

The Official Conference Adult FAQ

By David Shackelford

If you're reading this, hopefully, you're a PCD adult over 25 years of age. Preferably, you've been active in this district for at least six months, possibly in an RE or youth program, or possibly just as a local congregation member who enjoys working with youth. You're responsible, open-minded, and fun-loving. If the above apply, we would (really, really) love to have you as an Advisor at youth conferences!

Q: Hey, what's a conference?

Conferences, or “cons,” are weekend gatherings for youth which are planned, run, and attended by the Pacific Central District Young Religious Unitarian Universalists (PCD YRUU for short). The purpose of a con is to give youth a place to have fun, create community, and deepen spirituality.

Q: PCD YRUU?

PCD stands for 'Pacific Central District,' and it describes UU's living in Northern and Central California, Nevada, and Hawaii. YRUU stands for 'Young Religious Unitarian Universalists,' and it describes UU youth who participate in district-wide activities. There is a national YRUU youth council based in Boston, as well as district youth councils. The PCD youth council is the body that handles conference planning.

Q: Fun, community, and spirituality?

While we want everybody in attendance to enjoy themselves, we are intentional about trying to make spirituality and community-building a part of conferences.

-Youth are placed into small “touchgroups,” with a trained leader and an adult. Here they get a chance to talk and do activities with youth they might otherwise not meet or interact with. Touchgroups are great for making people feel comfortable in the community, allowing them to “touch base” with a small group they will meet with periodically throughout the weekend.

-We have a number of worships throughout the weekend, planned by a Council-appointed worship coordinator. Worships happen once each night, once at the end of the con, and occasionally in the morning. We regularly use readings, music of all sorts, and spiritual activities to help youth develop connections to each other and the world around them.

-We have several YELLer (Youth-Empowered Lay Leader, our volunteer youth staff) positions designed to help create a safe, comfortable community for all. Council plans out games, gatherings, dances, talent shows, and other events throughout the day. Our workshop coordinator makes sure that daytime workshops (led by anyone interested) are varied and engaging. Our energy monitors are confidants and sympathetic ears; youth can go to them to rant, cry, ask advice, or talk about anything at all. Energy monitors also are responsible for being aware of anyone who may look upset, lonely, or generally down.

Q: So what does an Advisor do at a conference?

Advisors attend conferences as part of our community, working in partnership with youth (the YELLers, specifically) to ensure a safe, fun event for all. They serve as reservoirs of experience and wisdom, and positive adult role models for youth. However, they also learn a lot from the conference youth, encounter positive youth role models, and receive new ideas about UU youth programming that they can take back to their local congregations.

Q: Does it cost money for adults to go to a conference?

No, adults receive full scholarship at weekend conference events.

Q: What will I do on a day-to-day basis as an adult?

Actually, nothing significantly different than what youth do. You'll attend group meals, participate in workshops, group events, and touchgroups, and go to worship. At the beginning of the conference, you'll have a meeting with the other adults and the Adult Coordinator (a Council member).

Because we recognize that adults sometimes have slightly different sleep and/or quiet needs from youth, we tend to be more lenient about them participating in *all* activities. While we want you to be a part of our community, don't be worried if, for your own health or peace of mind, you want to head off for a few hours to take a nap or read a book.

Also note that adults have a separate sleeping area on the site.

Q: As an Advisor, am I in charge of supervising the youth at the event?

Anyone on the conference staff, youth and adult alike, is responsible for watching for and responding to any unsafe (both physically or community-wise) behavior or situations. In YRUU, we try to foster the idea of youth and adults working together to solve problems. So while you do have a responsibility to watch for safety issues, this responsibility is not yours alone: it is shared by the entire YELLer (Youth-Empowered Lay Leader) team.

Q: I'm still a little confused.

Let me present two unsafe situations, and a way an Advisor might respond:

- 1) An Advisor is walking in the garden outside the church, and encounters two youth smoking at the edge of the building. He says, "Guys, you know that's not allowed. Come back inside with me." He tells one of the conference deans, and a joint youth/adult Conference Affairs Committee (CAC) is called. This group decides how unsafe the questionable behavior is, and whether it warrants consequences. Smoking at a conference very clearly violates a very clear rule and would probably result in a youth's parents being asked to take them home.
- 2) An Advisor notices that two youth seem to be constantly lip-locked, and it makes her uncomfortable. She can also see that it makes some youth uncomfortable, especially the younger ones. The advisor asks the couple to tone it down, saying that she and others are uncomfortable, and that their exclusive relationship is hurting the community. In the event the youth ignore her, she talks with a dean, they come to an agreement about why the behavior is unsafe, and the dean expresses this to the youth, telling them that if they're not willing to make the community a comfortable place, they're not welcome in the community.

Q: Why didn't the Advisor just tell the youth to cut out their behavior at the peril of being sent home?

There are a few reasons for this:

-If a behavior is assigned a consequence, we want it to feel like it came from the community, rather than one person. Even if a behavior is clearly in violation of a major rule, we want a youth to have a chance to explain himself to a group representing the conference community. A CAC is made up of leadership adults and youth, as well as a youth and adult from the community uninvolved in the situation. If a consequence springs from it, the reason is made very clear, and the youth knows how he or she has endangered the community.

-A harsh consequence is not always the best way to correct inappropriate behavior, and we feel that a small group can think about what's best for the community better than any individual. Calling a CAC or simply consulting a dean or other staff member pools wisdom and experience, and makes intentional deliberation more likely.

-Youth, as a rule, react more strongly to a directive, ultimatum, or consequence from another youth than they do to one from an adult. Our society makes a point of assigning adults natural authority over youth, and many youth will take a directive from an adult as lightly as they take mandates opposed by adult organizations, such as school cell phone bans, jaywalking laws, and speed limits. Often a youth (elected by the community) explaining how a behavior has hurt a community has much more impact than an adult saying the same—not because there is anything flawed in the adult's explanation, just because youth are very used to having directives imposed from 'on high.'

Q: So are you saying the youth Deans are in charge of me, even though I'm an adult and they're a youth? Aren't I liable for the youth's safety?

We would prefer you consult with the deans before taking action against a youth, especially if the situation is one in which time is not necessarily of the essence. We think a collaborative approach to problem-solving works best. However, there are times when it is necessary for an adult to exert his or her authority as such, and we leave those to your discretion. Certainly any time someone is in physical danger, we expect *anyone* present, adult or no, to use any means at their disposal to defuse the situation.

In short, I suppose, the Deans are not 'in charge' of you. If you think it's necessary to act unilaterally as an adult to keep the community safe, you're free to do so. However, whenever possible, we want youth and adults to work and make decisions together.

Q: How much do you need me at conferences?

So much that it's not even funny. Cons do not happen without adults. On the one hand, please only volunteer if you actually plan on coming, but please, please come. Obviously we do not expect adults to commit to being present at every conference, so if you're at all interested, try it out for just one weekend!

Q: Wow! I had no idea being an advisor at conferences could be so rewarding, or that advisors are one of the most critical parts of YRUU events! Where do I sign up?

Start by contacting the Adult Coordinator which is listed at pcdyruu.org under the Advisor or Council tab. Alternatively, send a message to Youth Council through the contact form on our website. Once you're in contact with someone from Council, we will supply you with the necessary form (a simple agreement to a criminal background check, which you will send to a website listing on the form) and give you further details about the upcoming conference. We're excited to hear from any and all interested adults!