

# Building a Stronger Core Team

by PERRY RIHL

When I first started working in a parish as a paid coordinator of youth ministry, one of my first goals was to build a great group of volunteers who were passionate in their relationship with Jesus and were excited to work with teens. Naturally, as a recent college grad, I recruited my friends and other peers.

This worked out well...for a while. My young and vibrant Core Team was excited, energetic, and eager for new challenges. What they lacked in life experience, they more than made up for in vigor. **Everything was great until my Core Team did what recent college grads and early twenty-somethings tend to do: they moved on.** Some got jobs, some relocated, and others just got bored with the ministry or cooled off in their faith. Whatever the reason, I was left high and dry within a few months, looking for new volunteers to fill the gap.

What I found was a small group of parishioners who had been volunteering in one youth ministry capacity or another at the parish for ten, sometimes 15 years. They were food moms, basketball coaches, and other willing adults who loved to serve teens, but often felt marginalized by the youth minister's preference for a younger Core Team. When asked, these men and women were willing to lend their time and wisdom in a way my young adults were unable to do.

They brought a spiritual maturity and a commitment to the parish that can only grow when one puts down roots. **Most importantly, they brought life experience that not only enlivened their personal ministries but helped to guide and temper my personal youth and inexperience.** They thought about things I may not have considered and looked at the world from a different perspective. I discovered that this Core Team was willing to stick around and sacrifice for the teens. They continue to help grow our ministry through their authentic love and passion, educated by the ups and downs of life.

I've learned a few things from these awesome Core Members:

## Layer Your Core Team Well

My Core Team would not be what it is without the varied life experiences that create our shared witness. Some Core Members are married with children; others are single. Some are in their twenties, and others are closer to a parent or grandparents age than they are to the teens themselves. Each Core Member has different spiritualities, passions, talents, devotions, and roles within the ministry that help to make us stronger as a unit.

**One of the biggest mistakes I made early on was trying to find Core, who looked, talked, and acted like my image of a Core Member, but this approach only filled one set of criteria when it takes many to evangelize and catechize our teens.** Recruiting others to fill the same spot was foolish and redundant. Young adults are great for their energy and creativity while older members bring a level of knowledge and experience that only time can provide. Pair them up and mix experiences in your small groups and prayer teams. We need all types to help get the teens excited, to teach them, to lead them, and to make sure nobody gets left at the retreat center.

## Don't Be Afraid To Ask Parents

Some of the people who are going to be the most invested in the growth and quality of the youth ministry program are the parents of the teens you serve. By no means is this a rule, but we all know of parents who are interested and excited about what you have going on. We cannot be intimidated to contact parents and ask them to serve the Church by serving the youth. They don't need to be in a small group with their son or daughter but allow them to serve teens of similar age.

Get their perspective as parents who are raising a teenager in the current cultural climate. **Lean on them to share the youth ministry experience as a family and to grow in their role as primary catechist as they serve the teens of the parish.** Some parents may be reluctant at first, but remind them that this is about serving His children and that their 'yes' to his call comes with a guarantee of grace that far outweighs their trepidation.

## Delegate

You cannot do this ministry thing by yourself. The only way to set your program up to outlive your time at the parish is to delegate responsibilities to your Core Members based on their strengths and charisms. Ask Core to give talks or drive to and from events. Assign Core to keep things on time or coordinate things when you are away. Your reach as a youth minister can only go so far. It is only when we utilize the strengths of our Core Team and the parish community that a program can take on its unique character.

## Don't Be Afraid to Say Goodbye

It is a simple fact that people and life situations change over the months and years. If you have a Core Member who feels called to move on from your program, be prepared to support them. If you have a Core Member who is hindering the ministry, ask them to take a step back. Core Teams shift and change over the years for a variety of reasons. When we prayerfully go with the flow, this change becomes easier to handle.

## Pray Constantly

Pray for you Core by name every day. Offer Masses for them. Encourage them to be praying for each other and provide them with materials and opportunities to grow in their faith. Give them the names of teens to pray for and partake in the sacraments together, sharing your successes and challenges as a group.

The Core Team is just that, a TEAM. **Unless we are constantly supporting them and receiving support from them, we cannot hope to maintain any longevity in our job.** The best Core Team is one made up of friends who share an authentic joy and love in each other's presence. Teens will use that example of prayer and fellowship to build their relationships. Come before Jesus as a team, and go forth as a team to do His work.

### *About the Author*

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I love Thai food, old books, and stupid puns. I'm married to a beautiful, patient, and holy woman and I live and work as a youth minister in the Diocese of Arlington, Virginia. God allows me to lead worship and retreats all over the place and you can follow me on Twitter @dprihl.