



## Implementing Youth Ministry: Parish Pastoral Council Commissions by Kevin Driscoll, Diocese of Gary Office for Youth & Young Adults

### The Education and Formation Commission

Catholic education—be it through schools, religious education, or youth ministry programs—is a rich tradition of who we are as Catholics in the United States. In the 2000's, the U.S. Bishops have placed a strong priority on developing effective catechetical strategies, particularly in the area of adolescents.

Bishop Melczek once wrote, "Religious formation and education is a lifelong process. It cannot end with Confirmation. As you might recall, this was a priority I set for our diocese when I arrived here in August 1992. Catechesis is particularly necessary during the high school years which are a critical time during which young people are often formed. Thus, it stands to reason that we put forth our best effort when it comes to being a part of this formation."

#### ***Recommendations:***

- Explore strategies that take catechesis out of the classroom, especially for post-Confirmation teens.
- Determine catechetical themes that you value as a community, seek resources and develop programs that address those areas (i.e. chastity, social justice, pro-life, etc.). The USCCB document *Doctrinal Elements of a Curriculum Framework for Young People of High School Age* should guide you.
- Studies show that today's teens are not hardwired to accept facts from prescribed authority figures. Effective catechesis is best done through lived experience. Think 3-D: develop a multi-dimensional approach to formation that includes head (teach the facts), heart (bring them into a prayerful and intimate relationship with Christ), and hands (service to others).

### The Spirituality/Worship Commission

So often I hear that the answer to bringing more teens to Mass is to have a teen-only Mass. I think that is perhaps oversimplified. While only you can determine if this strategy would work for your community, I believe strongly that teens aren't the only segment of your parish program craving dynamic liturgy! We all do, let's be honest. Be it Sunday Eucharist or other forms of worship in your parish(es), care should be taken to ensure that the voice of youth are heard.

### ***Recommendations:***

- The easiest way to include the voice of youth in your liturgical celebrations is to include youth! Recruit youth to assume roles such as Extraordinary Ministers, Ministers of Hospitality, Music Ministers, and Lectors. Train the youth as you would any adults for those roles, and hold them equally accountable.
- If youth participate in large-scale events, encourage a representative to deliver 3-5 minute witness talks after communion (particularly if the community assisted in fundraising).
- Make youth the focus of National World Youth Day Sunday, held annually during the 30th Sunday of Ordinary Time (late October). OYYA provides resources in priest mailing each September.
- Creativity is essential to engaging youth in prayer experiences. Try new approaches.

## **The Parish Life Commission**

While elements of youth ministry fit into each commission, if you had to place it under one commission, I believe it fits best here. The reason is simple if you understand youth ministry is not a *group* or series of *activities*, but rather a *ministry*! Youth groups are clubs that teens either belong to or *do not* belong to. The intent might be very inclusive, but the very word “group” is exclusive. The term “youth ministry” might include youth group-type activities, but has a broader definition: it is *any effort* to touch the lives of adolescents in your community (for better or worse!). That includes things not commonly associated with “youth group,” like: homilies, how you extend hospitality, your parish carnival, other ministries, etc.

### ***Recommendations:***

- Are adolescents present outside of youth-only activities? If not, give them a voice in other areas of the parish.
- Ensure that youth (I recommend that they be a sophomore-senior in high school) are represented on the Parish Life Commission and/or Pastoral Council.
- How is the rest of the parish present to youth? We ask youth to fold tables, but don’t think to ask other ministries to assist youth! Youth ministry is best when the entire parish takes ownership of its youth.
- Develop comprehensive youth ministry strategies in accord with USCCB document on youth ministry *Renewing the Vision*. OYYA can provide training. Programming should reflect a variety of styles and formats.
- Empower a team of youth ministers to assist the youth ministry coordinator. No parish(es) should have just one youth minister. That would be like asking the DRE to teach all RE classes.
- Don’t do it alone. Ensure your parish(es) is/are represented at diocesan and national events. Your youth will be energized and reassured that they belong to a faith much bigger than what they see inside your four walls!

## **The Peace & Social Justice Commission**

Today’s teens are more socially-aware than any other generation. They volunteer. They are idealistic. They truly believe that they can change the world. They have grown up with tolerance, and with awareness. They are environmentally conscious. The pump is primed! Further, the current generation of teens is breaking free of the chains of our U.S. individualistic world view: they gather in small communities, and even when they are online, they prefer to connect with groups of friends via social networking. If youth are not a part of our social justice strategies, we are missing the boat!

### ***Recommendations:***

- Don't assume youth don't want to do service projects. But appeal to their social conscience: let them know why the project is really making a difference.
- Focus on teachings that surround the dignity of the human person. Most teen angst, depression and, sadly, violence can be attributed to a breakdown in human dignity.
- Studies show younger generations—not just Catholics—are more anti-abortion than previous generations. Great news! However their understanding of other pro-life issues isn't nearly as sharp. Develop strategies that connect their pro-life sensibilities to other issues like immigration, death penalty, poverty, etc.

## **The Stewardship/Administration Commission**

At a time when budgets are stretched thin, can we afford to invest in a ministry that is not a revenue producer? *Can we afford not to?! Did you know that 63% of Catholic teens served by youth ministry have been to confession in the last year, compared to 44% of Catholic teens not served by youth ministry? Did you know that 90% of youth ministry-served teens attend Mass frequently, compared to 61% of their non-served counterparts? Did you know that teens who have attended retreats, rallies, and conferences (like our own diocesan-sponsored events) report being significantly closer to God than those who have not?\** There is a distinct correlation to good youth ministry and a vibrant parish. Further, effective youth ministry breeds what I call a "reverse evangelization" in which fired-up teens bring their parents back to church.

*\* National Study of Youth & Religion, 2004-2009*

### ***Recommendations:***

- Be smart. People give if their needs are met. For many parents, their needs are strongly connected to the needs of their children. Feed their children spiritually and they will be thankful. Make sure parents are a part of everything you do in youth ministry, and celebrate your successes alongside them!
- Budget money for adult youth leaders. Even if you cannot afford a salary/benefits, a stipend of some kind goes far toward showing your appreciation for those special adults who are "fighting the good fight" in the trenches. Strongly consider picking up the entire registration fee for your adult leaders at diocesan/national events. If possible, underwrite a portion of the teens' costs as well.
- Funding youth participation in events is NOT a one-way street! It should be an investment, and the benefactors—the teens!—should present a return on that investment. Make sure the teens share their stories with after-communion witness talks, photo displays in the back of church, or bulletin thank yous.



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