

# **Coming of Age Planning Guide for Congregational Leaders**

version 8/16/06; original author Betty Tharpe, revised by Riley McLaughlin

## **Overview**

The PCD Coming of Age program is a biannual program for 8th - 10th grade youth. It is a bridge program marking the transition from childhood into adolescence and toward adulthood.

Each participating congregation plans and runs a local program that includes a mentor relationship between each participating youth and an adult member of the congregation, and a Coming of Age Sunday church worship service in May. PCD plans and runs three retreats throughout the year, attended by youth from multiple congregations. These retreats (Threshold, Social Justice and Nature Vigil) offer an opportunity for the participants to experience the larger community of UUs, and to take on physical, social and spiritual challenges with adult support. The Threshold and Social Justice retreats are held at congregations, and attending the Sunday morning worship service of that congregation is part of the retreat. The Nature Vigil retreat is held at a campsite. The program culminates in a Celebration dinner and dance event on the evening of COA Sunday.

The retreats facilitate the development of:

- \* Confidence in self - 'I am strong and capable' 'I know what my limits are' and 'I can work with others'
- \* An awareness of place in the world in relation to others and the larger world (UU movement, American society, nature)
- \* Friendships with youth from other congregations, weaving the web of denominational community.

The program requires each participating congregation to provide volunteers for the retreats. Youth advisors and mentors from the home congregations can serve as program staff at the retreats. Parents can support the retreats in "behind the scene" roles: shopping for supplies, providing transportation, meal prep.

The link between the home congregation program and the district-run retreats is essential for grounding the Coming of Age experience in the religious life of the participants and their families. We have seen that young people coming to the

retreats from congregations that are coordinating their program with the retreat themes are more likely to engage in and reflect on the retreat challenges in a way that promotes growth.

### **COA Class**

Churches have used various models for a regular meeting of the participant group: Sunday morning class, evening youth group, less-frequent longer meetings. When not all the youth in the church are participating in the district program, then a separate class can work best. On another hand, a "coming of age" class can be the youth program for both participants and nonparticipants in the district retreat program.

In the congregational program, key themes are exploring values, beliefs, spiritual life, and UU identity. These can be focussed through the goal of preparing for the Coming of Age Sunday service in May. Many congregations require each youth to write a Credo statement, which is a statement of religious belief(s) to be presented in that worship service. Working on a social justice or social action project should be part of the curriculum. Journal writing is one of the main introspective practices at the retreats, culminating in the solo nature vigil, and journal writing in the congregational program helps youth develop this practice.

Facilitating a strong and supportive group atmosphere, bonding and strengthening relationships, and encouraging youth towards new levels of responsibility and peer leadership, are also appropriate goals for the COA class. (Cf. the article "Five Components of Balanced Youth Group Programming", available from the UUA Youth Office.) The classes should have a reasonable amount of fun, while serving a larger goal. Youth who play team sports learn that while drills are rarely as much fun as scrimmages, they are essential to the long-term joy of playing well; the same applies to CoA.

### **Parents**

Parent meetings at the beginning of the program and throughout the year will help parents support their children's development. Parents benefit from having the opportunity to share with other parents this phase of family life, and to support each other in parenting through the transitions of adolescence.

## **Mentoring**

The congregation must match each participant with a mentor, an adult in the church. A relationship with an adult who is in the congregational community (and who is not a parent of that youth's peers) provides support through the challenges of the program, a sounding board for the youth's life transitions and moral crises, and a personal connection to the congregational community and the larger UU tradition. These connections sometimes last beyond the program year.

Mentors and youth should start with some scheduled, structured activities to build a meaningful relationship. Icebreaker games can be good at first, and service projects build deeper camaraderie. Mentors and youth, as a whole group or as pairs, can take on (or be assigned) specific church activities, such as attending a board meeting, committee meeting, service project or work party. All mentors and youth should meet together before and after each retreat, and work toward the Coming of Age Sunday service in May, perhaps comparing notes on each youth's credo statement.

There are several ways to match mentors with youth. Sometimes a minister or religious education professional assigns all the matches. Some congregations ask the youth or parents to nominate mentor candidates; however, it is important that the mentor serves at the direction of the congregation, rather than being solely accountable to youth or parents. In matching mentors, prioritize the spiritual needs of the youth over those of the mentor.

The congregation should be clear about the specific commitment which it asks of the mentors, and what support it will offer to mentors. Mentors should commit to spending time with youth regularly through the program year, attending the COA Sunday service and the PCD COA Celebration Dinner. We generally encourage mentors to serve as program staff at the retreats, especially the first (Threshold) retreat in October. The district program provides mentor trainings in early Fall; requiring mentors to attend a training is a commitment, and providing the training is a form of support. The congregation should provide an ongoing contact person for the mentors, including one to whom they can appropriately report concerns, crises, and/or miracles. The congregation should actively state, to mentors and to youth, the extent to which mentors

can keep confidences. Youth often want a listener who will not report to parents or other authority figures, and to a large extent, that is appropriate, but with an exception: when the mentor learns of a serious problem (eg abuse, suicide plans, intent to harm others), the mentor must report that problem, sometimes to a minister or even to government agencies.

PCD UUA recommends that congregations follow practices based on its Safety Policy, which includes choosing only volunteers known to the congregation for six months or more (and/or checking with their previous congregation if they've just moved to yours), requiring for a written reference and/or background check, a minimum age of 25 for adults working with any group that includes youth in high school, and agreement to follow a Code of Conduct. The mentor should be careful to keep the extent of the relationship known to the youth's parents, and within appropriate boundaries. (For example, the mentor should generally not take the youth to see R-rated movies.) We recommend that all contact between youth and mentors be visible to others. Acoustic privacy (out of earshot) in a courtyard or at a cafe is one thing. One youth and one adult alone behind closed doors, or in a car, is another thing. The latter category increases the possibilities for misconduct, whether actual, perceived or alleged. Please protect your mentors from perceptions or allegations of misconduct, and in doing so, you also increase the safety of your youth.

### **Coming of Age Sunday Service**

A worship service celebrating the completion of the coming of age program on the Sunday of the celebration dinner is the opportunity for the congregation to acknowledge the youth's journey from childhood towards adulthood. Congregations often invite youth into more participation, sometimes as voting members (pledging either individually or under their household's pledge). The worship service planners should meet with youth and invite them to take an active role in worship planning, as well as delivering their credo statements as the homiletic element of the service. The Coming of Age Sunday worship service witnesses and celebrates their development in their home religious community.

### **Leadership and Troubleshooting**

Although the congregational CoA program is usually under the

authority of the congregation's religious education leader, it is best to delegate management of the program to a small team with a designated chair. The parish minister(s) should be aware of the program, and should meet with participating youth sometime well before the CoA service in May; ministerial guidance in the Credo writing process can result in deeper, more articulate Credos, and also lets the youth participants know that their Credos are worth the attention of a minister. PCD CoA leadership may sponsor an Internet forum which congregational leaders can use to compare notes and troubleshoot. When major questions arise, communicate directly with the PCD CoA Administrator or Chair; they have experience and resources! The responsibilities of each youth, parent and congregation include bringing up any problems with the program.

PCD COA is a sponsored program of the PCD Religious Education Committee, which is in turn accountable to the PCD UUA Board and works closely with the PCD Lifespan Faith Development Director.

### **Sample Overview Calendar**

#### *Early Fall*

Send registrations and Congregational Covenant to PCD COA.  
Recruit mentors, with written commitment to Code of Conduct.  
Assign one adult mentor to each youth participant.  
Hold a mentor meeting (just mentors) and a parent meeting.  
Hold an initial meeting of mentors and youth, with icebreakers and orientation (see script #1).

#### *Mid-Fall*

Hold a meeting for all mentors and youth to prepare for the Threshold retreat, including what to bring (and not bring).  
Hold another meeting for all mentors and youth to debrief from the Threshold retreat. Discuss preparations for COA Sunday service.

#### *Winter*

Hold a meeting for all mentors and youth to prepare for the Social Justice retreat, addressing concerns and anxieties.  
Hold another meeting for all mentors and youth to debrief from the Social Justice retreat. Choose a service project.

#### *Spring*

Hold a meeting for all mentors and youth to prepare for the Nature Vigil retreat, including meditation and journaling.  
Hold another meeting for all mentors and youth to debrief from

the Threshold retreat.

Detailed preparations and rehearsals for COA Sunday service.  
*COA Sunday*

Deliver a worship service which honors youth, mentors and parents, and is also a meaningful experience for first-time visitors to the congregation.

### **Sample Script for First Meeting of All Mentors and Youth**

12:45

Welcome and Introduction of teachers

Chalice lighting (one volunteer lights flame, another reads opening words)

Check-in (everyone, clockwise around the circle, begin and end with name)

Overview of COA program and today's session

Review of overall calendar

1:15

Icebreaker game with self-disclosure, eg "I Never", "Two Truths and a Lie", or "Spill the Basket" (cf. UUA publication "Deep Fun")

1:25

Mentor/Youth Interview: Part I

1:35

Snack Break

1:45

Mentor/Youth Interview: Part II

2:00

Reconvene with song (eg "Come Come" or "Gathered Here")

Introduce your partner to the group by telling:

At least one thing you have in common

At least one thing that is different

The most surprising thing you found out about your partner

One thing you want to know more about

2:20

Review of COA Program, Mentor and Youth expectations, role of parents, what to expect at Threshold retreat, what to bring (and not bring).

2:45

Closing

### **Sample Mentor Requirements (from UU Church of Somewhereville)**

Maintain an open and supportive relationship with the youth you are mentoring, in which fellowship and fun are central. Plan to spend at least three hours per month together, which can include group activities.

Oversee your youth's progress in the program, and support her/him in finding answers to any questions she/he may have about the program as well as fulfilling the above requirements.

Attend the following:

One mentor training session in September  
Youth & Mentor Covenanting Dinner  
Youth & Mentor meetings  
Service projects with youth  
One credo workshop in the spring  
Credo Dinner in the spring  
May 20 Coming of Age service  
May 20 Celebration Dinner

Communicate with\_\_\_\_ regarding any questions or concerns, particularly any problems with your mentoring relationship. Maintain an open and supportive relationship with the youth you are mentoring, in which fellowship and fun are central. Plan to spend at least three hours per month together, which can include group activities.

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