

A Church for All

Engaging Youth in Church

by Drew Downs

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let's be honest

I shouldn't be in church.

Growing up, I detested church words.

I hated idle chit chat and conversation about the weather.

Words like

faith

love

spirit

thankful

serve

gifted

blessing

drove me crazy
and shut me out.

So I left.

It wasn't because I was in college.

It wasn't because I took a science class.

It wasn't because I was hanging out with atheists.

I left because I loved church.

It just wasn't important **enough.**

Is church important enough?

You're probably tired of hearing about who isn't in church.

I am. It drives me crazy.

But that doesn't change this: I *shouldn't* be here.

I'm here **in spite of** the church.

And know this...

The church didn't change
to meet me halfway.

And I didn't change
to fit into the church.

I made GOD **more important** than church.

I have made my commitment to church
more than a commitment to a place.

I have made my gifts available to GOD
so that GOD can transform the church.

What gifts do you make available to GOD?

When we talk about church we need to know what we mean.

I'm here because of Church, not my church.

And for you, it may be the opposite.

You may be here because of **your** church.

But we need to speak the same language.

Not dressed up words.

Not words that makes us think we're more faithful than we are.

Words that get used in church.

We need to be clear on what *church* is.

When we talk about church, we must be clear:

Church is the people not the building.

We don't worship in "the church" but in the nave or worship space.

The Church is us.

The local church is the people in this locale.

And when we talk about the character of church, we must be clear:

Every part of the church (the people) is essential.

Each of us is not just important, but **essential.**

Every person has gifts.

As we profess our faith we make this claim:

In baptism, we are all equal.

For this to be true,
for this to be believed,
we need to act like it.

Every Sunday service,
every Bible study,
every trip to the Food Pantry,

we express what we believe:

**Our expression of church should match
our operating assumptions.**

So our primary operating assumptions must be:

1. Church is the people not the building.
2. Every part of the church (the people) is essential.
3. Every person has gifts.
4. In baptism, we are all equal.
5. Our expression of church should match our operating assumptions.

youth

There is a reason I began with church.

Not youth
not ministry
not youth ministry

church

and it is this.

Engaging people in ministry isn't enough.

And neither is attending a church.

We need to be the church.

And nowhere is this more important
than with our youth.

Here's how we can engage our youth in church.

Authenticity

You are tired of hearing this, but understanding this is essential.

For previous Generations, one's most important attribute is responsibility: doing one's duty and being responsible.

For youth and young adults, the primary attribute is authenticity: being who you say you are, doing what is best, not what is expected of you.

Until the church **reorients away from its complete focus on responsibility and toward authenticity**, we are bound to disengage our youth as they grow.

Read *Almost Christian*

Drop what ever you are doing and go read Kenda Creasy Dean's *Almost Christian*. Then order copies for all the Christians you know.

This book should outsell everything in the Christian section at Barnes & Noble, because it is for us.

We can no longer leave the preparing of young people to the one or two people we lock in the youth room with our youth.

If youth aren't engaged in church, it isn't their fault or the outside world's fault: it is ours.

Create Safe Space

Most churches know this one pretty well.

We know that youth need to be together.

But more important than that, is to have the opportunity to band together.

To make the relationships essential and practice Christian community safely.

This doesn't just mean being safe from the outside or safe from one another, **but to experiment and fail.**

It is essential that youth feel as if they can test things out and not get so thoroughly punished if the whole group doesn't like it.

Integrate into the Congregation

Just as youth need their own space, they also need to be full participants in the wider community.

They need both.

We need to believe **our youth are special enough** to have both.

The youth room is theirs only, but that shouldn't be a dungeon in which anyone is locked.

Besides, the baptismal covenant allows complete participation in the life of the congregation.

So stop making our youth wait until they turn 18 to do anything. They (should) have as much canonical standing to lead the church as you do.

Develop an Evangelism Lab

Get youth doing not only what they care about doing, but the stuff they are good at.

Encourage youth to help brand the congregation.

Coax them to make videos and put them up on YouTube and show them at church functions.

Buy or rent equipment that will allow the youth to produce quality audio and visuals.

Encourage the computer-obsessed to build the church website or some of its functions.

Help the youth recognize the wide opportunities, and subtleties, of evangelism.

Don't Outsource the Bad Work

Don't make the youth do stuff that nobody wants to do.

We get our youth to help set up tables for our big functions, then discourage them from participating in them.

Either find a way to make the congregation-wide event represent the entire congregation, not just the old people, or else do the dirty work yourself.

This may be the most important one.

Stop Thinking About Youth Representation

Instead, keep thinking integration.

We don't need more youth representatives or youth boards with only a little bit of power and responsibility.

Instead, actually get youth engaged in the decision-making process of the congregation.

When a group makes up 10-20% of your congregation, but 0% of the vestry or governing board it is unacceptable.

Youth need to be part of real decision-making.

Challenge the Youth

Youth don't need coddling or coaxing or convincing to participate.

And we don't need to trick them (see #1) into participating.

We need to challenge our youth to join us as equals.

We provide all of the means for success and challenge them to actually do it.

**And praise them when they succeed
even if it is in finding their limits.**

Realize that Youth are Equals

Here's the deal: youth aren't a commodity.

They aren't an "other" that deserves "our" attention.

Youth are Christians who actually reflect the faith of their parents and their church.

Today, our youth act and believe just like most adults in their faith community.

And that should be enough incentive to get off our butts and get real about adult formation.

Full Membership

Youth are the incubator of mature faith formation.

They are doing it already

and behave the way we invite and encourage them to.

The sooner we realize

that every teen that “checks out” of church

represents an adult that does the same,

the better.

Our inability and disinterest
in dealing with the big questions
lead youth to believe
that Christian faith is shallow.

The fear of conflict
in many of our churches
lead our youth to believe
that Christians are cowards.

We can choose
to keep gathering all the data we can,

combing through all the research
done about youth,

and find ourselves coming back to the same thing --

the thing that drives anybody away

the thing that drove me away

--the eagerness of many Christians
to manufacture conflict
lead our youth to believe this:

the church is full of hypocritical bigots.

When people see us *hate*

they know we are people who *hate.*

But when they see us *love*...

They see Christ.

We are called to love.

To be the church.

And no matter how much grey hair
we see on a Sunday,

The church of today
is all of us.

Be the church.

BEING CHURCH

To find out more about what it means to be *A Church for All* and make some new friends,

visit this page.

Or visit

<http://drewdowns.net/a-church-for-all/>

SHARE

Feel free to share *A Church for All*.

Just don't sell it or change it.

[Facebook](#) [Twitter](#) [Google+](#)

You may also contact me at drew@drewdowns.net

DEDICATION

To the one most supportive, most encouraging, and somehow most accommodating love of my life.

I love you, Rose. I don't know how you put up with me.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Drew Downs is an Episcopal presbyter (priest), father, emergence Christian, and a dreamer.

He lives in Michigan where he tries to keep up with two kids and a spouse who have way more love in their hearts than he can even imagine.

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