

1 Community Is Essential to Youth Ministry

Relationships are the starting point for youth ministry. Most young people's involvement in Church life, including youth ministry, is directly related to the sense of welcome they experience as members of the parish community and as participants in youth ministry programming. When relationships among youth and between youth and adults are left to chance, they have as much potential for failure as they have for success. To be a Christian community—the Body of Christ—we must be attentive to the welcome, acceptance, and invitation to participation that each young person receives.

Renewing the Vision states:

The content of our message will be heard only when it is lived in our relationships and community life. To teach compassion, generosity, tolerance, peace, forgiveness, acceptance, and love as gospel values and to identify ourselves as Christians requires us to live these values in our interactions with young people and in our community life. (P. 34)

This quotation makes it clear that it is impossible to teach the faith if it is not lived out within our communities. This is especially true for young people who are searching for faith and learning judgment skills. If our parish communities talk about being the Body of Christ but do not act on those beliefs, young people can become disillusioned. However, if our parish communities and youth ministry programs welcome young people with open arms, are attentive to their needs, provide opportunities for intergenerational and peer relationships, and create space for their questions and ideas, then young people experience the love of God and find meaning within their Catholic faith.

All our efforts at building community must be based on Gospel values and be imbedded in our parish structures. In 2002, the “Effective Youth Ministry Practices in Catholic Parishes” research project uncovered the following information. When asked, “What works in youth

What Do You Think?

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ministry?" adult leaders, parish staffs, and youth responded with the following ideas:

- Hospitality and relationship building are foundational to effective youth ministry.
- Young people are welcomed and accepted.
- Extending personal invitations, providing a warm welcome, building relationships, and forming groups is intentional and ongoing.
- A web of relationships is created: youth with youth, youth with adults, parish community with youth, youth with their families.

Renewing the Vision speaks of youth-friendly communities as a way to describe a parish that is willing to reach out and minister to every young person through all the ministries of the parish. Such parishes value young people, see youth as a resource, and provide opportunities for intergenerational relationships:

If parishes are to be worthy of the loyalty and active participation of youth, they will need to become "youth-friendly" communities in which youth have a conspicuous presence in parish life. (P. 13)

What Do You Think?

- ◆ Do we give as much attention to the role of the parish as we do to our youth ministry programs?
- ◆ What are the things that hold us back from making our parish youth-friendly?

The role of the parish in the life of a young person is of equal importance to the role of the youth ministry program. Something is missing when a young person experiences welcome and acceptance within a youth ministry program, but finds themselves excluded and their needs pushed aside within the larger parish community. The whole parish is responsible for providing ministry to youth, and if only a few people are taking that responsibility to heart, it will be reflected in the parish's relationship with its young people. *Renewing the Vision* reminds us, "The ministry of community is not only *what* we do (activity), but *who* we are (identity), and *how* we interact (relationships)" (p. 34). We must create an atmosphere in which *all* youth feel welcomed, safe, and appreciated. This cannot be true only within a small setting of the faith community, like the youth ministry program, but must also be true in all elements of parish life.

Community life comprises three important elements: atmosphere, attitude, and actions. It is essential to create an atmosphere in which young people know they are safe and accepted. They need to know that their presence is valued, their energy is appreciated, and they are invited and welcomed to contribute their own ideas and skills within the community.

I think those sorts of settings, right music, right context can really help them to be able to open up and to pray too. Somehow the setting has to be such that they sort of can forget about themselves. (Quote from an adult leader, "Effective Practices")

The attitude of all community members toward its young must be authentic (young people can spot a phony a mile off), positive, and understanding. In addition, what we say and do (or what we don't say or do) communicates volumes to young people. Parish communities and programs that are inviting and supportive and that help young people get to know others and build trusting relationships will be authentic Christian communities.

Building community is not the end goal of our ministry, but our goals cannot be accomplished without community. All people of faith come to know God through other people and are challenged to grow in faith through involvement in community. Within Catholic youth ministry, we have named our primary goals: creating disciples, encouraging involvement in the work and mission of the Church, and developing faithful individuals who live with a depth of spirituality and a healthy sense of self. These goals will only be achieved in a network of relationships, in other words, within a community. Young people in particular need to *experience* faith: engage in service activities, pray in community, hear about faith journeys in story and conversation, and see how friends and mentors express their faith in everyday life. By building community among young people, they will be able to walk through adolescence—a time of dramatic change—with friends and guides.

Young people will be able to learn from their peers, find refuge in common struggles, and provide direction and insight to others who are at a different place on their faith journey. When we are intentional about building community intergenerationally, we give young people the opportunity to learn about discipleship through the lived experience of faithful adults, find consolation and support from others outside their families, and provide guides and mentors as they move from childhood into adulthood. Relationships with adults help young people move through this transition with success.

A recent report, *Grading Grown-Ups 2002: How Do American Kids and Adults Relate?* (a national study by Search Institute with support from Thrivent Financial for Lutherans), highlights this issue:

There is clear evidence that young people benefit from multiple, sustained relationships with adults outside their immediate family. For example, Search Institute research has found that the more adults a young person reports that he or she can turn to, the better off that young person is. Yet just 22 percent of the youth surveyed reported having strong relationships with five or more adults other than their parents. (P. 5)

What Do You Think?

- ◆ If we gave a report card to our parish's attitude toward young people, what would be our grade?
- ◆ What are the actions we should add or subtract that can help young people feel more included and welcomed within our parish?
- ◆ Is our parish atmosphere youth-friendly?

What Do You Think?

- ◆ What joys of community have we witnessed within our youth community?

The importance of intergenerational ministry should not be overlooked. Parishes can achieve this goal by transforming various youth-only programs and strategies into intergenerational programs and strategies. Parishes can also encourage and provide leadership opportunities for youth within all the parish's ministries—social, liturgical, service, and so forth. In addition, new programs and strategies may be created to build community among all the generations of the parish community.

This vision of our ministry points to the importance of all the components of comprehensive youth ministry, but does not serve as a reason to ignore the need for community building. Developing community life is a noble purpose for youth ministry leaders to embrace. Building community should not be an afterthought or viewed as a frivolous activity. To believe this is to shortchange the next generation from the life-giving message of the Gospel that was first told in community and is only made real today in relationships.

Read Mark 9:36–37, and then offer the following prayer:

God,
help me to reach outside of myself,
to be extra conscious of the young who ache
to feel connected to you
and to your people.
Help me to welcome as you welcome,
not just with “hello”
but rather
with a true and authentic sense of welcome
that honors, reveres,
and recognizes that you are with us,
in all things, in all people.
Help me to see you in them.
Amen.

(David Haas, *Finding the Calm*, p. 39)