

Youth Engagement - The Episcopal Church in Delaware

 delaware.church/youth-engagement/

“... Sometimes irreverent, sometimes curious, sometimes opinionated, sometimes insightful — our conversations remind me that when we listen to one another, we gain more from a wider perspective than any one generation can provide.” — The Rev. Ruth Beresford

by the Rev. Ruth Beresford

Early in my ministry as a priest in the Episcopal Church in Delaware, my minister for children and youth came to me to advocate for our youth. She understood her role as a leader for our younger members, but also as their defender and advocate. She shared an observation — every committee and ministry wanted the youth to participate as laborers rather than collaborators. She knew that as baptized members of the parish, our teens (and children) had gifts to share that far exceeded manual labor. We welcome them to the table in worship, but not the tables of governance.

The youth minister’s advocacy for them voiced the challenge to our parish that still rings in my heart. The following year we amended our by-laws, and the youth selected one of their own to fill the new position of youth representative on the vestry. Because they were at least 16 years old, they were voting members of the parish, and now also on the vestry.

What does it mean for youth to be collaborators? As with every other lay minister, they are called to “represent Christ and his Church; to bear witness to him wherever they may be; and, according to the gifts given them, to carry on Christ’s work of reconciliation in the world; and to take their place in the life, worship, and governance of the Church.” (*The Book of Common Prayer*, pg. 855.)

With each search for a new associate rector, a member of the team was a teen. When the youth minister retired, teens participated in the interview process for the next minister for church and youth, and their input was persuasive. We ask that youth bring their perspective to parish matters and voice their opinions.

This past year, while we’ve been searching for our next minister for church and youth, I’ve had the privilege of joining our youth on Sunday evenings. Sometimes irreverent, sometimes curious, sometimes opinionated, sometimes insightful — our conversations remind me that when we listen to one another, we gain more from a wider perspective than any one generation can provide.

I know there are congregations that are missing younger generations, and that all search committees are looking for leaders who can attract children and youth to the church. Let our youth minister's wisdom guide your approach when one comes through the church's doors. Listen to them. Invite them to engage their knowledge and talents, remembering they are empowered by the Holy Spirit for their ministry, which is more than moving tables.

Ruth is the rector at Christ Church Christiana Hundred in Wilmington, and has been in ordained ministry in the Episcopal Church for more than 30 years. She loves gathering with the children at the church preschool, journeying with their youth as they seek God, leading worship, praying, teaching, and sharing the faith in Christ Jesus that sustains and strengthens the church for its ministry with people of all ages.