

PCD COA Overview for RE Professionals and Parents

Version 10 June 2008, by Riley McLaughlin, including some material by Anne Steele

Introduction

Coming of Age is a year-long program for youth entering the 8th through 10th grades, which seeks to promote, honor and affirm our teenagers' passage toward the greater freedoms and responsibilities of adulthood and to impart a deeper comprehension and appreciation of Unitarian Universalism. Although the time commitment to this program may seem overwhelming, the end result is rewarding, profound and affirming. Each congregation determines the details of its own local program, while the Pacific Central District Coming of Age team (PCD COA) plans and holds retreats at which youth face intentional challenges with lots of support, and meet their peers from the other participating congregations.

Mentors

Although local programs vary, assigning an adult mentor to each youth is a key element, and is a pre-requisite for enrolling in the district retreat program. The mentor is an adult role model, and a source of moral support through the challenges of the program. Some congregations have many meetings with all mentors and youth together; some have each pair of mentor-and-youth meet on their own schedule; some have mentors and youth work together on a community service project. The mentor is a volunteer acting in service to the church, and thus we strongly recommend that while youth and parents may have nominations for which mentor is assigned to each youth, that the RE professional or local COA committee match mentors with youth. PCD COA offers mentor trainings in early Fall, usually an early-bird training in late August and a last-call training in late September.

Retreats

These weekend-long double overnights each involve a challenge event that takes up most of Saturday. The Fall retreat centers on a Ropes course, to practice teamwork and trust through physical challenges such as climbing obstacles. The Winter retreat centers on a Street Retreat with the Faithful Fools, to deepen social and emotional awareness. The Spring retreat centers on a four-hour silent vigil, in which each youth spends some time alone with a journal and pen, a bottle of water, and some reflection questions, without company, food, electronics, or other distractions. These are all supervised by experienced adults, and involve appropriate safety precautions.

The opportunity to meet youth from other UU churches helps participants understand Unitarian Universalism as a religion and institution, rather than just as a unique local club that their parents belong to, and it gives them a much larger community of peer support than they get from their agemates at their

congregation. Carpooling to and from retreats has many benefits, including time for camaraderie and reflection!

Credos

Most congregational programs include having youth write a personal credo and speak it from the pulpit on COA Sunday in May. Having mentors model speaking their own credos, and having at least one credo-writing meeting with a minister, are recommended as part of a long process of preparation. The intentionally intense experiences of retreats may help provide inspiration for credos.

Delivering a credo from the pulpit affirms the youth as an active contributor to worship, and to the mix of thoughts and values held within the congregation.

Family Commitment

This program is intensive in its time commitments and often in its emotional stretching. Family support helps youth to make the most of the program, and to accept the inevitable trade-offs with other parts of life such as homework, extracurricular programs, family time and free time. It is often helpful for parents to form strong connections (or deepen existing connections) with the parents of other participants. There is almost always a moment of "is this really worthwhile?", typically while packing bags for a retreat; support within and between families helps the answer stay "yes!"

Congregation Commitment

We recommend appointing a COA Coordinator and/or Committee, working closely with the RE professional. Followup on mentors is important; sometimes mentors and youth drift out of contact and need a reminder to reconnect. (In rare cases, a congregation may have to assign a new mentor.) The congregation will also provide volunteers for the retreats. Typically, youth advisors and mentors serve as program staff while parents serve as kitchen staff. This support culminates in the Coming of Age Sunday Service in May, in which the congregation will hear participants' credos and celebrate their accomplishments. You'll need the cooperation of church leaders from parish ministers to administrators (meetings involve room reservations!).

What You Do

- Your congregation matches each participating youth with an adult mentor. How you recruit, screen, choose and match the mentors is your choice and your responsibility; we have some advice on that if you want it, and we hold some trainings for mentors. You should make sure that each youth meets with their mentor at least before and after each of the PCD retreats.

- You hold a program for all the participating youth in your congregation as a group, covering age-appropriate knowledge of Unitarian Universalism and the congregation, spiritual growth and exploration, and service activities. (If you have

only one or two participating youth, this can be part of the mentor relationship.)

- Your congregation has a highlighted role for participating youth in the main Sunday service on May 17th, 2009, recognizing their completion of PCD COA. Many congregations have youth make a personal credo statement in this service.
- You stay in communication with PCD COA planners. You clearly, directly and proactively communicate any concerns that may arise.
- Your congregation provides support for the retreats, generally in the form of program staff volunteers and/or kitchen staff volunteers. Although the Dean of each retreat has final responsibility for the staffing, they rely on participating congregations to get them in touch with appropriate volunteers. The main retreat program role for adults is titled "Wisdom Circle Leader" (WCL) and involves leading a group of 6-10 youth participants through the various retreat activities and discussions. Parents of participating youth may not be WCLs. We don't require that the kitchen staff for retreats be parents, but they're often the easiest ones to recruit into that role.
- Parents of participating youth bring youth to and from retreats, checking them in and out with retreat staff, and complete all paperwork (registration, consent forms, etc.). Parents take responsibility for their youth's packing before retreats (both for what to bring and what not to bring) and for their youth's full and responsible participation, following all retreat rules. In the rare and unpleasant event that we call parents to remove a youth from a retreat, they must do so with all reasonable speed.
- See the PCD COA brochure and registration form for more details.

What PCD COA Does

- We offer mentor trainings in early Fall, and written resources such as this overview and our guide to running a congregational COA program.
- We plan and run three retreats and a Celebration Dinner. The Dean of each retreat is responsible for selection, training, and oversight of all volunteer retreat staff, such as WCLs, including those volunteers nominated by participating congregations as part of their Covenant. We send out a mailing before each retreat with directions to the site and a packing list.
- We check in with congregations several times during the program year, with encouragement and such wisdom as we may have to offer. We take seriously any concerns raised by youth, parents, and/or congregational leaders.