

Ask any youth leader anywhere why students attend youth group and you'll generally get the same answer: friends.

I'd like to think it's my perfectly delivered messages or the strong programs we have each week, but I know for a fact that if I had the Apostle Paul himself coming to lead the program this week, my youth would be texting each other Sunday afternoon: "U goin?"

Certainly friends are a huge part of why teens attend youth group, but can their motivation go deeper? Are there youth in the group who would be there even if their friends weren't? The answer is yes. There is more to why teens attend a youth group than just having their friends there. In fact, the FUMC Youth Group is full of teens who are there for various reasons.

Teenagers attend youth group because:

- Their friends are there;
- They have a desire to grow closer to God;
- They have a desire to learn about the teachings of Jesus;
- They are seeking opportunities to make their faith relevant in the world; and
- They desire close friendships within a fellowship of believers.

1. Because Their Friends Are There

Before you skip this obvious motivation, you need to know it is structured differently than we might think. What I have found is church friends can exist in a different friends category than other friends teens have. Many youth have church friends they consider different than school friends or neighborhood friends. Church friends have a special bond not found in other friendships. There is a close tie to church friends, something I found to be stronger in groups that have students from several different high schools. That's why I call our group a "family".

Youth have stated "It's really hard to walk with Christ alone, but when you have all your brothers and sisters around you encouraging you, that's a huge thing." Many students said youth group had a different feel about it, that it was more than just getting together with friends. So, yes, one reason youth attend our FUMC Youth Group is because they have friends there, but they are special friends. So what makes those friends so special? What brings two or more youth together as prayer partners or accountability partners? What I found was a bond students were describing that was found only among church friends. That bond is described in our second reason.

2. A Desire to Grow Closer to God

Again, no big surprise, but it's deeper than it appears. When youth see other youth and adults who love God, they want to know that feeling of loving HIM. "I saw something in him/her I wanted for myself". Our students are the same way; they look to each other to find God. When one student can see the faith of another student, he or she has a desire to grow closer to God. That desire can manifest in many ways, but basically faith is contagious. When a student can see God in a friend, that student has a desire, consciously or subconsciously, to know more about that God.

3. A Desire to Grow Closer to Jesus

Learning about God is about learning about the love of the Creator and the grace and forgiveness which come with that love. Once the students in youth group learn about God, there emerges a desire to grow closer to Jesus; that is, how to treat others and live among them.

4. Opportunities to Make Faith Relevant in the World

There seems to be a point in a teenager's faith when he or she wants to be a better person, wants to participate in mission opportunities and wants to be a disciple of Christ. Youth have a desire to participate in mission and service opportunities. Youth are reported focusing less on themselves and more on others; several reported getting along better with their parents and siblings and helping more around the house.

Students reported a desire to treat others differently based on a deepening relationship with Jesus. Students also reported deeper relationships with friends, seeking strong relationships with Christian brothers and sisters to assist in their own faith walk.

5. Having a Fellowship of Believers

Youth seek opportunities to make their faith relevant in the world, youth speak of a realization that we, as Christians, are all in this together “a fellowship of believers”. True Christian friends have your back no matter what. Church friends seemed to be on a different plane than school or neighborhood friends.

Cycle of Welcome

So, what does this mean for youth ministry? These five points add up to what I like to call “The Cycle of Welcome,” and provides a way to conceptualize student ministry. Too often, we have Bible studies, Sunday School classes, mission opportunities, team building trips, Bucket List Days and service projects that stand alone. When we program these activities with The Cycle of Welcome in mind, we can begin to see how each of these seemingly stand-alone programs work in concert with each other. A Bible study is a way to teach students not just about Jesus, but also how to be like Jesus. It’s a way to get students to put feet, hands and a voice to their faith. A Summer Bucket List Day is not just a fun activity, but a way for students to grow closer together, to treat each other as Jesus would have them treat each other (only in a different setting from the church).

The Cycle of Welcome helps describe the Youth Group ministry with more purpose, realizing each level in the cycle helps students move to the next level, and each trip around the cycle will develop a deeper faith within them.

It is my hope this Cycle of Welcome not only makes sense to you, but also encourages families to involve their youth in all of the FUMC Youth Programs.

-Kristen Britt, Youth Director at FUMC