



REACH!

Produced by the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod Commission on Youth Discipleship

It's Not About Retention, It's All About Advancement

by Dr. Joel Nelson, Administrator – WELS Youth Discipleship

In our circles, we talk a lot about keeping youth in the church. We talk about it because it is a real and important issue in our church body. Many WELS teens are not staying active in our congregations. We have even given the phenomenon a label: “teen retention.” But is that really what we mean? Is that really what we want? Let’s do some word association to probe a bit deeper.

When you hear the word “retention,” what’s the first thing that comes into your mind? For me it’s holding a student back from the next higher grade in school—it’s flunking. The Webster dictionary defines “retention” this way:

- 1) the act of retaining,
- 2) the state of being retained.

Well, that doesn’t help much, so let’s look up “retain.” This is what Webster says:

- 1) to keep in a fixed place or position,

- 2) to hold in possession.
- Synonyms: detain, withhold, reserve.

Hmm, is this what we want for teens—keeping in a fixed place, holding in possession, detaining, withholding? Those words all have a really negative connotation.

As congregations, congregation members, parents, and other interested individuals, don’t we really want to prepare teens for the future—letting them go and turning them loose to lead meaningful earthly lives that make a positive and spiritual contribution but also end in the glorious life in heaven? That doesn’t sound like retention to me. It sounds more like advancement.

When you think of “advancement,” what picture comes to your mind? For me, it’s an

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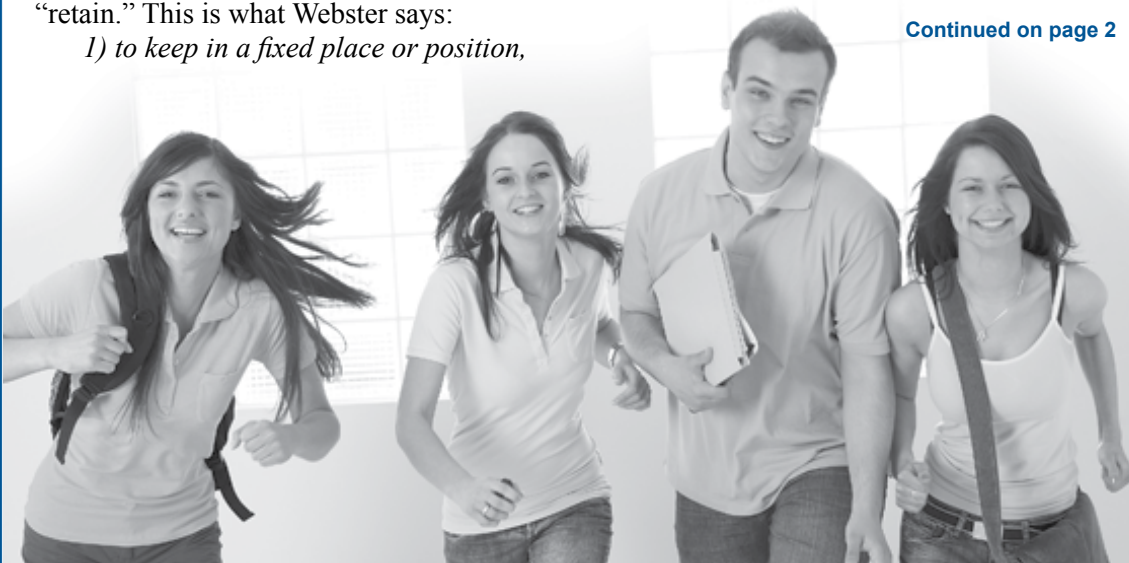
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Comments about this

REACH!

and ideas for future issues
can be directed to . . .

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army slowly, intelligently moving forward, taking ground, and winning battles. Webster defines “advancement” this way:

1) *The act of raising or the status of being raised in grade, rank, or dignity.*

Webster defines “advance” this way:

1) *to bring or move forward,*

2) *to assist the progress of,*

3) *to increase.*

Synonyms: encourage, foster, further, promote, serve.

These words all have a more positive connotation.

OK, that’s a nice lesson on words, but what’s the point? The point is that the terminology we assign to things says a lot about what we feel. In the case of teens in WELS, our “retention” verbiage betrays an attitude about teens and about what they can do in the church that is not very helpful for the teens or healthy for the church. For too many congregations the mind-set regarding teens is captured with these words: “They’re here, I suppose we’ve got to do something for them until they grow out of it!” For congregations that really want to advance their teens, however, some different phrases need to be thought and spoken: “We love and need our teens. They are part of our Christian family—part of the body of Christ. Our ministry is incomplete—we are incomplete—without them.”



Congregations that want to *advance* their teens need to ask themselves some pretty basic questions:

- **Why do we care about our teens anyway?**

What is the answer to that question in the minds and hearts of your congregation’s leaders, members, and the parents of the teens themselves? Is our interest in them driven by obligation or opportunity? Are we afraid of them or excited by them? Do we view them as bigger children or emerging adults? Do we recognize and accept Christ’s command to serve and love them?

- **Do we view our congregation’s ministry relative to teens as a “to teens” or “with teens” kind of thing?**

Do we feel we need to take ministry *to them* via high octane programming by charisma-machine leaders with a lot of hot pizza, so the teens will stay interested in coming to church?

Or do we expect, solicit, allow for, and appreciate their actual, hands-on, side-by-side involvement with other generations in the congregation’s ministry, so the teens can see that life in general and the life of a Christian in particular, is not about them but about them serving others the way Jesus did?

- **Do we know the demographics of our congregation?**

How many teens? How many pre-teens? How many are faithful, floundering, forgotten? What is the spiritual state of the teens’ families? It seems so obvious that you can’t serve people if you don’t know they exist, yet I am troubled by the number of WELS congregation leaders, pastors, and youth workers who cannot tell you for sure how many teens are members of their congregations.

- **Do we know and care about what current research is telling us?**

What does the research say about teens today and their families? About how teens learn best? About different youth ministry models? About what youth leaders need to know and be to connect with teens? About perpetuating youth ministry approaches whose time has come and gone? About the need to involve parents? About the need to start with children much, much sooner? About the need to reach out to the lost via our teen ministry?

- **Do we know what we can and can’t do?**

Do we realize as a congregation that we can’t do it all? Have we discovered

the things we can do well with teens and are we doing those things in the absolutely best possible ways? Have we assessed what the real needs of our teens and their families are? Are we designing strategies to meet those needs? Do we have the philosophical, physical, financial, and spiritual partnership and support of the entire congregation relative to our ministry to teens?

Answering these questions will take some reflection time, but it will be time well spent. It will engage those tasked with developing the teen ministry in a much needed evaluation and planning process. It will help everyone see that ministry to teens is really a very positive and exciting thing. It will open up some new ways of thinking and feeling about teen ministry in your setting. It may even move you to develop some new terminology that better captures your teen ministry mind-set, for example: replacing teen *retreats*, with teen *charges*!

Part 2 Survey Says . . .

In the last issue of REACH! we shared responses from a survey taken by 117 WELS pastors and youth leaders. We share more responses in this issue.

Survey question

“With what attitude should a [youth leader] come to his/her ministry with teens?”
(organized by common themes with illustrative responses)

HUMBLE

- [This will] help you reach teens at their level, not being overbearing or assuming that you understand exactly what they are going through.
- Learn from teens; you are not better than them.
- This is not your ministry but the Lord’s, and you are simply a servant for giving the gifts the Lord has to give.

- Understand that you don’t know everything.
- See all people (including yourself) as both sinner and saint.
- Come with a servant’s attitude, remembering that you are not there to be [teens’] friend or buddy but a worker called to serve their spiritual needs.
- Put other’s interests ahead of your own.
- Always enter teen ministry knowing that it is more about them than about you.
- You are there to help teens develop their relationship with Jesus; they’re not there to help develop your ego.
- As with any other ministry, it must be approached humbly acknowledging that nothing on ourselves makes us worthy of such a task nor capable of it but on the grace and power of God.
- Humble willingness to be all things to all so that some are saved.

SPIRITUAL

- Be devout in your devotion to the Lord.
- The devil will prowl but working with the Word will help you overcome problems.
- Be Christ-like.
- Be steadfast in the Word.
- Eagerly share the Word.
- Love Christ and love souls.
- Praise God for this next generation of [youth]; mentor and encourage them in their Christian walk.
- Eager to share the Means of Grace.
- Lead [youth] to a deeper understanding and appreciation for God’s gift in Jesus.
- Trust the gospel to do its work.
- Your best tool is Scripture; try to get teens into it as much as possible so the Holy Spirit can do his awe some work.
- Be excited to grow in God’s Word.
- Pray continually.
- Confident that it is the Lord’s Word you proclaim.
- You have a wonderful calling that is a service to the Lord.

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- Be a spiritual leader.
- Be firm on Sola Scriptura.
- Serve with the joy of the gospel, soundness of speech and reverent awe in the presence of the saving mysteries of God.
- God's Word is the power to keep and foster a stronger faith in teens.
- Have an evangelical heart that recognizes sanctified living to be a process.

GENUINE

- Be honest and not hypocritical. Teens have an uncanny ability to pick up on this which often destroys respect.
- Teens do not need a "friend" but rather, a kind leader. They do not expect the vicar to be cool but rather to facilitate activities.
- Teens will read quickly whether or not this guy really wants to be doing what has been assigned to him.
- Be open and transparent.
- Be yourself. Don't expect to change the world in the short time you are there. Plant seeds.
- Learn from your mistakes.
- Don't try to be their "buddy" and act like a teen. Respect is more important than friendship.
- Show sincere interest in teens' ideas.
- You are not a teen.
- Be real and genuine. Don't try to talk down to them or be too "cool."
- Don't feel you have to become one of [the teens]; you aren't one.
- You were a teen a few years ago, remember what it was like.

ENTHUSIASTIC

- Have energy and enthusiasm.
- Bring excitement and be eager.
- This is a joyful opportunity to serve.
- Be excited to try new things.
- Keep it going at the same pace and don't give up when the initial excitement wears off.
- Attitude should be positive and enthusiastic.
- Be optimistic.
- Embrace it with enthusiasm and avoid cynicism.
- Embrace it with enthusiasm; kids feed off enthusiasm.
- Be eager to try things.
- Expect nothing but great things.
- Enjoy your time spent with teens.
- This is fun!

LISTENING

- Teens are individuals. Get in touch with them on a "one-on-one" basis.

- Spend time getting to know the main members of the group and get a feel for them. Some like loud and crazy . . . some prefer quiet; some like to talk, some will never talk.
- Learn as much as you teach.
- Be ready to learn because life has changed since you were a teen.
- Be willing to hear and learn from experienced experts.
- Seek out the teens; find out about them. Keep an open mind and be ready to listen.
- Hear teens out and share your thoughts when they ask. Be ready to answer when they do ask. They may only open the door to hear you once or twice before locking it up.
- Talk to parents with teens; they can give you a multitude of wonderful insights. Talk to 7-8th grade teachers. They are valuable resources.
- Get to know your teens individually.
- Be willing to learn and make mistakes.
- Have an attitude that says, "I'm here to learn and it's only for one year."
- Look to teens' interests.
- Believe that you will learn as much from the teens as you will teach them.
- Wait for the teens to ask before you tell them your life story.
- Be a good listener, as an advocate for teens.
- Talk with, not to teens. Keep lectures to a minimum.
- Be alert for the "teachable moment."
- Show sincere interest in teens' ideas; make it clear you care about them.
- Get to know the teens and let them tell you what they are looking for out of a youth group.
- Be slow to anger and quick to listen.

LEADING

- Teens need a kind leader.
- Give teens a lot of opportunities—keep them on schedule—try to do a lot of activities even if you don't have large turn outs.
- Be a leader and recruit more leaders.
- Remember that you are placed in a position of authority.
- Be humble but confident in your leadership.
- Read Dale Carnegie's book, "How to Win Friends and Influence People."
- Be a spiritual leader. Too many teens don't have anything close to a godly mentor in their lives.
- Be careful not to put yourself in a compromising position.
- You are a responsible adult in a leadership position.

Everyday Issues, Everyday Help

by *Jeremy Bakken, Administrative Assistant – WELS Youth Discipleship*

On LivingBold.net and under the title, *Everyday*, WELS Commission on Youth Discipleship (CYD) has just launched a series of streaming devotional videos. Developed in collaboration with Wisconsin Lutheran College (WLC) Professor, Jan Nelson-Gompper, WLC's Theatre Arts Department, and Highlights Media (owned by WELS member Chad Johnstone), *Everyday* will bring 50, 2-7 minute video vignettes to the Web. The videos will get teens thinking about the faith they have, the sins they face, the relationships they navigate, the victories they claim, and the hope they have for this life and the next. A different video is featured each week on the LivingBold.net homepage with a discussion board for teens to exchange reactions and thoughts.

A larger archive of the *Everyday* videos is posted on WELS Media Web site, *Streams* (<http://streams.wels.net>). Some of the topics addressed so far include guilt, homosexuality, pornography, trust, prayer, communication, medical conditions, and parents. In the future, CYD plans to develop Bible studies to accompany each video vignette.

Spread the word to the teens in your congregation. For more information on the Everyday video series, and to obtain some awesome posters to promote them in your setting, see www.livingbold.net/media/everyday.

Also available on LivingBold:

- NEW! Weekly podcast devotions (www.livingbold.net/media/audioarchive)
- NEW! LivingBold merchandise (www.cafepress.com/livingbold)
- Updated MySpace page (www.myspace.com/livingbold)
- Daily e-mail devotions (www.livingbold.com/uplink)
- WELS teen group featured weekly (www.livingbold.net/welsspace)
- 2009 Rally "Follow the Path, Lead the Way!" content (www.welsyouthrally.net)
- NEEDED: Artwork, spiritual articles, poems, short stories, music, and video produced by YOUR teens to post in the Talent Gallery (www.livingbold.net/welsspace/gallery)



REFLECT ON THIS

The quotes below come from *City on a Hill: Reclaiming the Biblical Pattern for the Church in the 21st Century* by Philip Graham Ryken, Moody Publishers, 2003.

“What the next generation needs is what every generation needs: the kind of caring community that can only be found in the church of Jesus Christ” (pg.75).

“A Christian church is a caring community in which we consider what happens to someone else to be every bit as important as what happens to ourselves” (pg. 86).

“Many young people want to make a difference in the world. Unless they see the church demonstrating mercy and compassion in practical ways, they will not listen to our message—nor should they. But a church that is committed to outreach offers them a place to belong and, eventually, a place to serve” (pg.158).

What Do Teens Need?

Adapted from Group Publishing's, The Practical Youth Ministry Handbook, 2008.

The teens in your congregation are individuals, each with specific histories, personalities, experiences, and life-situations that translate into specific needs. How do you discover what the needs of your teens really are? The best approach is to conduct a needs analysis. Here are four strategies to help you:

1. Ask teens to brainstorm. Use one of your normal meeting times or bring teens together in a special meeting to brainstorm ideas around the five foci of youth ministry—worship, education, fellowship, service, and recreation. Have teens think of topics they'd like to study, activities or on-site programs they'd like to experience, places they might like to go, and service projects they'd like to try.

2. Have teens respond to open-ended statements. By using open-ended statements, you'll get the best, most honest evaluation of teens' needs. Give them each a handout with statements such as "I get so angry when..."; "I wish I could..."; or "It scares me to think about...". Make sure teens know their answers will be anonymous. Then collect

the papers and go through them looking for common themes and topics.

3. Talk to teens' parents. If you want added perspective on your teens' needs, talk with their parents. Ask parents to suggest what they feel their child's needs are and/or pinpoint changes in their teens' behavior and tell you why they think that behavior has changed.

4. Discover what teens talk about. Meet with schoolteachers. Be on the lookout for issues that teens are talking about such as drug abuse or bullying. Also, develop personal relationships with teachers at nearby schools and actively seek out their perspectives on the problems teens face.

Do You T.E.A.C.H.?

When you present a Bible lesson as part of your teen ministry activities, consider . . .

Is it **T** rue?

Is it biblically sound? Are the verses used in context? Is the whole Scripture considered?

Is it **E** ncouraging?

Does the lesson motivate and encourage students toward some sort of action or commitment?

Is it **A** pplicable?

Does the study or lesson apply to the real-world of my students? Have I made the effort to make the biblical truth actually real for them and for their lives today?

Is it **C** lear?

Is the lesson easily understood? Is everyone "getting" the points I am making? Is the truth coming out clearly?

Is it **H** umorous?

Does the lesson include some enjoyable interaction? Does it recognize that lessons are best remembered when they are fun? Am I showing my joy as a teacher?

Please contact us with any questions or for further information.

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