service and ministry.

Youth Ministry Resources below would foster this way of thinking:

[Youth Ministry Incubators](#)- a small design company aimed at helping ministries launch new ideas.

[Ministry Architects](#)- a coaching company aimed to serve the development and health of existing ministries. For example, their [volunteer accelerator](#) would be of service.

[Saying Is Believing](#) by Amanda Drury- This book invites the reader to consider the practice of testimony- telling one's own story- as something the community can do together to get to know one another, create clarity around one's own sense of faith and calling, and to encourage one another in the faith.

[Sustainable Youth Ministry](#) by Mark DeVries- This book articulates a road map for sustainable ministry practices and would touch on the need to have multiple loving adults around each young person, consistent volunteers, and stability in the staffing of youth ministry.

[Flagler College Youth Ministry Forum](#) - a regional event aimed at serving both youth ministry staff and volunteers. This could be an opportunity for the Presbytery to develop some tradition and true service to youth ministry across the Presbytery.