

memo

First United Methodist Church Youth Ministries

To: FUMC Church Council
From: Joe Webb, Chair, Youth Ministries Team
Date: 6/9/2011
Re: Proposal for paid staff resources for FUMC Youth Ministries

Comments: The FUMC Youth Ministries Team would like to submit for your consideration the attached narrative proposal to dedicate paid staff resources to Youth Ministries.

As Youth Ministries Chair, I would request that you take time to read through this document prior to the June 15 Council meeting so that you will be familiar with the proposal and the issues it addresses. This will allow us to spend our time at the meeting in more productive conversation regarding potential solutions.

The attached document was formulated over the course of five months through dialogue with existing Youth Ministries volunteers, current and former students, parents, other members of church leadership, members of the congregation, youth and ministry leaders from other churches, teachers, and other members of the community.

We believe the proposal accurately portrays the current state of Youth Ministries at FUMC, the potential benefits of dedicating staff resources to Youth Ministries, and the potential consequences of continuing to rely solely on volunteers to administer Youth Ministries programming.

I look forward to a productive dialogue with you at your June 15 Council meeting.

Thank you for your consideration.

Dear fellow FUMC disciples,

Youth Ministries at FUMC is nearing a crisis point.

Despite many successes over the past several years, we are beginning to suffer what were probably the inevitable consequences of failing to devote staff resources to Youth Ministries following the departure of Brooke Patterson as Christian Education Director in 2007. And while a dedicated team of volunteers has done its best to provide a quality program for our teenagers & their families in the meantime, that team has reached the limits of its capabilities, and the program is beginning to suffer the results.

I could spend pages and pages debating the merits of staff vs. volunteer leadership of youth ministries, and certainly I will outline some of those below. But the inescapable truth is, without paid staff resources dedicated to youth ministries in a church our size, the overwhelming message we are sending to our teenagers and their parents is that they're simply not worth it.

So before I get into justifications and rationalizations, let me lay out from the beginning a couple of bottom-line statements:

- Without dedicated paid staff, we are severely short-changing our youth;
- Failure to provide dedicated paid staff sends a message to parents that their teenagers don't deserve the best we can offer;
- Without dedicated paid staff, FUMC could easily lose youth ministries within 6 months; and
- Dedicated paid staff could measurably enhance not only programming & growth for youth, but also enhance broader volunteer development within the church.

Let me say clearly that the statements above are not a reflection on the dedication of the current Youth Ministry Team. The volunteers running our program are highly committed to reaching our youth in meaningful ways and providing them with opportunities to deepen their faith, help them grow spiritually, and have an impact on the culture surrounding them.

The problem is, even the most dedicated team of adult volunteers can only do so much simply because we are volunteers. We all have jobs, family responsibilities, other volunteer obligations and, in many cases, other duties within the church—all of which compete for our time and attention. Those obligations change and evolve over time, and so our ability to spend time, resources and effort on youth ministries is always limited.

Over the past 6 months our volunteer leadership team has already eroded from 7 adults to 5. Two of those remaining are not even members of FUMC (although they attend regularly). Three individuals have expressed a desire to join the team in 2012, but there are no other potential candidates in sight at this point. But any number of volunteers, whether it's 5 or 25, will always have to live and work within the limitations inherent to being a volunteer. In reality, adding more volunteers only spreads the existing workload out among more people. It does little to enable real growth, new opportunities, or additional viability to the program.

Youth ministry is by its very nature significantly different from other ministries within the church. Youth ministries require a relational component different from anything else we do. There are social, cultural, educational, psychological and interpersonal dynamics involved in relating to teenagers that are unique and challenging. It requires not only a specific gift and call from God, but also specific types of training and experience.

Certainly, we could offer more and better training to existing and potential volunteers. But that proposition comes with its own set of barriers. Volunteers who are already giving their “extra” time would be required to give up even more time to attend training events. Even then, what happens when we get someone trained and their work or family circumstances change without warning? An all-volunteer staff will always be more subject to external circumstances than paid professional staff.

It is not only the amount of training that is in question. It is also the type. Effective youth ministry today requires leaders who can teach the Bible effectively, plan & execute activities & events, and offer counseling in everything from school performance to home & family issues to relationships, sex, alcohol & drugs. They need to simultaneously offer teens a safe place in which to express themselves as well as be a trusted resource for parents.

If we were a church of 50 or 100 people with 5-10 teenagers, an all-volunteer team could probably manage the program. But we are a church of over 400 members, worshipping well over 200 congregants each week, with a roll of more than 40 eligible students in grades 7-12 (children of members and/or regular attendees) who we are expected to serve. And as we look at the kids coming up through our Children’s ministries, we can only expect that number to grow over the next several years.

During the 2010-2011 school year, only 6-8 out of the 40+ teenagers in our church (along with a few of their friends who either don’t belong to a church or whose churches don’t have youth programs) are participating in our Youth Ministries program. The program at this point consists primarily of weekly Sunday School and Sunday night Youth Group meetings, and two regular major activities: 30-Hour Famine and Creation Festival.

As recently as two years ago, we were regularly drawing 18-25 teens each week for Sunday School & Youth Group, and we were participating in special events and activities 5 or 6 times a year, including mission weekends and major educational events. Many of those kids, however, came into the program prior to 2007, when we had staff resources dedicated to youth ministries. I believe the reason those kids (and their parents) stayed with the program is that they became committed to it at the time when the church was committed to serving them through staff resources. In essence it appears that we were able to ride on the program’s momentum for about 3 years, but without paid staff we have been unable to sustain that momentum.

In some ways, we are victims of our own success. The strength of our Children’s Ministries has not only had a major impact on the families we serve, but has become a gateway to draw new families into the church. But we have to recognize that, whether “officially” or “unofficially,” the truth is we dedicate staff resources to Children’s Ministries. The results of dedicating those resources are evident in the strength of the program.

And so what message do we send to those families who have come into our church or have become more active, dedicated members of our church because of our outstanding Children's ministries? The message is that we're not willing to expend the same level of resources on their children once they reach 7th grade. We basically turn them over from professionals to amateurs, from paid staff (at least on the programming side) to volunteers. That is not an indictment of the abilities of either, but merely of the perception we invite.

One need only look four blocks across town to see the effect of a paid youth ministry program within the very same community of families that we serve. And while we certainly can't claim that our friends at First Baptist Church offer the perfect answer to the issues we face, we cannot deny the overwhelming positive results on students and their families.

I'm not saying that we need to mimic the strategy of the Baptist Church...they clearly have a much larger congregation and more resources from which to draw. But we cannot ignore the effect of a paid professional staff on the lives of the students they are serving. The example is literally staring us right in the face.

In addition to the obvious benefits for students, paid staff resources could potentially have a positive impact on not only our existing volunteer team, but on potential new members. It could free some of us from day-to-day management of the program in order to better exercise our gifts for teaching, mentoring, relationship-building, etc. It is also easy to envision paid staff being able to create small group structures within the ministry program that would offer additional opportunities for adults to be small group leaders without the expectations that go with large-group leadership. And the opportunities for volunteer development can easily spread its impact beyond just youth ministries.

So, taking all of the above narrative into account, your Youth Ministry Team would like to put forth the following options for your consideration:

1. Hire a full-time or part-time youth pastor/youth director.
2. Hire other full-time or part-time professional staff (i.e.; Christian Ed director), part of whose duties would be to direct/administer Youth Ministries.
3. Maintain the status quo.

If we wish to realize the fullest potential positive outcomes for our youth, their families, and our church, either of the first two options would not only provide the resources necessary but also send a strong signal to our congregation and to our community that we are committed to raising a generation of teenagers equipped to live their faith in a difficult world, that we are committed to engaging families through the very real stresses of adolescence, and that we are committed to laying a strong foundation for the future of our church.

However, if we choose Option 3 and insist on continuing to rely on volunteers to run our Youth Ministries programs, the consequences are all negative: we will continue to lose volunteers and youth participants, offer fewer opportunities for those who remain, and risk losing families from FUMC as their

children grow into teenagers who are not receiving the same level of commitment from the church that they did as children. There are indications that this very thing is already beginning to happen.

As Youth Ministries chair, I am willing and eager to commit to working with Council, SPRC and the Finance team to pursue Options 1 or 2 above in an expedited fashion. It is certainly possible and clearly desirable that, with some dedication and hard work, we could have a staff person on board by the time school starts, or at least within the first few weeks of the fall term.

If Council chooses Option 3, however, it must be understood that it will need to recruit a new Youth Ministries chair, or simply allow the program to die for lack of leadership. It would be a betrayal to my faith and my calling to be party to continuing to cheat our teenagers and their families of the kind of ministry program they deserve.

Before I close, allow me to offer one final thought: When Brooke first left and we began having discussions about how, or even whether, to replace her, the question facing Church leadership in general (not just youth) was, "Where do we see ourselves in five years?"

I would submit that we are now almost five years down the road from that moment and not much has changed. We have clearly had some success at adapting and reacting to circumstances, but we have been so paralyzed by our inability or unwillingness to answer the question that we have done very little to proactively create new and captivating environments in which to engage our community. In constantly trying to look ahead to the next five years we have, for almost that long, failed to effectively deal with where we are here and now. Youth Ministries may only be the first, or perhaps just the most obvious, victim of that failure.

We are not buried yet. But we're in a pretty deep hole. Perhaps instead of fixing our sights so firmly in the future we should deal with our present circumstances, and let God's Spirit guide us into wherever we go from there...for the next five years and beyond.

Respectfully,

Joe Webb
Chair, FUMC Youth Ministries Team