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Connecting Resources with Ministry

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TITLE: Building Safe Sanctuaries for Youth

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In the Gospel of Luke there is recorded the story of Jesus and his family going to worship in Jerusalem for Passover. Luke 2:42 says, "And when he was twelve years old, they went up as usual for the festival." You are familiar with the story, but perhaps you have never considered it in relation to creating safe sanctuaries for youth. Let's look again at verse 42, "And when he was twelve years old, they went up as usual for the festival." (NRSV). What a clue for us as we plan for youth! Jesus was approximately the age of today's junior high students and this verse, along with the following verses, makes it clear that worship was a normal and even a usual part of his life and that of his family. Then, by the time he would have been old enough for today's confirmation, he felt a part of the community and secure in the community even when his family was not in sight.

This level of feeling secure and feeling as if we belong is exactly what our congregations' hope youth ministry will provide for their teens. Therefore, the first tool we must utilize in building safe sanctuaries for youth is that of building strong ministries for whole families, including young children, teens, parents, and older persons. Building valued relationships with the whole family strengthens the family and the congregation. Last Sunday, in my congregation, we presented Bibles to approximately eighty third graders. What a blessing! Two weeks ago, my congregation began the confirmation class for this year's group of approximately seventy-five students in the sixth and seventh grades. Again, what a blessing! Some of the parents of the third graders are also parents of the confirmation students. Many congregations, no matter what their size, have experienced these blessings in the past few weeks. Every third grader and every confirmation student is an important member of our communities of faith. It doesn't matter whether there are three children or one hundred children and youth, our hope is to provide for each and every one! It is easy to see how important serving whole families can be in building faith relationships and values.

To assure your congregation's continuing ability to be in ministry with families, and especially with youth, it is critical for you to implement reasonable recruiting, screening, and hiring procedures by which you select those persons who will work with the youth, both volunteers and paid workers. Use written applications for all those who desire to work in your ministries. Ask for personal references from each applicant, and check each reference that is provided. Have a personal interview with each applicant to find out how much experience they may have had, what type of previous youth ministries they have worked in, and what their gifts are for youth

ministry. In addition, be sure to conduct a criminal records background check on each applicant. Every congregation, regardless of its size or location, must pay close attention to the recruitment and selection of its workers with youth. We cannot afford to approach this part of youth ministry in an offhand way. This thorough approach to recruiting youth workers is one of your most valuable tools for building safe sanctuaries for youth.

After selecting your workers, then train and prepare them so they can demonstrate appropriate interpersonal boundaries and behaviors for the youth. Give leaders the tool of training and information. Youth in every congregation hope to engage in relationships with their peers and with adults that are fun and affirming. They are exploring what it means to engage in close friendships and dating relationships. Prepare youth workers to respond to every imaginable question and to model respectful, positive, and enthusiastic interpersonal behaviors. Give youth workers the tool of training and preparation, and you'll assure that the youth receive strength for their day-to-day interactions based on the values of their community of faith.

Finally, make your meeting space a tool for building safe sanctuaries. Hold youth meetings in an area that allows for fellowship, fun and study without allowing for isolation or secrecy. Use classrooms that have windows in the doors or leave doors open. Use equipment that is age-level appropriate equipment. For example, instead of using the pre-school sized playground for playing a game, use your congregation's yard space, or if you have one, use your church's athletic field. If your building has computers with internet access, be sure that use of the internet is supervised and restricted. If your church has a gym, use it responsibly by utilizing adult supervision for the activities there.

Luke 2: 48-49 reports the response of Jesus' parents when they found him in the temple saying, "When his parents saw him they were astonished; and his mother said to him, 'Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety.' He said to them, 'Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?'" (NRSV) If we are diligent in building safe sanctuaries for youth, the result will be teens who are engaged with us in the community of faith because they want to be and parents who need not suffer anxiety when their youth are in the church! What a blessing!

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