Coming of Age
Materials herein were gleaned from learning at Stan Crow’s ICA Rite of Passage Journeys Coming of Age Workshops, Toronto September 2006 and the religious educators who’ve shared so generously from their experience. UUA youth office colleagues and “transition years” youth leaders I met while serving on Youth Council, 2003 and 2004 also significantly influenced my knowledge and understanding and informed materials in this presentation.

Thank you all for sharing your wisdom!
Sylvia Bass West
GOALS of this presentation:

Emerge with a deeper understanding of the role a Coming of Age experience plays in the lives of the young people in your congregation

Understand more about the four components of a Coming of Age Program

Begin discussions around defining or clarifying roles regarding all stakeholder positions and a mechanism for documenting these roles
What is special about Coming of Age?

A Coming of Age program provides opportunities for young people to deepen their sense of spiritual identity in the context of their congregation.
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The Coming of Age program will also inspire and challenge the adult members of the congregation to examine their own spiritual values. The adult community will also reflect on the changing dynamics of the relationships. Significant newly claimed independence will impact everyone in community. As our young people mature on their journey, together we move ever forward toward the interdependence of all existence of which we are a part.

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Why commit to a Coming of Age program?
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Here is one reason why!
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Here is another!
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Here are a few more!

The Coming of Age program serves a real goal to keep the youth involved within their home congregation.

Coming of Age is about the future of your faith community; raising up young people to give them a vision of what can be in the congregation!

A good COA program will teach youth about the history of their religious traditions and encourage them to be involved in church life, so that they understand how our living tradition manifests on a daily level!

Coming of Age programs include rewards for ALL.

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What do young people need these days to “Come of Age?”
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What do young people need these days to “Come of Age?”
Caring community
Mentor relationships
Space to reflect on values
Activities to help them learn and grow and challenge themselves
Opportunity to let go of aspects of childhood and make space for new responsibilities and privileges of adolescence
Who is the program geared to?

- Coming of Age programs are generally designed for Junior Youth in grade 7 and/or grade 8.

- Your congregation decides which age grouping is most appropriate.

- No more than a 2 year spread is recommended.

- COA is part of the whole span of lifespan learning community.
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- COA can be offered weekly for a full year, for part of the year with a few weekend retreats, or once a month, for 6 or 8 months. You decide what works in any given year.

- COA one year allows you to effectively offer junior high Our Whole Lives lifespan sexuality curriculum alternate years, in effect honouring this two year period of inevitable growth and transformation.

- If we provide this transformative experience for the junior youth during a COA program, this then creates the potential nucleus for a youth group that feels more fully engaged with their faith and their own congregation.
Who knows your song and will sing it to you when you have forgotten it?

(reading from Stan Crow’s materials)
The four major rites of passage:

1. Beginnings - birth, starting school, new stages of life, new parent
2. Initiations - **coming of age**, entering puberty, entering young adulthood, apprenticing, learning new skills, being tested
3. Partnering - marriage, committed relationships, business partners
4. Endings - divorce, loss of work, retirement, ending a stage of life, death.
What kind of Coming of Age program would we create if we could create one?

- It can be anything you wish as a community, as long as it is intentional, safe and purposeful.
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Elements of the COA Program

• Mentored Learning
• Practical Testing
• Enacted Ritual
• Empowering Story
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Mentored Learning

• Mentored learning is an essential component of COA.

• A mentor is a guide toward healthy life patterns.

• A mentor helps the youth gain a sense of pride in the community, provides a connection to the past and can help the youth learn to recognize his or her role in the life of the community.

• Potential mentors are named by the youth — what a privilege to serve in this capacity!
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Note: A entire day long program is available to further explore the role of mentor.

• In the mentor relationship a youth can explore their own spiritual development with a caring adult who is a committed UU. COA programs ensure there are times for regular reflective encounters. The minister can play a key role here.

• Mentors and youth ideally meet as a group, so that risk is minimized in this high trust ministry.

• Meditation, wisdom circles, journaling, and role play offer the youth time to deal with situational ethics
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Mentoring and COA programming can happen in large and small congregations. We have resources to help!

Part of the mentor’s job is to open the eyes of the youth to the social realities and innocent suffering of the rest of the world. (Stan Crow)

This often means engaging in some sort of social action project. By working as a team on a project that makes a difference in the world, both the mentor and youth can put their faith into action.
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Practical Testing

• Ropes courses and other types of physical challenges encourage a youth to rely on their inner and outer strength and can build self-confidence and provide an opportunity for youth to test themselves.

• It is important to honour all abilities and provide worthy alternatives.
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Practical Testing

• Building community and having FUN together are a big part of Coming of Age.

• At least some outings in nature are critical – they can be these type of challenges (ropes courses, hiking, rock climbing) solo camping, or other group building exercises done outdoors.
Enacted Ritual

• Enacted ritual takes on religious significance when we dramatize the compassion, concern and joy of caring in a faith community. Ritual makes possible the sharing of deeper meaning in common experiences.

• Ritual should be developed by the group to ensure it has meaning, but drawing on ancient and modern traditions is encouraged.
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Enacted Ritual

- Choose activities that you hope everyone will remember for a lifetime.

- The more the ritual is filled with mystery, the more it goes to the heart.

- After a Coming of Age ritual the youth engaged will be treated differently within community, by their peers and their parents.

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Empowering Story

- Values Based
- Future Directed
- Community Connected
- Reinforcing Symbols

- Often a vision quest, the making of masks, treasure boxes or walking sticks are used as part of developing ‘the empowering story’

- Participants write a credo statement as part of COA.
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Honouring our Coming of Age youth within the wider CUC denominational context reminds us all that we are part of a larger multigenerational community of free thinking, liberal religious people!

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What Are Your Intents in Designing Your COA Program?

**Rational Objective - Cognitive Intents**  
* What Do They Need to Know or Discover

**Example:**
- Participants Write Their Empowering Story
- Participants and Mentors Discuss and Identify Their Values

**Experiential Objective - Affective Intents**  
* The Guiding Mood or Feel of This Learning Experience

**Example:**
- Participants Understand Their Lives As a Journey
- Participants Experience Being a Part of a Community and Find a Bond to Others
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Image to Shift - Metaphoric Description
* Perception You Hope to Occasion - the Shift in Personal or Social Self.

Example:
• Shift from Seed to Plant
• Shift From Being a Victim to Being Free

Anticipated Outcomes - What Results Are You Intending?
* What New Situation Do You Hope For?

Example:
• Mentee Participating in the Life of Congregation as a Choice (not because parents told to)
• Mentee is Self Affirming - Sees Self as Accepted and Valued by the Community
EXERCISE – in small groups

State at least
one **Rational Objective**,  
one **Experiential Objective**,  
one **Image to Shift**, and  
one **Anticipated Outcome**  
for your program
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Some Considerations
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Considerations in planning for your program:

**Planners:** A group of committed people are needed in different roles - this cannot be run by only one or two people. Some connection with broader community, RE leadership and youth group is essential.

**Mentors:** Mentor selection must be done with appropriate care and intentional and complete program orientation is essential. Safe congregations impacts need to be addressed and risk assessment must be done. Lowering risk is manageable with mentors meeting as groups with the youth and with adults completing the appropriate screening.
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**Age:** Age is always a question - the trend seems to be moving towards youth in grade 7 or 8 (no more than 2 year age span is recommended.)

If we provide this transformative experience for the younger age youth group this then creates the potential nucleus for a youth group.

**It is important to state again, “the Coming of Age program serves as a real goal to keep the youth involved with the church and feeling a part of the overall community.”**

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**Attendance:**
Similar to OWL, continuity is very important. Youth (and their families) need to commit to the program and a covenant is formed.

**Rules:**
Rules, and how they are enforced is important to address. The rules for a COA program need to be very clear, along with the consequences for rule infractions. Youth conference and the Coming of Age program rules may be different. Covenants are important. Adults always enter into the same covenant for behavior as the youth.
**Fees:**
The overall charge for the program is important to decide. Anywhere between $100-$200 per youth for the whole year’s program is not unreasonable, depending on the off site events and associated fees. Fundraising will likely be needed!

(In some congregations, youth raise one third of the fee, the congregations contributes one third, and the family contributes one third. A young person would not be excluded due to financial hardship, however.)
A complete Coming of Age curriculum was developed by a team at the Greater Lansing MI congregation with funding from the Unitarian Sunday School Society and is available on loan from the CUC Lifespan Learning Library, or for purchase from their website [UU Curriculum and Resources Developers (UU CARDS)] or email uucoa@mac.com