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Transition is a part of life - especially for young people - and churches have a special opportunity and responsibility for celebrating and marking these moments. Honoring the achievements of graduating seniors and acknowledging this important transition in their lives is a small way we can continue to include young people in the lives of our congregations.

The congregation of St. Mary's in Arlington, Virginia, does its best to celebrate young people at the end of the academic year. One way we do that is by recognizing graduating seniors, both those who have stayed active and those who are less active. We find that young people raised at St. Mary's, as well as those who joined us more recently, have a real sense of identity as members of the congregation. Celebrating their time at St. Mary's, no matter how long or short, is important for everyone in the community.

### **Youth Sunday**

On the first Sunday in June, we thank and recognize all children and youth and the adults who mentor, teach, lead, and minister to our younger members. Youth Sunday is scheduled that day and the younger children serve as ushers and greeters at the 9 a.m. service. At the 11:15 service, we recognize the youth leaders and the adults who work with the youth, and recognize young people graduating from high school. Someone in this group is invited to give the sermon at both services.

While many congregations give graduates a Book of Common Prayer, we decided to give each graduate *Call on Me: A Prayer Book for Young People*, compiled by Jenifer Gamber and Sharon Ely Pearson (Morehouse Publishing, 2012). The book draws on the Book of Common Prayer and the Bible, while focusing on events that occur in the lives of young people. Divided into three parts - common prayer, types of prayer, and personal prayer - it includes prayers that celebrate personal achievements or address obstacles to grace and faith. The prayers from *Call on Me* can be used at youth events in a variety of settings.

Since I arrived at St. Mary's during the 2012-2013 academic year, I knew some of the seniors, but certainly not all of them. I was surprised when almost all of them came to the Senior Recognition. The 20 seniors who participated in the program were visibly moved as their names were called and each was given the book.

It was important for them to know that the congregation's support did not end with this celebration, but continued as they went in new directions. After the service was a lovely reception with time for congratulations and, of course, cake!



### **The Next Step - Keeping in Touch**

After graduation, we track our youth as they head to college, the work force, the military, a gap year, or whatever their next steps may be. We provide a list about what they are doing next for the congregation. For those leaving the area, we try to connect them to a campus ministry or congregation where they are working, in school or in the military.

To continue our connections with young people going to college, the youth in the congregation assemble care packages to send to alumni on a special occasion, such as Valentine's Day. They report that the care packages are greatly appreciated, and how much it means to them that their home parish remembers and is thinking about them.

In the end, the actual gifts we give graduates do not matter as much as the gesture. It is a time that the congregation acknowledges the gift that they have been to the community. The important gift they receive is in having been a full member of the congregation, the Body of Christ.

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