

Leadership for Effective Youth Ministry

The research strongly indicated that having the right leadership is an essential ingredient of effective youth ministry. Parish staff members reported that their coordinators of youth ministry fostered youth and adult leadership. Adult leaders talked about the importance of parish support and the impact that their parish staffs have on youth ministry. The young people named the personal attributes they value in their leaders, both youth and adult. Coordinators of youth ministry, adult volunteers, youth, pastors, and parish staff all play an important leadership role within youth ministry. In parishes with effective youth ministry, all of these groups work together to create a vibrant place for youth within the parish.

From the five findings in this chapter, two themes emerge. The first is a description of the attitudes, actions, and qualities of the coordinator of youth ministry. Symposium participants describe a new understanding for this important leadership role, preferring to name these leaders as animators of youth ministry. The coordinator of youth ministry role description implies that the role is primarily programmatic. But those interviewed emphasized the spiritual significance of this leader and the evolving role as the person who inspires and supports ministries throughout parish life. Because of this emphasis, the title of *animator* was suggested. Animator is frequently used to describe ministry leadership in religious communities. The animator knows that he or she is responsible for vision and inspiration as well as coordinating the tasks. The animator is not necessarily in the spotlight when ministry happens, allowing other leaders to emerge and shine.

A second theme in this chapter is the description of the qualities and actions of all adults who work with youth. Youth who encounter adults of vibrant faith grow in their faith and in their sense of belonging within the community. The openness and faithfulness of the adults they encounter in the parish is a key factor for youth. It determines whether youth will choose to

participate and how much they will grow in faith and discipleship. Good formation and support of adult leaders enables them to be successful in their roles.

Overall Findings Regarding Leadership for Youth Ministry

Coordinators of Youth Ministry

Three findings are directly related to the role of the coordinator of youth ministry. It should be noted that the “coordinator” is not necessarily a full-time, paid minister.

Leadership Finding 1: Coordinators Hold a Vision for the Ministry

The leadership of effective coordinators of youth ministry is based in an understanding of Church mission, values, reflection on the ministry components of youth ministry, and an understanding of comprehensive youth ministry. They know that youth ministry is the responsibility of the whole parish. Coordinators represent a variety of ages and personalities. What unites them is that they all act from a sense of vocation and awareness that they are called to this ministry.

Effective coordinators regularly check their ministry efforts against a shared parish vision for youth ministry, their own personal goals for their ministry, and *Renewing the Vision*. In addition, effective coordinators are able to set clear direc-

“The future of humanity is in the hands of those who are capable of providing coming generations with reasons for living and hoping.”

(Pope Paul VI, *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*)

tions and make good programmatic decisions. As a parish staff finding states, “They know what is at the core theologically and programmatically.”

In fact, I like to look at my column after it’s written to see if the components are there on a regular basis anyway. I am always checking myself against the components.

Adult Leader

I really like the idea of having a mission statement and having goals and looking at those goals . . . taking a look every year and seeing exactly what you are doing and where you have gone.

Adult Leader

Our coordinator of youth ministry knows what is central, and critical, and can’t be compromised, and what can; or if not compromised, not dealt with right now. He has a good sense of what is really at the core and needs to be there.

Parish Staff

The support of the whole parish is an essential element of effective youth ministry, and coordinators have an important role in building that support. Effective coordinators spend a great deal of time developing relationships not only with the young people but with the whole parish community. They understand that they cannot possibly minister to all of the young people of the parish and must draw from the richness of the parish community.

We tried to share that vision with everybody; we purposely had meetings with parish council and key leaders and all that to share vision in what youth ministry was about.

Adult Leader

A great gift for a youth minister, or anybody in a leadership position, is knowing that you cannot do it all by yourself, and it is very important for you to surround yourself with good people—adults and youth.

Parish Staff

Effective coordinators come in a variety of ages and styles and personalities. Although their personal attributes contribute to their effectiveness (see next finding), their ability to act from a sense of vocation seems to play an

essential role. Coordinators acknowledge that they need the help of the community and the Holy Spirit to effectively minister.

I really think the Holy Spirit gives me hope because I think the Holy Spirit has really inspired me and has worked through me in some incredible ways in the last five years.

Adult Leader

You are gifted in different areas. Realizing where you are gifted and celebrating that, instead of just focusing solely on “Why can’t I do that?” or “Why can’t I do this?” really blesses your ministry and helps.

Adult Leader

He is a person of faith and a person of mission. That forms what the program is.

Parish Staff

“The Ministry Coordinator “facilitates the people, programming, and resources of the parish or school community in a comprehensive ministry effort.”

(USCCB, RTV, p. 41)

Leadership Finding 2: Personal Attributes Make Coordinators Successful

Coordinators of youth ministry have personal attributes and virtues that make them successful. Coordinators of youth ministry have the following characteristics:

- Healthy and well-balanced
- Dedicated and enthusiastic
- Good communicators
- Approachable
- Trustworthy
- A team player within the parish

The young people who participated in the interviews were very direct in naming the importance of the personality of the youth minister. In their minds, “A youth-friendly youth minister is essential for effective youth ministry.” Youth know that without a good coordinator, youth ministry at their parish will falter. As one young leader stated,

One of the things that really helps is that she is not hypocritical. She lives the life, which is really good. Because I’ve seen other youth ministers say one thing and then do another thing, or say “We’re going to get the kids involved” and then lead everything. So that’s one great thing—to follow through with what you say and a lot of personal communication.

Parish staff members are also quite vocal about the importance of coordinators being healthy, well-balanced people, recognizing that the dedication and virtues of the coordinator had a profound impact on the effectiveness of the youth ministry. Hiring the right person was important to the parish staff. As one parish staff member explained:

When parishes look for youth ministers they have to look for healthy, well-balanced people who don’t have particular leanings towards any one ideology and they then are able to bring the health and balance to the whole program. I think attracting the right talent and person is crucial.

Parish Staff

Leadership Finding 3: Coordinators Animate Youth Ministry

Coordinators of youth ministry animate dynamic ministry with youth in a variety of ways. They are especially valued because they invite and welcome youth and adults and make them feel comfortable. Coordinators advocate for young people’s place in the church, the programming that youth need. They network with other youth ministers and connect to other parishes and the diocese.

Effective coordinators have the ability to make people feel “at home” within the church and at youth ministry events. They know the importance of remembering names, initiating conversation, and encouraging participation.

We sent out personal invitations and letters, just explaining what we were going to try to do this year and that we would really like to see them come back. We know they couldn't come to everything and to try something and our numbers have tripled, so I just think that personal invitation extended to them really helped our program.

Adult Leader

“Ministry coordinators alert the whole community to its responsibility for young people, draw forth the community's gifts and resources, and encourage and empower the community to minister with young people.”

(USCCB,
RTV, p. 25)

I think something about our youth minister that really helps is that he is almost like a friend to us. He'll talk to you and he makes you feel comfortable and he's nice to everyone and he'll act like he has known them forever. He always remembers your name. He is sort of like a friend and you really feel like you can laugh and talk with him. He makes you feel comfortable.

Youth Participant

This ability to build relationships extends to parents and other parish adults and includes parish organizations.

We value his ability to invite . . . the parents, who may not . . . feel comfortable in that situation. He invites them in and he learns what they may not know about themselves, or where they might fit in some part of the ministry.

Parish Staff

Adult youth ministry leaders talk about “playing the numbers game.” They are frustrated when the number of young people who attend an event becomes the measure for successful youth ministry. They know that it is important to minister to whoever walks through the door on a particular day.

So often, especially at the beginning of youth ministry, we focus so much on numbers because people tell us we need to focus on that. Instead of focusing on the numbers, focus on who is there . . . and celebrate with them. In time, it's miraculous. It's the best evangelism. Go and get the kids there, but celebrate and be present with who is there. Don't worry about who is not. In time, they'll come.

Adult Leader

Animating youth ministry in the parish also includes the important work of advocating for young people's roles within parish organizations and the parish community as a whole. Effective coordinators know that sometimes they have to sell youth ministry to a parish community that might not know or understand the giftedness of youth.

We look at young people and we see God. We see a reflection of God. But so many people don't. So our job is to go out there and make sure that people know that. We're advocates.

Adult Leader

The youth minister is the bridge between the youth and the adult so you need them to be advocating for you, not just arguing why you can't do things.

Youth Participant

Going beyond the parish boundaries enhances youth ministry, and effective coordinators know how to network with others to expand their ministry efforts. Staying connected to the diocese, parishes in their community, and national opportunities is important. Through these connections, parishes are able to offer ministry opportunities that go beyond what one parish could offer.

Our youth minister is good at making connections, networking among other parishes and dioceses and other dioceses at the national level.

Parish Staff

Adult leaders also speak about the importance of networking with other coordinators for support, ideas, and help in times of crisis. New coordinators, in particular, need the wisdom and example that can be found in others who

are experienced, but all appreciate being able to have someone to share stories and ideas with.

What gives me hope? All of you. All of you here—deeply faith-filled, committed people. You have a wonderful sense of humor. The reason is because of the good news. You have to be committed to that. All of you give me hope.

Adult Leader

You have to have networking. You have to have people that are in youth ministry that you can gripe to, just bounce things off of.

Adult Leader

Adult Volunteers

Young people need trusted adults in their lives. Their age or marital status is not important to young people. What is important is that adults are present and open to young people.

Leadership Finding 4: The Qualities of Adult Volunteers

Adults who work with youth must be genuine and real. They must have a passion for youth and be faith-filled. They are willing to be present to youth where they are: in the context of their lives. These adult volunteers build positive relationships with young people that are based in faith.

Youth can spot a phony from a great distance. They know which adults are committed to them and which are just putting in time. Youth spoke with great passion about the adults who were involved in their youth ministry. If the adults are genuine and real, the youth respond.

They have such a commitment to you. They have a job and have a life and have their own children. They have their own life and then they are committed to you. It is a great comfort.

Youth Participant

I guess it probably goes without saying—they have to really love the youth. You have to love youth, their music, their way of dressing, their way of speaking, their own little culture. You have to know and appreciate and respect that.

Parish Staff

You have to be yourself—with all your little flaws and everything else. And they love your flaws.

Parish Staff

Adults also must be able to share their story, which means, in part, being comfortable enough in their own skin to share their real self with another. Young people are looking for adults who will share their wisdom but are not afraid to let the young people struggle a little too. As one youth eloquently stated:

I am just saying that there's a large part of the time when the adults are older and wiser than we are and they have the benefit of the years of going through the same questions that we did. But I think what is so important is that we go through the questioning and we talk it out without immediately being told we're wrong.

Youth Participant

Young people need to experience faithful adults in order for them to understand what faith lived out looks like. Adults themselves must be on a journey of faith if they are going to be able to accompany a young person on his or her journey.

Young people have those core people who are in their own parish community that they have relied on. They've seen them witness of their own faith.

Adult Leader

In our parish youth ministry it is not just about the kids, but it's also about kids interacting with the adults in the parish and learning—the kids learning from the adults and the adults learning from the kids.

Youth Participant

Adults who work effectively with youth know how to connect to youth who are struggling and exploring questions. They accept immaturity, incessant questions, and other youthful behavior. Effective parishes take outreach ministry seriously and spend time going out to the places where young people are, to be present to them and to invite them into parish involvement.

“Leadership development . . . develops and nurtures adult leaders of lively faith and maturity with solid theological understandings, relational and ministry skills, and organizational ability appropriate to their particular role in ministry with adolescents.”

(USCCB, RTV, p. 41)

Our youth ministry comes from us walking the streets and inviting people to come and participate.

Adult Leader

You need to go where they are before you can get them to come to where you want them to be. You can't stand on the street and holler that you have something great over here unless you go over to their side of the street and see where they are at; to be present, and then that gives ideas on how to make them be present on your side of the street.

Parish Staff

Training and Formation

Adults, both coordinators and volunteers, need formation and training for their roles. Effective parishes are intentional about providing training, matching people to the right jobs, and being attentive to the faith lives of adults.

Leadership Finding 5: The Importance of Training

Training and formation is important for adults working in youth ministry. Adult leaders need to grow in their faith and learn skills for ministry. It is important to match the gifts and talents of adults to the right roles in youth ministry.

Effective parishes do not assume that adults automatically will be good at working with youth. Effective coordinators learn the skill of assessing the gifts of their volunteers and then work hard to match them to the right roles. They make sure that the volunteer gets the training and support necessary to succeed at the job they have been given. Effective coordinators know that if volunteers have a positive experience and feel good about their contributions they will most likely volunteer again.

We made a concerted effort about a year and a half ago to really put money and time into forming volunteers. That would be a huge focus for us. It made a whole lot of difference.

Adult Leader

I find the more prepared people are in general, the more likely that you'll get them to come back and you'll have a fulfilling experience as opposed to when you just throw them in there. They're like, "What am I doing?" They want to know specifically what is going to be asked of them and then train them to do it.

Parish Staff

In addition to practical skills, all of those who work in ministry with youth also need spiritual development. This came out as a very strong recommendation from the research symposium. The parish youth ministry leaders attending the symposium were adamant about the importance of spiritual formation for themselves and their volunteers. This was also evident in the research when youth talked about the qualities of the adults who work in youth ministry and the kinds of faith formation or catechesis that they felt was effective. Youth are looking for inspiration and spiritual authenticity in the leaders who share faith.

Pastors, Parish Staffs, and Youth as Leaders

Three other groups play an essential role in youth ministry leadership at effective parishes: pastors, parish staffs, and youth. Without the combined leadership of these groups, parishes struggle to provide effective ministry to youth. The importance of these groups is explored in chapters 1 and 2 of this book.

Recommendations

Leadership is a learned skill. Parishes with effective youth ministry have ministers who can inspire others, mentor new leaders, and know the importance of leading from a vision. To enhance the leadership for youth ministry at your parish, consider the following eight implications.

1: Youth ministry leaders must nurture their spirituality. Youth ministry leaders should find prayer styles that help them grow in faith. They should be intentional about creating time and space for spiritual reflection. Other opportunities for spiritual enrichment are attending Mass, finding a spiritual director, and praying for their ministry with others. All of these are ways that they can continue to experience God's presence in their life and reflect on the Good News.

2: Coordinators should network with other coordinators of youth ministry. We all need support and help along the way, and no one knows the struggles of youth ministry better than those engaged in the ministry. New coordinators can find a mentor who will help to guide their work and support them as they learn more about the ministry. They can work with other youth ministers on local or diocesan projects. Beware of isolation. Adults in ministry need a community of peers as much as the young people do.

3: Utilize local and national resources for developing responsive youth ministry. Diocesan offices and national organizations have resources, information, and training that can enhance your ministry. Pay attention to what is being offered and make good decisions about what will benefit you, your volunteers, and the young people of the parish. National and international events offer young people a profound experience of the larger church and help to inspire faith. Nationally sponsored or diocesan service weeks, leader-

ship programs, and retreats offer opportunities for young people that may not be available locally.

4: Develop a coordinating team of youth and adults to vision and plan for effective youth ministry. The coordinating team helps to shape the vision and direction for the ministry and direct youth ministry programs. The adults on the team have a unique opportunity to build meaningful relationships to youth. The youth on the team serve as peer leaders and inspire the participation and leadership growth of their peers.

5: Nurture the skills and the spirituality of the adults who work with youth in your parish. Provide ongoing training opportunities for your adult leaders. Mentor adults into new leadership roles. Host an adult retreat each year for your volunteers. Give adult leaders specific feedback about their ministry efforts. Pray all the time. All of these options help the adults who work with your young people to grow in their own faith and to learn the skills necessary for effective youth ministry.

6: Involve youth in leadership, ministry, and teaching roles in youth ministry and in the parish. Young people can transform your parish and your youth ministry efforts when they are allowed to make a difference. As one coordinator told us: “I told my kids once, don’t bring me problems, bring me solutions; and it’s amazing some of the solutions they’ll come up with. Some that I would have never thought of or attempted, but they said, ‘Let’s do this one.’” Create leadership roles within youth ministry and within the parish. Make sure that young people get the training and support that they need to succeed. *Tomorrow’s Present*, a research project on Catholic youth leadership, showed that young people who were involved in parish leadership as youth went on to value parish leadership and involvement as adults. Your investment in youth now can have a profound effect on the leadership of the church in the future.

7: Coordinators of youth ministry need to take the time to develop their skills. Your parish coordinator of youth ministry cannot be expected to know everything! But they can be expected to provide the leadership that your parish needs. To do that effectively, coordinators may need to study, reflect, establish a vision, and trust in others to help them. Coordinators must be intentional about learning what they do not currently know—through

diocesan training programs, certificate training programs, college and seminary programs, and mentoring programs.

8: Coordinators of youth ministry should be intentional about their relationship to their pastor, the parish staff, and the parish community. Coordinators must be in relationship with the other leaders of the parish if they are going to help infuse young people into the parish and to engage the adults in ministering to the parish. They can do this by finding projects that can build cross-ministry relationships. They can invite other parish organizations to collaborate with them. They can be the pastor's and parish staff's public relations person.

Conclusion

During the youth interviews, it was sometimes obvious that effective, healthy, loving adults worked with the young people. And this was most obvious when they were not actually talking about the adults. They would be sharing a story about their own personal faith journey, and it would become apparent that they had a trusted adult who accompanied them. One young person told a story about discovering her own style of leadership, which led the researchers to wonder: Who was the adult who helped her name this? Youth talked about the importance of doing service and how much they learned by reflecting on their call to justice—leading to the question, “Who was leading the reflection?”

Parishes with effective youth ministry love young people. This usually begins at the top. The pastor and parish staffs that were interviewed for this project have such passion for young people. They spoke with emotion about watching youth grow in leadership and faith. They are passionate about creating more and more ways that the whole parish could minister to the young people. These parishes also have qualified, educated, self-directed coordinators who take their call to ministry very seriously. These coordinators are grounded in a vision for youth ministry that includes all the youth of the parish. They know how important it is to engage the gifts of other adults. They know, ultimately, that the Body of Christ is bigger than they are and that if they do not engage other adults in ministering to youth, the young people will suffer.