

Adult Leader Findings

For the National Symposium on Effective Youth Ministry Practices in Catholic Parishes Project

Introduction

Within this research project, Adult Leaders were interviewed in 13 different sites across the country. The composition of the group varied depending on the site of the interview, but within the whole of the research, those interviewed included full and part-time, paid Coordinators of Youth Ministry, volunteer Coordinators of Youth Ministry, and volunteers with parish programs, including parents of youth.

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Legend / Description of Terms Used in this Report

Findings are the outcomes that resulted from exploring and compiling the research data in light of the focus of inquiry.

Quotations from Interviews are selected quotations that are representative of a much larger base of data from which this finding emerged. These are direct quotations from the interview transcripts.

Key Findings are the most salient and important findings for this constituency group.

Supportive Findings are those findings that support and help build toward the key finding.

Related Findings are findings that are related to the same topic as the key finding.

Other Findings are those findings that emerged from the data but stand alone. They are not directly related to or supportive of a key finding.

Adult Youth Minister Interviews – Summary of Key Findings

Youth Leadership

1. In parishes with effective youth ministry, young people have ownership for the ministry—particularly by taking leadership. Adult youth ministers encourage youth to take ownership, provide leadership training and formation, and then get out of the way.

Family

2. Effective youth ministers want to be parent’s allies in the faith formation of teens. Youth ministers express frustration that parents feel inadequate or apathetic in identifying with their role in the faith formation process.

Support from Parish Staff and Structures

3. Parishes with effective youth ministry have pastors, parish staffs, and pastoral councils who support youth and have a clear and common vision of youth ministry. They are collaborative in their planning and programming, integrating youth into all aspects of parish life. Staffs are mutually supportive of each other.

Role of the Coordinator of Youth Ministry

4. Effective youth ministers know the success of the program isn’t dependent upon them. They recognize they have both strengths and weaknesses, they aren’t always in charge, and ultimately, youth ministry is the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit.

Extended Programs

5. Trips, camps, and other extended programs are important because they provide opportunities for good prayer and liturgy, leadership development, small faith groups, fun, and excitement. They have a unique ability to build community among young people and between youth and adults.

Youth Ministry Connects Young People to God

6. The ultimate goal of youth ministry is connecting young people to God through the Catholic faith. This is done through prayer, discipleship opportunities, evangelization, and by connecting the young people to Jesus Christ.

Youth Ministry is Challenging

7. Effective youth ministry challenges young people to take risks, develop talents, learn about faith and morals, and become better people. Youth ministers sometimes need to say the hard things and must understand the truths of faith and challenge young people with those truths.

Importance of Creating Community

8. Effective youth ministry is very intentional about creating an atmosphere (physical and emotional) where young people have a sense of belonging and are accepted. Important elements include personal invitation, welcoming, building community, and building relationships.

Volunteer leadership and training

9. Effective youth ministry needs volunteer youth ministers and catechists who share responsibility for the parish's youth ministry. Effective volunteers are described as being genuine and authentic, having a passion for young people, and able to share their faith. Coordinators of Youth Ministry work to ensure that the right people are in the right jobs and that their volunteers represent a spectrum of ages.

Faith Formation

10. Effective youth ministry understands catechesis as an important component of youth ministry. Catechesis occurs in a variety of ways and settings, but youth learn best when they are experientially engaged in the topic. The more it looks and feels like school, the less they learn. Conflicting understandings and approaches between youth ministers and religious education directors is a barrier to effective faith formation.

Liturgy

11. Good liturgy is a priority and it includes music that is contemporary, homilies that youth can relate to, and includes youth as liturgical ministers. There are differing opinions on the value of "youth masses." Some parishes see them as opportunities for liturgy that reaches young people, other parishes are wary of segregating youth from the larger parish.

Youth Integrated into the Parish

12. Effective youth ministry helps teens become integrated into the full life of the parish community. The parish gives youth a voice and recognizes that youth ministry is everyone's responsibility.

Adult Youth Minister Interviews – Key Findings with Quotations and Supportive and Related Findings

Youth Leadership

1. In parishes with effective youth ministry, young people have ownership for the ministry—particularly by taking leadership. Adult youth ministers encourage youth to take ownership, provide leadership training and formation, and then get out of the way.

Quotations from interviews:

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."

You have to be open to allowing the mistakes or that they may not be able to do it as fast, or as quickly, or as well as we or another adult could do it. There is patience to allowing (youth) leadership to develop.

Something we have at the parish is a youth advisory board. It involves both adults and students. I think it gives the youth a chance to take some ownership in youth ministry in the parish, and the parish itself. It becomes theirs. They did the brainstorming work. They did the planning work. It's something that belongs to them.

(A boy showed up at a planning meeting) It was his first time coming to anything in youth ministry. We tried to use his ideas and ask him more questions about what he thought. We used a lot of his ideas. He was really enthusiastic about going and doing a lot of the work. He told me just recently actually that it made a really big difference for him. He felt accepted and like he could belong to this group.

I had a group of high school students come to me and ask to do a living rosary. I'm going, "Hello, are you sure?" (The youth responded,) "We've heard about this; we think this would be cool." You know, it was the most beautiful, moving, awe-inspiring thing we ever did. I think sometimes we fall into the trap of going, "Oh, they're just kids, what do they know?" They know so much more than we do. I'll learn more from them everyday than I could ever share with them.

Related Findings:

- 1.1 In effective youth ministry, young people invite and welcome other young people into programs and activities.
- 1.2 Effective youth ministry inspires and invites youth to make choices for vocations or careers in church ministry.
- 1.3 Youth witnessing to other youth is very effective youth ministry. Particularly on retreats, young people are given the chance to share their faith journey with their peers and those younger than themselves.

Family

2. Effective youth ministers want to be parent's allies in the faith formation of teens. Youth ministers express frustration that parents feel inadequate or apathetic in identifying with their role in the faith formation process.

Quotations from interviews:

I just did a retreat this past weekend and I had a couple parents tell me when they dropped the kid off that they were picking him up early the next day and couldn't stay for the whole thing. When the kids are standing there, it is hard to have this discussion, you know? When I get back, of course, I went to the junior high coordinator. If they were taking the ACT test, they wouldn't come in and say, "I'm sorry you can only stay until 11:00. You can't finish the test." Or if people were at a baseball game, they wouldn't pull him out in the sixth inning and say, "We have to go now." Why is it okay to do it there? It's the attitude.

What gives me hope is that I hear a lot about the obstacles of parents. I've never found parents to be obstacles very often. Most times, parents are very supportive if they understand what you're doing. I think that's the real key, to keep parents informed and included so that they feel needed in the whole thing just as much as it is with the kids.

...we have all of the parents in the first two hours of the retreat program. There is a lot of maybe forced dialogue that happened on issues and topics of faith that are challenging to the parents, I think, more so than the kids. The parents aren't really sure where they are at in their faith and the kids are moving along faster or maybe at a greater depth.

If your parents are allies and not outlaws...

Well, I think that's one of the reasons that we have some resistance (is) that the parents don't feel equipped to catechize their children. Sometimes I wish I didn't have a job because I know it would force the parents to find a way – teach themselves. And you know, if we didn't have this huge parish staff, they would have to get involved in their kids faith formation.

Supportive Finding:

- 2.1 Effective youth ministry partners with families. It provides family-based activities and resources to facilitate the faith formation of teens and their parents.

Related Finding:

- 2.2 Youth involved in active parish youth ministry can inspire their parents to grow in their faith.

Support from Parish Staff and Structures

3. Parishes with effective youth ministry have pastors, parish staffs, and pastoral councils who support youth and have a clear and common vision of youth ministry. They are collaborative in their planning and programming, integrating youth into all aspects of parish life. Staffs are mutually supportive of each other.

Quotations from interviews:

...when you have the support of the staff it makes for very exciting ministry opportunities.

We have a staff that is extremely supportive of young people – our liturgist, our pastor, our assistant pastor, our DRE. Everyone understands what youth ministry is. It's ministering to the young people of our parish, even those that don't come to gathered things.

You guys will probably laugh when I say this, but I got to get it on the tape. You've got to have the secretaries and the maintenance guys on your sides. If you do, you fight fewer battles, if you've got that taken care of. You have to recognize the ones that can really harm you or give you some real benefits.

Having your staff on board makes comprehensive ministry just so much easier because instead of people walking through the door going, "I need you because I need free labor," they come running through the door, going, "Oh my gosh, I have four high school students signed up to be, you know, teachers, and I normally have 20 at this point, where are they?" They rely on them, I mean, they want them badly. Having your staff behind you and you behind them makes a huge difference.

I'm not a naturally wild, entertaining person. I'm a lot more reserved. The last youth minister they had was much more outgoing and flamboyant than me. I've done much better with the prayer and the reflection. My only concern is convincing the rest of the staff that that is just as vital.

Supportive Finding:

- 3.1 Parishes with effective youth ministry have pastors who strongly support youth and youth ministry. Those pastors are present at youth activities, know young people's names, support the program with money, and understand the vision of youth ministry.

Related Finding:

- 3.2 Lack of financial support causes frustration for youth ministers and communicates a lack of caring to the young people. Occasional fundraisers can help build community and support special events, but fundraisers are not the main income source for the youth ministry budget in parishes with effective youth ministry.

Role of the Coordinator of Youth Ministry

4. Effective youth ministers know the success of the program isn't dependent upon them. They recognize they have both strengths and weaknesses, they aren't always in charge, and ultimately, youth ministry is the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit.

Quotations from interviews:

Some of the best things that have had the biggest impact on youth have been things that just kind of were handed over to God. Here's a plan. I'm not sure how it's all going to go, but it'll come together. You plan and you have some things set, but things that have come out have just sort of developed themselves from the people and the youth and from God.

We can only plan so much and then we have to step back and let the Holy Spirit to work within the minds of the youth. The leaders have to be helped to understand to trust in the Holy Spirit. If they are walking on the right path with good intentions then the Holy Spirit will take care of the rest. That trust is very empowering. It is not only for me, but for the youth also.

I think despite my brokenness and my inability to get my own life together, I'm still used. And I think that's important to me. I don't do this because I'm going to do great things in the lives of the young people; I do this because it does great things in my life, and it makes me closer to Jesus Christ.

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.

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

Supportive Findings:

- 4.1 Effective coordinators of youth ministry are aware of themselves as role models as persons of faith. They lead from the mission and goals of youth ministry, recognizing that youth ministry is a labor of love that demands sacrifice.
- 4.2 Effective youth ministers articulate a multifaceted understanding of youth ministry which includes an umbrella of activities.
- 4.3 Effective youth ministers advocate for young people and for their rightful place in the parish and community. They help all of the generations of the church to know and value each other, and they help young people to speak out against unfair structures and decisions that affect them.
- 4.4 Effective youth ministers are aware of the total number of young people in the parish, but they do not play 'the numbers game.' They provide quality ministry to anyone that comes, even if it is only one person.

Related Finding:

- 4.5 Effective youth ministers network with other youth ministers. In doing this, they find inspiration from experienced folks, people to share stories with, to bounce things off of, gripe to, and learn new ideas and activities from.

Extended Programs

5. Trips, camps, and other extended programs are important because they provide opportunities for good prayer and liturgy, leadership development, small faith groups, fun, and excitement. They have a unique ability to build community among young people and between youth and adults.

Quotations from interviews:

I think the cool part about trips if you do them right, you can address all the good points, you know. You can do good liturgies and do good inter-relational stuff and there's opportunity for leadership and opportunities to serve. So you can just wrap them all in this package with a small faith group that you're traveling with and then they're having so much fun.

What I heard a little bit ago was that you get to know the young people; they also get to know us. I think they get to see us in a more human form than as 'the youth minister at church.'

...it's the [...] getting dirty and crabby and cranky and getting happy and glad, all of it. It's really cool.

So stick me on a bus, send me across country, and I'm a happy camper. People say, you want to do this and I'm like, "Oh my God, yeah. You haven't been trapped on a bus." I love the bus. There's nothing like getting to know somebody who hasn't got to change their underwear every day. You really get to know that person. You share with them on a completely different level than you would share with them in a normal time.

The bus ride gives you a microcosm of your life, and you get to know who they are. You get individual time with them, specifically, and they feel like you want to know who they are.

(A five-day youth camp) They come out of there very spirit filled and they form a union from year-to-year and they can talk about their faith openly to one another and not feel peer pressure...

Related Findings:

- 5.1 Youth retreats build community; make faith tangible, involve young people in leadership, and provide a significant faith experience. Retreats have a long-term impact on individuals and groups.
- 5.2 Service opportunities play an important role in youth ministry and in the faith formations of young people. Service allows young people to build relationships with people different from themselves, be evangelized and become evangelizers, invites deep experiences of conversion, and builds self-esteem in youth.

Youth Ministry Connects Young People to God

6. The ultimate goal of youth ministry is connecting young people to God through the Catholic faith. This is done through prayer, discipleship opportunities, evangelization, and by connecting the young people to Jesus Christ.

Quotations from interviews:

I would say that youth ministry in our parish is somehow trying to help our young people to have a relationship with Jesus Christ, to really develop them to be disciples where they experience the presence, this mystery of Christ in their lives. And because of that they, they would really be involved in the mission of Christ which is really the mission of the church.

Some of these kids don't even know God because nobody in their house knows God. We bring them into the church. Here is a child that doesn't even have food to eat, and you have to tell him where God is in his life, and show him where God is in his life. I got kids whose parents are on crack cocaine and the whole bit, and I'm trying to put God in their lives.

I need to bring them to Christ. We try to make Christ first in our lives with whatever we do. To be visible and strong and not timid and not afraid of God and prayer and praise. That has been very successful in our program.

She started crying. I said, "Welcome back." She got it. She cried and cried and hugged me and couldn't wait to be involved again. She thought she was gone, and lost, and never coming back.

One thing that gives me hope is I have a lot of kids who come on a weekly basis for our life meetings who are not Catholic and a bunch of those who are un-churched. They are not baptized; their parents don't go to church and the whole deal. What gives me hope is when those kids come up after a year or so of being there and say, "What do I need to do to be a Catholic?" This is like, "Yes, OK!"

Related Finding:

- 6.1 One of the blessings of youth ministry is witnessing young people's "aha" experiences of God.

Youth Ministry is Challenging

7. Effective youth ministry challenges young people to take risks, develop talents, learn about faith and morals, and become better people. Youth ministers sometimes need to say the hard things and must understand the truths of faith and challenge young people with those truths.

Quotations from interviews:

I think that that's really a key factor in what works in our youth ministry, is that you don't water-down the truth. The teens don't want that. I mean they know, they know what the world has to offer already. They want to hear what Jesus Christ has to offer. And we can't water it down.

One of the things that I think works is having our kids be risk takers in the sense of challenging them beyond what's comfortable. Somehow our kids are willing to take risks when it comes to faith, whether it be lecturing, or cantoring, or service. Sometimes they might be nervous about that, but if you expose them to the wealth of liturgy and faith, that's one of the things we should be helping our kids to do.

... I challenged her to do it but she walked away from me and I thought she didn't hear. She's like, "I always listen to you. I'll never let you know but I always listen to you." Watching certain young people make choices because they know that they've been challenged, they've been a part of community. There might not always be the direct link...

I don't know how many years ago it was, but I decided I wasn't going to screw around any more and was going to start telling the truth and not pussyfoot around our faith and about getting spiritual with the kids and challenging them spiritually.

We are going to love you. You are here. You are welcome. We are happy you are here, but we are going to challenge you. We are going to talk about faith, and we are going to talk about God, and we are not going to be ashamed of it. That has been working.

Importance of Creating Community

8. Effective youth ministry is very intentional about creating an atmosphere (physical and emotional) where young people have a sense of belonging and are accepted. Important elements include personal invitation, welcoming, building community, and building relationships.

Quotations from interviews:

Having space for the teens has been really important, a place to call their own. We do have a space at the Church which is their territory. It's like their home turf. They know they're safe.

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.

...we were very intentional about having one person, in particular we found somebody that was excellent, be at the back of the youth group meeting. He didn't have any job in the youth group meeting as such and he didn't run anything. But he greeted the kids at the door and he knew everybody's name. And he knew something special about every kid. He could make sure that he knew which ones were brand new in the group. And he would sit for a minute in the group and learn a little bit about them and make them feel welcome.

(Young people) think the Catholic Church is some place for them when they grow up and if we don't provide a welcoming, inviting experience for them to let them know that their church is the church of today, they're not going to take that active role, and they're not going to be involved, and they're not going to understand...

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

Supportive Finding:

- 8.1 Effective youth ministry employs meal ministry. Food draws people together, makes them feel welcome, and honors the complexity of family life.

Related Findings:

- 8.2 Teens enjoy building relationships with Catholic teens from other parishes. Effective parish youth ministry enables this through inter-parish retreats, social events, and diocesan activities. This requires a non-competitive, non-possessive attitude on the part of the youth ministers.
- 8.3 Parishes with effective youth ministry welcome youth of any religious or denominational background. Their youth ministers work cooperatively with the leaders of other local churches.

Volunteer Leadership and Training

9. Effective youth ministry needs volunteer youth ministers and catechists who share responsibility for the parish's youth ministry. Effective volunteers are described as being genuine and authentic, having a passion for young people, and able to share their faith. Coordinators of Youth Ministry work to ensure that the right people are in the right jobs and that their volunteers represent a spectrum of ages.

Quotations from interviews:

You have to walk the walk. You have to live by what you say and be that for your kids. Be real.

You have to be able to see Jesus in every single one of the kids.

I think another hindrance is really not having adults who are willing to get into the messiness of young people's lives. Parents are willing to bake, or to drive, or to make telephone calls, or whatever. But actively sit and talk with young people, or really be in with them, is a challenge for a lot of adults.

...people are still thinking we got to have college students in there to work with the kids, but some of my best volunteers have been 70; maturity is important, a balance. I think of balance as good volunteers but just looking for more than just someone who is 25. You don't want everyone to be 45 either; you need a balance.

...we try and do that within our volunteers who volunteer in youth ministry, and we have turned down a lot of people and just say that this may not be where your giftedness lies. Can we suggest something else? And as hard as that is to say it's better off in the long run for everybody. To say with real love and genuine concern, this may not be your gift...

Supportive Findings:

- 9.1 Parishes with effective youth ministry are intentional about training and forming volunteer youth ministers. It takes time and money. Coordinators of youth ministry are attentive to their own training and formational needs, prayer life, and spiritual growth.
- 9.2 A significant avenue for touching the hearts of young people is through personal relationships with adults. Effective adult ministers listen to youth and demonstrate their love and concern.

Faith Formation

10. Effective youth ministry understands catechesis as an important component of youth ministry. Catechesis occurs in a variety of ways and settings, but youth learn best when they are experientially engaged in the topic. The more it looks and feels like school, the less they learn. Conflicting understandings and approaches between youth ministers and religious education directors is a barrier to effective faith formation.

Quotations from interviews:

...that group of boys I was talking about earlier, there's no way in God's green earth I can sit those boys down and do a religious education class with them. Do you know how much catechesis we've done playing basketball?

The key there is that we allow them to experience the message. It's not boring. You know, they come in and they experience the message. We don't just open the book and read it to them. But we give it to them. They live the message, somehow or another, through what we do. And I think that's been really key to bringing the young people in.

I think I have actually had more significant moments of catechesis in those ten-minute discussions in those meetings than at anything that I have ever done anywhere else. They don't even realize that is what we are doing. They are just so excited and into what we are talking about because it is related to what they are working on.

What doesn't work? Text books, work books. They don't want to go to school again for another hour.

Our religious education director said, "What do you mean, tear the roof off this thing? It was invented 1500 years ago. You just have to follow the plan." We find that youth ministry works when we don't follow any plan. We constantly strive to find better ways to bring these kids to Jesus.

Liturgy

11. Good liturgy is a priority and it includes music that is contemporary, homilies that youth can relate to, and includes youth as liturgical ministers. There are differing opinions on the value of “youth masses.” Some parishes see them as opportunities for liturgy that reaches young people, other parishes are wary of segregating youth from the larger parish.

Quotations from interviews:

Another thing that is not working is the homily, the boring homily. To me, I think it's an insult to the young people, if they (the priest) cannot be inclusive enough on a subject to include the entire parish. It should include the youth and the adults as well. If you want them to be part of the church then you need to talk to them while they are there. I think that is a big problem.

...he came to church by himself when his parents really weren't practicing faith. He became a lector. He would memorize the whole reading himself. He would proclaim it without looking down. Somehow by putting the time into reading, it really nurtured his relationship with Christ and also doing a tremendous value to the community to see a young persons proclaim so well.

We have been discussing what we can do to make mass more interesting for them, and one said, “If we make a mass just for us then what will happen when we become adults?” I thought that was extremely prophetic. They don't want something just for them. They enjoy being with family and friends. They want liturgy to be good, but they don't want it just for them.

I found parishes that do have a youth oriented mass do it well so others don't feel excluded. I think it is important to know that there are different models out there that are working.

If a young person looks up on that altar and doesn't see anybody their own age, that says to them; I am not part of that. Once I am too tall to fit in the server's alb, I am off the altar and I can't go back until I am 21 or whatever. That says to them that they don't belong there. If they don't belong on the altar, then they don't belong in the pew.

Youth Integrated into the Parish

12. Effective youth ministry helps teens become integrated into the full life of the parish community. The parish gives youth a voice and recognizes that youth ministry is everyone's responsibility.

Quotations from interviews:

First and foremost, I think it's comprehensive, meaning that it is infused, young people are infused in every aspect of the faith community life.

When we were first establishing a high school ministry and talking to the kids about what they wanted, they didn't want a social group. What they wanted was a way to stay connected to the parish and to be of service. The things that we do that stick to that work. When we get off track there is just not as much enthusiasm.

A lot of people are putting energy into helping kids find ways to be involved in the parish. So when you go to a meeting of the lectors, it ranges from 14 to 84 and the same thing with the music ministry. It is a good age range where everybody is involved. Servers on Sunday could be a 35-year-old man and a 15-year-old girl. It is all mixed, everybody doing things together.

I think that youth ministry focuses on the youth but it is a parish life and even community life ministry. It is all-inclusive, but it has the focus on youth. Also I think it needs to be intentional. I feel like we can provide a bunch of programming and each program I feel needs to sort of have a connectedness...

I hope for inclusive community involvement - that there is never a thought that says, "Oh what about our youth?" It just comes naturally that your youth are invited in, and are accepted, and are put to work as viable people in our parish. That would be my goal.

Related Finding:

- 12.1 Intergenerational ministry within the parish helps youth build relationships within families and all generations. The rewards are the stories shared and the positive relationships that enrich all involved.

Other Findings

Diocesan Support

13. Parishes with effective youth ministry receive support from their bishops and diocesan offices of youth ministry. Their seminaries educate seminarians about the importance of youth ministry.

Written Resources

14. Good written resources help youth ministers plan effective youth ministry. Good resources were identified as short and easy-to-understand, where they the youth ministers can pull from different resources to create lessons, retreats, etc. A lack of good resources for intergenerational and family ministry was expressed.

Role of 18-21 year olds

15. In parishes with effective youth ministry, there is a split in understanding the role of the 18-21 year old. Some parishes bring people in this age group back immediately as ministers to high school youth. Other parishes provide separate programming for their continued formation, but they must be 21 or older before they can minister to high school youth. All agree that this is an age group that needs more attention.

Meeting Youth Where They Are

16. Effective youth ministry meets young people where they are and invites them to recognize God in all aspects of their life. Adults not only recognize the importance of non-church activities, but are present at school and community events in support of the young people.

At-Risk Youth

17. Effective youth ministers have a passion for reaching youth who are marginalized or at-risk. They befriend those rejected by their peers, reach out to kids who cause trouble, and provide a center and programs for neighborhood youth.

Helping Youth in Crisis

18. Parishes with effective youth ministry provide timely opportunities for young people to pray and talk when crisis strikes; particularly when the crisis is the death of someone they know.

Varied Programs and Activities

19. Youth ministry provides numerous and varied activities for young people to engage in the youth ministry program and parish life.

Adult Youth Minister Interviews – All Findings with Quotations

Youth Leadership

1. In parishes with effective youth ministry, young people have ownership for the ministry—particularly by taking leadership. Adult youth ministers encourage youth to take ownership, provide leadership training and formation, and then get out of the way.

Quotations from interviews:

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."

You have to be open to allowing the mistakes or that they may not be able to do it as fast, or as quickly, or as well as we or another adult could do it. There is patience to allowing (youth) leadership to develop.

Something we have at the parish is a youth advisory board. It involves both adults and students. I think it gives the youth a chance to take some ownership in youth ministry in the parish, and the parish itself. It becomes theirs. They did the brainstorming work. They did the planning work. It's something that belongs to them.

(A boy showed up at a planning meeting) It was his first time coming to anything in youth ministry. We tried to use his ideas and ask him more questions about what he thought. We used a lot of his ideas. He was really enthusiastic about going and doing a lot of the work. He told me just recently actually that it made a really big difference for him. He felt accepted and like he could belong to this group.

I had a group of high school students come to me and ask to do a living rosary. I'm going, "Hello, are you sure?" (The youth responded,) "We've heard about this; we think this would be cool." You know, it was the most beautiful, moving, awe-inspiring thing we ever did. I think sometimes we fall into the trap of going, "Oh, they're just kids, what do they know?" They know so much more than we do. I'll learn more from them everyday than I could ever share with them.

Related Findings:

- 1.1 In effective youth ministry, young people invite and welcome other young people into programs and activities.

Quotations from interviews:

What gives me hope is their willingness to reach out to other people and to minister to so many different people in so many different ways. I think it is just, it seems like over the last three to five years, I am seeing more and more of that.

For the ones that do come, the ones that come to the programs and they may be able to then reach those who don't come to the program. It gives me hope to know that there are youth that are doing that, they're actively doing that.

I can talk till I'm blue in the face – about what a cool retreat it's going to be, but to have another young person or a couple young people come in and say, "You want to be here, this is going to awesome." And they go, "Yeah, I do want to be there. It's going to be kind of cool." And then if you can keep that excitement going the, like you said, all of a sudden things are growing and instead of having 10, you've got 20, and then you got 40, and it's just like that commercial...

1.2 Effective youth ministry inspires and invites youth to make choices for vocations or careers in church ministry.

Quotations from interviews:

...when he graduated from high school he had two ROTC scholarships and several other offers. And he chose to go to the seminary and his parents had to pay for it, so they kicked me. But when he was ordained, and he gave his little speech and everything, he said, "I have to thank my youth minister for opening doors and planting seeds that I never would have known were there." And that was probably the most fulfilling experience I've ever had because you don't think about the stuff you do. You stick a kid on the bus, and go across the country, and he gets to meet the Pope, and you never knew this was going to happen. And from that experience he decided that he wanted a life in ministry. That was the coolest experience I ever had.

The other thing is as long as I have been around the youth ministry, it's getting to see our youth turn into adults and then start ministering in so many different ways. Whether it is youth ministry, or catechesis, or whatever way they are doing it. It is a really exciting thing to be able to see that.

What gives me hope is seeing young people graduating from college and choosing careers because of their faith. It is important to them. This one girl is spending two years in Chile in service. Someone is choosing to be a youth minister and pursuing that. That gives me hope because of what we have provided for them in their high school years nurtured that so that they pursued that in college and then pursued that long term.

That's something that I really find in my work with the youth. I really try to let them think about...vocation in the church such as DRE, youth ministry - something that they can actually think about when they're going to college. I think we need to open those doors. We really need to be able to, with the teens that we're working with, plant those seeds because we can't just take it for granted that there are going to be this multitude of youth ministers out there, DREs or anything. I think we need to nurture that and to let them know that there are possibilities.

1.3 Youth witnessing to other youth is very effective youth ministry. Particularly on retreats, young people are given the chance to share their faith journey with their peers and those younger than themselves.

Quotations from interviews:

...the effectiveness of the message of witness. I think it is really more powerful to have an 18 year old give witness as to why abstinence is important than a 35+, in my case, giving that same message. Or when you have a high school senior take a 7th grader aside when they're screwing around... and saying, "We want to be serious here, we're praying" than if the youth minister or one of the other core leaders of the adults do it.

...I don't think I would have grown in my faith without learning to share my faith.

I was the head of a retreat this past weekend, and I had a 15-year old girl come in and talk to them about STDs since it was an all girls' retreat. It was interesting because she volunteered to do it. I found that she had herpes, and she took it upon herself to share this information with the young ladies gathered there. She explained to them what herpes is and how she got it, etc. The reaction that I got out of the kids was overwhelming. They asked all sorts of questions. She was able to tell them she sat where they were sitting last year and, "I heard what they said about listening to parents and diseases you can get from becoming sexually active, but I didn't figure it could happen to me."

Family

2. Effective youth ministers want to be parent's allies in the faith formation of teens. Youth ministers express frustration that parents feel inadequate or apathetic in identifying with their role in the faith formation process.

Quotations from interviews:

I just did a retreat this past weekend and I had a couple parents tell me when they dropped the kid off that they were picking him up early the next day and couldn't stay for the whole thing. When the kids are standing there, it is hard to have this discussion, you know? When I get back, of course, I went to the junior high coordinator. If they were taking the ACT test, they wouldn't come in and say, "I'm sorry you can only stay until 11:00. You can't finish the test." Or if people were at a baseball game, they wouldn't pull him out in the sixth inning and say, "We have to go now." Why is it okay to do it there? It's the attitude.

What gives me hope is that I hear a lot about the obstacles of parents. I've never found parents to be obstacles very often. Most times, parents are very supportive if they understand what you're doing. I think that's the real key, to keep parents informed and included so that they feel needed in the whole thing just as much as it is with the kids.

...we have all of the parents in the first two hours of the retreat program. There is a lot of maybe forced dialogue that happened on issues and topics of faith that are challenging to the parents, I think, more so than the kids. The parents aren't really sure where they are at in their faith and the kids are moving along faster or maybe at a greater depth.

If your parents are allies and not outlaws...

Well, I think that's one of the reasons that we have some resistance (is) that the parents don't feel equipped to catechize their children. Sometimes I wish I didn't have a job because I know it would force the parents to find a way – teach themselves. And you know, if we didn't have this huge parish staff, they would have to get involved in their kids faith formation.

Supportive Finding:

- 2.1 Effective youth ministry partners with families. It provides family-based activities and resources to facilitate the faith formation of teens and their parents.

Quotations from interviews:

I see youth ministry as a Christ-centered means of the parish partnering with the families, especially with the parents, in helping them to foster and pass on the Catholic faith to their children.

Once a month we have large group family based sessions. (In an evaluation) 70% of the parents wrote in that they enjoyed being together at the large group sessions with their teens. Giving them resources to use in their homes, on the Internet, so that they can feel comfortable sharing their faith and to empower them to do that.

A real surprise for us is the number of parents that are like, "Tell me what to do with my kid, don't tell me about religion, tell me what to do with my kid the rest of the time." It's been very successful for us. It has met people where they're at.

One other thing that I've tried to focus on this year is the family. We're doing a lot more family-oriented activities. I think that's where we're headed is towards family catechesis. I think we have to think outside the box. We're concentrating so hard on teaching the kids that I think we're losing sight that if we don't get the whole family involved, we're going to lose them at some point.

I think we live in an extraordinary time where there is a tremendous amount of stress put on family life. Our parish used to have every Wednesday with religious education. But in an effort to support family life a little bit more we are offering a program, formal formation, on a monthly basis with lots of opportunities that they can come to by choice and lots of retreats and a lot of things like that.

2.2 Youth involved in active parish youth ministry can inspire their parents to grow in their faith.

Quotations from interviews:

I had a kid last year who moved out of his room, sold \$200 of his stereo equipment and wanted to live a simpler life. He moved into the basement with a cot, a bible, and a lamp. They called him Tarzan. It was a statement. He was the one telling his parents, "I want to be like this." They were going to church already but it helped them in their faith. I'm not just saying go for the youth and that will convert the family, but there is also the ability to reach the kids and the families.

I've seen young people bring their parents and their other family back into church to a more active role in the church. What a blessing to see the kids getting the parents back to church.

The parent support just keeps growing as the kids keep evolving. If we can keep them coming, I think that as a result some of those parents will come back.

Support from Parish Staff and Structures

3. Parishes with effective youth ministry have pastors, parish staffs, and pastoral councils who support youth and have a clear and common vision of youth ministry. They are collaborative in their planning and programming, integrating youth into all aspects of parish life. Staffs are mutually supportive of each other.

Quotations from interviews:

...when you have the support of the staff it makes for very exciting ministry opportunities.

We have a staff that is extremely supportive of young people – our liturgist, our pastor, our assistant pastor, our DRE. Everyone understands what youth ministry is. It's ministering to the young people of our parish, even those that don't come to gathered things.

You guys will probably laugh when I say this, but I got to get it on the tape. You've got to have the secretaries and the maintenance guys on your sides. If you do, you fight fewer battles, if you've got that taken care of. You have to recognize the ones that can really harm you or give you some real benefits.

Having your staff on board makes comprehensive ministry just so much easier because instead of people walking through the door going, "I need you because I need free labor," they come running through the door, going, "Oh my gosh, I have four high school students signed up to be, you know, teachers, and I normally have 20 at this point, where are they?" They rely on them, I mean, they want them badly. Having your staff behind you and you behind them makes a huge difference.

I'm not a naturally wild, entertaining person. I'm a lot more reserved. The last youth minister they had was much more outgoing and flamboyant than me. I've done much better with the prayer and the reflection. My only concern is convincing the rest of the staff that that is just as vital.

Supportive Finding:

- 3.1 Parishes with effective youth ministry have pastors who strongly support youth and youth ministry. Those pastors are present at youth activities, know young people's names, support the program with money, and understand the vision of youth ministry.

Quotations from interviews:

Did we talk about the barriers? Sadly, in our parish, it is the priest. They are aware that it is the priest, and how bad and how tragic it is that there is not someone they can go to and ask their questions and feel as if they are treated with respect and with the dignity of being valued in the parish. This is in our situation, the biggest barrier.

I think a lot of times that if you don't have that support, or your priest just isn't there yet, you have to be his PR person. And you really have to work at being the go-between the kids and the priest or the families or the priest and help that out a little bit.

He's there when things are going well and when they're not going well; you can walk through the door and say, "Hey, do you have five minutes, I need some advice for the benefit of the young people." And he loves them as much and they know that...

And we have no paid youth minister. We have a priest who in some ways is supportive of what we're doing, and in other ways he's not supportive. We have people of influence in our parish who don't see youth ministry as important. I'm on the parish council, and I was told in parish council that "I was a glorified babysitter." My priest sat there and said nothing to defend me.

But the biggest thing that works is the excitement of the amazing core team, of the pastor who is at every life night, at every fundraiser. If he's not talking, or not leading small groups, he's sitting in the back, you know, or in the kitchen cooking with the adults. So that is the pastor support.

Related Finding:

- 3.2 Lack of financial support causes frustration for youth ministers and communicates a lack of caring to the young people. Occasional fundraisers can help build community and support special events, but fundraisers are not the main income source for the youth ministry budget in parishes with effective youth ministry.

Quotations from interviews:

...the pastor's support; it doesn't just mean a dollar amount; it means they acknowledge their existence as being part of the parish and for some, unfortunately for some pastors, that acknowledgement doesn't happen until there's money in the envelope and so your young people aren't acknowledged. They bring life to a parish in many aspects and will become involved in liturgy and yes, they may not be putting dollars in, but they're giving their time and talent...

Then one thing that's working in your (parish) is the access to those resources. So in a way it works. I mean it really does. Money works!

I don't know if it's a barrier to good youth ministry, but lack of funds is a barrier for us. We don't have, I don't know how people get all their funds. Maybe you make the kids pay for everything they go to. But we don't have that money to pay for everybody to go to something. And when you don't have money, you spend the time that you could be doing other really interesting things and helping them [...] You spend most of your time trying to earn money.

I tithed directly to the youth group, ...and let me tell you, that was not a very popular thing with any of the priests who were there. Because, "You should just give to the church." And we're like, "Well, no, we're not getting anything, so it's my tithe, and that's where it's going." Because they were like, "Well, you need to fundraise." I'm like, "Well, you know, you can only fundraise so much."

I've also felt that if you have fundraisers that involve the kids, that is a great bonding experience. Sometimes if you have adults, not just us volunteers, but actually parents work beside, ...that's two days of a work event and that I think is a terrific bonding experience, working together on the same kind of thing for the same goal. You can make it kind of serve a double purpose. They're not all-together evil is what I am trying to say.

Role of the Coordinator of Youth Ministry

4. Effective youth ministers know the success of the program isn't dependent upon them. They recognize they have both strengths and weaknesses, they aren't always in charge, and ultimately, youth ministry is the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit.

Quotations from interviews:

Some of the best things that have had the biggest impact on youth have been things that just kind of were handed over to God. Here's a plan. I'm not sure how it's all going to go, but it'll come together. You plan and you have some things set, but things that have come out have just sort of developed themselves from the people and the youth and from God.

We can only plan so much and then we have to step back and let the Holy Spirit to work within the minds of the youth. The leaders have to be helped to understand to trust in the Holy Spirit. If they are walking on the right path with good intentions then the Holy Spirit will take care of the rest. That trust is very empowering. It is not only for me, but for the youth also.

I think despite my brokenness and my inability to get my own life together, I'm still used. And I think that's important to me. I don't do this because I'm going to do great things in the lives of the young people; I do this because it does great things in my life, and it makes me closer to Jesus Christ.

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.

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

Supportive Findings:

- 4.1 Effective coordinators of youth ministry are aware of themselves as role models as persons of faith. They lead from the mission and goals of youth ministry, recognizing that youth ministry is a labor of love that demands sacrifice.

Quotations from interviews:

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. It doesn't have to be me that actually provides all the programs.

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.

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...

What works is being an example and loving.

It's a great gift that God has given us and the responsibility is to go with that gift.

...our dedication has to be 100% I think.

4.2 Effective youth ministers articulate a multifaceted understanding of youth ministry which includes an umbrella of activities.

Quotations from interviews:

(Youth ministry) it's not something that's happy-go-lucky all the time, and it's not giggles all the time. It's happy, it's sad, it's good, it's bad, it's just a little bit of everything. It's a learning experience and a journey, and what you're going to do with that from the beginning to the end. It's all encompassing.

Youth ministry in our parish is bringing the middle school and high school youth closer to God in a spiritual, social, and service way.

...youth ministry for our program is more me and other adults helping to provide, or young people are involved in helping to provide, experiences for youth to grow in their faith and to meet other young people who are trying to follow that path and to grow in their faith. That involves like service and also experiences where they've learned more about what the church teaches and things like that. Also, just things like for fun, going skiing and going to a water park or something like that. Anyway, different areas. Things that help them to grow all around. I think an important part of it also is to build good Christian friendships. It's a lot easier to walk the walk when you have other people doing it with you.

We have a teen mass, and every Sunday after the teen mass, the other part of our jobs is education. And we do the CCD type things, education them. We do "issue nights" every month, where we apply the faith, you now, apply what they've learned to their faith, into their everyday lives. And we do social every month.

The framework that all of that happens within (youth ministry) is sort of incidental as long as at the end of it all the kid has been through our program. They have, like you guys mentioned, developed those relationships and grown in those relationships with God and with each other as well as the families and the church.

4.3 Effective youth ministers advocate for young people and for their rightful place in the parish and community. They help all of the generations of the church to

know and value each other, and they help young people to speak out against unfair structures and decisions that affect them.

Quotations from interviews:

That's where another component comes in, that advocacy for the young people, to help everybody in the parish come to understand because they were all young once. I know that sometimes I think that some adults have a difficult time appreciating ministry because they themselves didn't have a good experience or have an experience of that when they were in junior high or high school.

But, you know, but the thing in advocacy. You know, we go out there, and we have to keep fighting against it. You know, the negativity and everything else. Because I mean that's what we do. We, 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, you know, we've gone out with them—we're doing it for these young people, because we want to introduce them to Jesus Christ.

They had gone through so many youth ministers in the past years. The advocacy was to get them [youth] involved in every single ministry in the parish that was already existent. We are involved in the Stations of the Cross. The Knights of Columbus are the big brothers to our youth. I went to them and said, "You guys are the cool guys and you are the daddy's and husbands that are living and caring that a lot of our youth have not experienced, so you need to come and help us."

This year we got a new high school youth teacher. Doing a great job. Some of the parents were kind of against a couple of things that they did. She was going to quit. The best part about it was that the kids said, "I'm not coming anymore unless she comes back." They thought she was such a great teacher that they're like, "There is no way - she's done so much for us." This is all before Christmas. We had just started the school year. To see those kids rally for that each and say, "No way" was the best thing I'd ever seen. It was great. She's back.

Another thing that I did, I think making it visible, the youth ministry visible parish wide so with some of your programming, like we do a pancake breakfast twice a year. Well, the whole parish comes to that event and they see youth ministry doing this.

4.4 Effective youth ministers are aware of the total number of young people in the parish, but they do not play 'the numbers game.' They provide quality ministry to anyone that comes, even if it is only one person.

Quotations from interviews:

...if there are three or four there, there is a reason they are there, it is the Holy Spirit working. I think as youth ministers, we need to take that attitude. ...On the trip down here we couldn't have had a better conversation about the things going on in their lives, it was just meant to be those two. I think as minister we do have to be open to the Holy Spirit.

So often, especially at the beginning of the 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 who isn't present 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...they'll come.

I have kind of given up on having, working on the numbers coming to a particular weekly event. Instead I go into Catholic high schools and the grade schools and I volunteer there, and I do their programs where they need outside volunteers to come in. Instead of fighting with the system that I can't change, I just now penetrate those systems and work within them. Then those relationships follow after that, and they see me as an extension of the church that cares enough to come to where they are.

Something else that doesn't work is canceling events because there's only a few people. That's telling the few that they're not important enough to go through the energy or the effort whatever the event is. And so it's the diversity, and thank God I have a pastor that it's not about numbers and so you know not having a 100 for something[...] you just go right on with that retreat. If we put a value on young people, it shouldn't matter how many show up for the event; it goes on as planned.

...this is probably the biggest pet peeve of every youth minister I've ever known, is whatever doesn't work, please don't judge it by numbers. How many came? How many are in your program? This is such an awful indication of success. When they ask how many kids are in youth ministry, I say, "983." Then they go, "983?" It is our entire mailing list. I mean, it is. That is how many kids that belong to the parish that are identified. Never in my life have 983 kids shown up for anything. Okay? It is not being flip but if you ask the pastor how many people are in your parish? He would say, "3200." He wouldn't tell you who shows up for mass or who uses envelopes. We really do minister to even the people we don't see regularly.

It's all about relationships. Our major concern is that the young people that I work with and their families all get to know who Jesus is. That is my major focus. I think what happens in youth ministries, you are always having to justify in terms of what you're doing. How many kids are there? How many activities have been planned? How many people were served by your job description? I don't think that any of that, it may be quantifiable, but I don't know how valuable it is if they haven't had the witness of who Jesus is.

Related Finding:

4.5 Effective youth ministers network with other youth ministers. In doing this, they find inspiration from experienced folks, people to share stories with, to bounce things off of, gripe to, and learn new ideas and activities from.

Quotations from interviews:

...director at the parish and she's been in it forever but there are other ministers, youth ministers, family life ministers, that I can name. They've been in their ministry for a long time, and they're still doing healthy, effective ministry and how affirming that is for this diocese...

For a lot of years, I tell you, 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 it's the good news. You have to be committed to that. All of you give me hope.

...the other thing I think that really gives me hope is sharing stories with other people in youth ministry, especially some of the people around this table because, you know, just starting out, "Oh I can't do this, this is crazy" and hearing stories (from people) who have been doing this for ten, fifteen, twenty years who would say the same thing sometimes and share stories of when they started out like you and I did...so really connecting with other youth ministers and hearing stories, sharing stories is so important, that really gives me hope that I can do this.

Networking, 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...

Extended Programs

5. Trips, camps, and other extended programs are important because they provide opportunities for good prayer and liturgy, leadership development, small faith groups, fun, and excitement. They have a unique ability to build community among young people and between youth and adults.

Quotations from interviews:

I think the cool part about trips if you do them right, you can address all the good points, you know. You can do good liturgies and do good inter-relational stuff and there's opportunity for leadership and opportunities to serve. So you can just wrap them all in this package with a small faith group that you're traveling with and then they're having so much fun.

What I heard a little bit ago was that you get to know the young people; they also get to know us. I think they get to see us in a more human form than as 'the youth minister at church.'

...it's the [...] getting dirty and crabby and cranky and getting happy and glad, all of it. It's really cool.

So stick me on a bus, send me across country, and I'm a happy camper. People say, you want to do this and I'm like, "Oh my God, yeah. You haven't been trapped on a bus." I love the bus. There's nothing like getting to know somebody who hasn't got to change their underwear every day. You really get to know that person. You share with them on a completely different level than you would share with them in a normal time.

The bus ride gives you a microcosm of your life, and you get to know who they are. You get individual time with them, specifically, and they feel like you want to know who they are.

(A five-day youth camp) They come out of there very spirit filled and they form a union from year-to-year and they can talk about their faith openly to one another and not feel peer pressure...

Related Findings:

- 5.1 Youth retreats build community; make faith tangible, involve young people in leadership, and provide a significant faith experience. Retreats have a long-term impact on individuals and groups.

Quotations from interviews:

(A mom relaying a reaction to a youth's participation on a retreat) I called her and she was relaying to me the story. She said I really have to tell you what happened the other day when I got home from work. My son was waiting up for me. He wanted to tell me all about what had happened. After everything that was said, he said to me, "Mom, I know that Jesus loves me and everything's going to be okay."

In terms of what I have found to be effective, I think retreats—especially peer ministers and relationships with adults on retreats. I think that has made a real significant difference. I have been in my parish long enough now that I've got kids coming back as adults who were on the retreats and say what a difference it made in their lives. Parents will call and say it really helped my young person get through the things going on in their life.

The main observation I made on the retreat—what got me so excited was that faith became tangible. You could see it and feel and hear it. It's awesome listening to those kids share and demonstrate their faith.

...we have multiple ministries, but our main ministry, and it's the ministry everybody wants to be on, is the retreat ministry. Because it's the sharing ministry, it's the sharing of faith ministry. And they grow by their sharing.

That's the one retreat that really energizes me in the upcoming year because you can really see the youth come out and blossom after that. But also just the intimate relationship that when they're struggling with something, that's usually when it pops up too—where they trust in one of the older youth, or come to me and really say, "I am struggling with is or that." That's my moment where I am like, "Wow, we're really reaching them!"

5.2 Service opportunities play an important role in youth ministry and in the faith formations of young people. Service allows young people to build relationships with people different from themselves, be evangelized and become evangelizers, invites deep experiences of conversion, and builds self-esteem in youth.

Quotations from interviews:

...kids actually make this faith connection and it clicks for them and watch them reach out to the community around them, total strangers...the kids were affirmed...

...kids from different parishes come together to work on service and they form community in that and come to know each other, but it is that shared purpose and understanding. We are all here because our faith matters to us, and it matters to us to express that and that becomes a formative element of who they are as a community.

Once they felt they were part of that larger circle then they started to bring in more youth.

...those outreach things are the things that kids really are able to say, "I see God and what God is now."

...it puts them in a position where they are going to be able to make relationships with who they are working with. They're not off doing the work, they are in conversation and suddenly language doesn't matter. They are able to communicate. And they get information from these people, and they build a relationship.

Youth Ministry Connects Young People to God

6. The ultimate goal of youth ministry is connecting young people to God through the Catholic faith. This is done through prayer, discipleship opportunities, evangelization, and by connecting the young people to Jesus Christ.

Quotations from interviews:

I would say that youth ministry in our parish is somehow trying to help our young people to have a relationship with Jesus Christ, to really develop them to be disciples where they experience the presence, this mystery of Christ in their lives. And because of that they, they would really be involved in the mission of Christ which is really the mission of the church.

Some of these kids don't even know God because nobody in their house knows God. We bring them into the church. Here is a child that doesn't even have food to eat, and you have to tell him where God is in his life, and show him where God is in his life. I got kids whose parents are on crack cocaine and the whole bit, and I'm trying to put God in their lives.

I need to bring them to Christ. We try to make Christ first in our lives with whatever we do. To be visible and strong and not timid and not afraid of God and prayer and praise. That has been very successful in our program.

She started crying. I said, "Welcome back." She got it. She cried and cried and hugged me and couldn't wait to be involved again. She thought she was gone, and lost, and never coming back.

One thing that gives me hope is I have a lot of kids who come on a weekly basis for our life meetings who are not Catholic and a bunch of those who are un-churched. They are not baptized; their parents don't go to church and the whole deal. What gives me hope is when those kids come up after a year or so of being there and say, "What do I need to do to be a Catholic?" This is like, "Yes, OK!"

Related Finding:

- 6.1 One of the blessings of youth ministry is witnessing young people's "aha" experiences of God.

Quotations from interviews:

Talking about the God moment, I think being privileged enough to see them having that God moment.

...you know so often we wait for the thunder and the lightning and the wind. And when I'm with the kids, so often those God moments aren't always thunder claps. And sometimes it's just the whispers that you always see things happening.

Unless you can really feel the Holy Spirit working in your life... In Confirmation we talk about the sacrament and the Holy Spirit coming upon you, but it seems like it's almost a symbol until you can actually experience the Holy Spirit in your life. I have found out once the kids have experienced that, it's kind of like, great. If there are ways we can work to have them find the spiritual experience, to really experience the Holy Spirit in their lives, it is a big step.

I think that just about everyone of us in youth ministry who has been doing it for more than 37 seconds has talked about an "aha moment" a young person has had. To see that when the light comes on and there's fire in their eyes, there's this excitement. You can actually see them begin to bounce in their seats, 'cause they know what to say and how to feel. And there's a reaction there. Because so many times in so much of our culture today, we see so much apathy, there's no movement, there's nothing there. And when a young person beings to see it and beings to catch the fire and reaches out in the smallest attempt and somebody else recognizes that and holds on, that's what excites.

Youth Ministry is Challenging

7. Effective youth ministry challenges young people to take risks, develop talents, learn about faith and morals, and become better people. Youth ministers sometimes need to say the hard things and must understand the truths of faith and challenge young people with those truths.

Quotations from interviews:

I think that that's really a key factor in what works in our youth ministry, is that you don't water-down the truth. The teens don't want that. I mean they know, they know what the world has to offer already. They want to hear what Jesus Christ has to offer. And we can't water it down.

One of the things that I think works is having our kids be risk takers in the sense of challenging them beyond what's comfortable. Somehow our kids are willing to take risks when it comes to faith, whether it be lecturing, or cantoring, or service. Sometimes they might be nervous about that, but if you expose them to the wealth of liturgy and faith, that's one of the things we should be helping our kids to do.

... I challenged her to do it but she walked away from me and I thought she didn't hear. She's like, "I always listen to you. I'll never let you know but I always listen to you." Watching certain young people make choices because they know that they've been challenged, they've been a part of community. There might not always be the direct link...

I don't know how many years ago it was, but I decided I wasn't going to screw around any more and was going to start telling the truth and not pussyfoot around our faith and about getting spiritual with the kids and challenging them spiritually.

We are going to love you. You are here. You are welcome. We are happy you are here, but we are going to challenge you. We are going to talk about faith, and we are going to talk about God, and we are not going to be ashamed of it. That has been working.

Importance of Creating Community

8. Effective youth ministry is very intentional about creating an atmosphere (physical and emotional) where young people have a sense of belonging and are accepted. Important elements include personal invitation, welcoming, building community, and building relationships.

Quotations from interviews:

Having space for the teens has been really important, a place to call their own. We do have a space at the Church which is their territory. It's like their home turf. They know they're safe.

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.

...we were very intentional about having one person, in particular we found somebody that was excellent, be at the back of the youth group meeting. He didn't have any job in the youth group meeting as such and he didn't run anything. But he greeted the kids at the door and he knew everybody's name. And he knew something special about every kid. He could make sure that he knew which ones were brand new in the group. And he would sit for a minute in the group and learn a little bit about them and make them feel welcome.

(Young people) think the Catholic Church is some place for them when they grow up and if we don't provide a welcoming, inviting experience for them to let them know that their church is the church of today, they're not going to take that active role, and they're not going to be involved, and they're not going to understand...

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

Supportive Finding:

- 8.1 Effective youth ministry employs meal ministry. Food draws people together, makes them feel welcome, and honors the complexity of family life.

Quotations from interviews:

...it (shared meals) gives them a chance for fellowship that they really didn't get before they were coming in from activities, school things, and going right to the classroom. They wanted to visit with each other but really never got an opportunity. This gives them that opportunity.

One of the things is that we have a different family rotate off of who prepares that meal. So it gets families a little more involved with our youth group. I started that originally because I couldn't find any youth leaders. I had to make families prepare the meal. Once they got there and could see that it was okay and that they didn't have to be a brain scientist to pull that off, then it was easy. It does somehow involve the family more in our youth program. It's not just something that "Hank" is doing with the youth. It's something that the parish does.

...it's become a real vehicle for the kids to interact with other groups and invite them when we have something special going on. Lots of groups have come to eat with us. It's been very good.

I think this year, it sounds silly, one of the things that really worked with the whole meal thing is what we would call "Pizza ministry." We'd go down to the school and invite them for lunch. And we did that every other month and actually go down with pizza...

Related Finding:

- 8.2 Teens enjoy building relationships with Catholic teens from other parishes. Effective parish youth ministry enables this through inter-parish retreats, social events, and diocesan activities. This requires a non-competitive, non-possessive attitude on the part of the youth ministers.

Quotations from interviews:

...as ministers we work together to do the best that we can for the young people of our community versus I've been other places where I have heard, "These are my kids. These are your kids, and don't touch my kids."

And there's another thing that's working ministry-wise in our diocese, is every first Saturday of the month, at a...restaurant, they have this thing and all the teens go. Literally hundreds of teens from high schools go. They have bands that play, music that plays, and they're just meeting the kids, once again, on their level. And it's entertaining, it's fun, but it's where all the youth groups just come together and have fun. And that's very important, and that's building a lot of, a lot of relationships in our diocese. Because you have kids coming all the way from ...which is on one end of the diocese meeting kids from the opposite end. And they're having fun, and they're keeping in touch.

That is all they talk about is seeing their friends from the other parishes. They go to several of these groups now. They don't just go to mine, they go to others and they come to mine and they are leading at one of my ...retreats – kids from other parishes.

I found a huge dynamic lately where our kids want to be with kids from other parishes and go on to the universal look of the Catholic church from our kids. It might be hard at first to get them involved. As soon as they have met kids from other parishes, they love it, And they can't wait to be with them again.

Right now we have this huge dynamic after this year where I didn't think it could be better than last year, and I keep telling myself, shame on me for limiting God. Because it has gone beyond and they are like best friends now. There are three parishes that are just hanging out together and love to be with each other. It took a lot to get us there, but now it won't stop. So there is something happening, and it is very spiritual and very relationship oriented, and it is an incredible experience.

8.3 Parishes with effective youth ministry welcome youth of any religious or denominational background. Their youth ministers work cooperatively with the leaders of other local churches.

Quotations from interviews:

I would add that it welcomes all high schoolers. We have a couple of Jewish high schoolers, Protestant and Christian also. We are very welcoming to them and try not to put labels on and have all the Catholics sit here and the Jewish kids sit there.

...my percentage is about 30% of non-Catholics that come to my events just because I mainly work with public school and no Catholic school. I did realize that the church really looked at it as being just in our church versus not the wider community. So I really had to educate on that aspect that we need to open it up to not just our parishioners, but to non-parishioners too.

We have some Chinese in here and they are Buddhists. It is kind of a real mix here. They are all involved. A few come into our ... youth rally and so it is kind of an evolving thing here. I don't know where else it is going to take us, but we are the only thing for kids in our community. There isn't anything else for kids to do. I have some kids that have been baptized but certainly have not had any religious instruction or whatever.

There has been a real cooperative thing going on. However, we are kind of the big kid on the block. I don't know how I would feel about that if I were the parish that didn't have a lot to offer. I do try to encourage kids to participate in the things that they offer too because I figure we shouldn't really feel threatened. It should be almost an enhancing kind of thing.

Volunteer Leadership and Training

9. Effective youth ministry needs volunteer youth ministers and catechists who share responsibility for the parish's youth ministry. Effective volunteers are described as being genuine and authentic, having a passion for young people, and able to share their faith. Coordinators of Youth Ministry work to ensure that the right people are in the right jobs and that their volunteers represent a spectrum of ages.

Quotations from interviews:

You have to walk the walk. You have to live by what you say and be that for your kids. Be real.

You have to be able to see Jesus in every single one of the kids.

I think another hindrance is really not having adults who are willing to get into the messiness of young people's lives. Parents are willing to bake, or to drive, or to make telephone calls, or whatever. But actively sit and talk with young people, or really be in with them, is a challenge for a lot of adults.

...people are still thinking we got to have college students in there to work with the kids, but some of my best volunteers have been 70; maturity is important, a balance. I think of balance as good volunteers but just looking for more than just someone who is 25. You don't want everyone to be 45 either; you need a balance.

...we try and do that within our volunteers who volunteer in youth ministry, and we have turned down a lot of people and just say that this may not be where your giftedness lies. Can we suggest something else? And as hard as that is to say it's better off in the long run for everybody. To say with real love and genuine concern, this may not be your gift...

Supportive Findings:

- 9.1 Parishes with effective youth ministry are intentional about training and forming volunteer youth ministers. It takes time and money. Coordinators of youth ministry are attentive to their own training and formational needs, prayer life, and spiritual growth.

Quotations from interviews:

...we're very intentional about trying to make sure that the adults were aware that they were youth ministers everywhere and that it wasn't just matter of being part of the youth group.

...you said, what gives you hope; instead of thinking in terms of what has given me hope, what gives me hope is prayer, a prayer life...

We need to be fed ourselves and that is the only way we can feed.

I think in youth ministry what I find is it takes 15 adults to do a retreat or this many adults to do this and you have to recognize the fact that you are forming these adults. There is an issue there. You are helping these adults to come to grips with their own faith. I think it happens all over the place in informal settings. Actually that aspect, I think, gives you a lot of energy because you see these adults growing. And they in turn are ministering to the youth and helping them to grow and that whole parish things starts to happen.

We made a concentrated effort about a year and a half ago to really put money and time into forming volunteers and that has been a huge focus for us—made a whole lot of difference.

9.2 A significant avenue for touching the hearts of young people is through personal relationships with adults. Effective adult ministers listen to youth and demonstrate their love and concern.

Quotations from interviews:

... (young people) have those core people who are in their own parish community that they have relied on. They've seen them witness to their own faith. That helps the relational ministry as well. I've been in my current position for five years and there are some, obviously, that I know very well. I get to know them very well because of the situations, but all of them, I can't (know so well.) So I put the responsibility on other adults in our community so that they can have that joy as I have.

On Sundays when I see in church a young person who walks in and people know his or her name, that after church people are standing around and that young person is engaged in conversation with somebody who is sometimes their own age and maybe not. That they have a place where they belong.

We have a group of ninth grade girls and guys that are just struggling with their identity and just struggling with peer pressure, that issue and everything. They just made a real connection with their volunteer leader. I think that is starting to create itself on its own. I have been trying to get it going and here it just fell in our lap. So it was great.

It's all about relationships. Our major concern is that the young people that I work with and their families all get to know who Jesus is. That is my major focus. I think what happens in youth ministries, you are always having to justify in terms of what you're doing. How many kids are there? How many activities have been planned? How many people were served by your job description? I don't think that any of that, it may be quantifiable, but I don't know how valuable it is if they haven't had the witness of who Jesus is.

Two young people...a brother and sister, were killed in a car accident. The mother and father asked that I would speak at their funeral... The only way that I was able to participate in their life was because of that lifelong relationship. We had prayed together. We had worshipped together. It had nothing to do with going to water parks. It had nothing to do with service organizations. It had nothing to do, all of those things are fine. They're good. It was all about the relationship in terms of faith that we experienced in terms of the resurrection. I go back through the years, and it's all about relationships.

Faith Formation

10. Effective youth ministry understands catechesis as an important component of youth ministry. Catechesis occurs in a variety of ways and settings, but youth learn best when they are experientially engaged in the topic. The more it looks and feels like school, the less they learn. Conflicting understandings and approaches between youth ministers and religious education directors is a barrier to effective faith formation.

Quotations from interviews:

...that group of boys I was talking about earlier, there's no way in God's green earth I can sit those boys down and do a religious education class with them. Do you know how much catechesis we've done playing basketball?

The key there is that we allow them to experience the message. It's not boring. You know, they come in and they experience the message. We don't just open the book and read it to them. But we give it to them. They live the message, somehow or another, through what we do. And I think that's been really key to bringing the young people in.

I think I have actually had more significant moments of catechesis in those ten-minute discussions in those meetings than at anything that I have ever done anywhere else. They don't even realize that is what we are doing. They are just so excited and into what we are talking about because it is related to what they are working on.

What doesn't work? Text books, work books. They don't want to go to school again for another hour.

Our religious education director said, "What do you mean, tear the roof off this thing? It was invented 1500 years ago. You just have to follow the plan." We find that youth ministry works when we don't follow any plan. We constantly strive to find better ways to bring these kids to Jesus.

Liturgy

11. Good liturgy is a priority and it includes music that is contemporary, homilies that youth can relate to, and includes youth as liturgical ministers. There are differing opinions on the value of “youth masses.” Some parishes see them as opportunities for liturgy that reaches young people, other parishes are wary of segregating youth from the larger parish.

Quotations from interviews:

Another thing that is not working is the homily, the boring homily. To me, I think it's an insult to the young people, if they (the priest) cannot be inclusive enough on a subject to include the entire parish. It should include the youth and the adults as well. If you want them to be part of the church then you need to talk to them while they are there. I think that is a big problem.

...he came to church by himself when his parents really weren't practicing faith. He became a lector. He would memorize the whole reading himself. He would proclaim it without looking down. Somehow by putting the time into reading, it really nurtured his relationship with Christ and also doing a tremendous value to the community to see a young persons proclaim so well.

We have been discussing what we can do to make mass more interesting for them, and one said, “If we make a mass just for us then what will happen when we become adults?” I thought that was extremely prophetic. They don't want something just for them. They enjoy being with family and friends. They want liturgy to be good, but they don't want it just for them.

I found parishes that do have a youth oriented mass do it well so others don't feel excluded. I think it is important to know that there are different models out there that are working.

If a young person looks up on that altar and doesn't see anybody their own age, that says to them; I am not part of that. Once I am too tall to fit in the server's alb, I am off the altar and I can't go back until I am 21 or whatever. That says to them that they don't belong there. If they don't belong on the altar, then they don't belong in the pew.

Youth Integrated into the Parish

12. Effective youth ministry helps teens become integrated into the full life of the parish community. The parish gives youth a voice and recognizes that youth ministry is everyone's responsibility.

Quotations from interviews:

First and foremost, I think it's comprehensive, meaning that it is infused, young people are infused in every aspect of the faith community life.

When we were first establishing a high school ministry and talking to the kids about what they wanted, they didn't want a social group. What they wanted was a way to stay connected to the parish and to be of service. The things that we do that stick to that work. When we get off track there is just not as much enthusiasm.

A lot of people are putting energy into helping kids find ways to be involved in the parish. So when you go to a meeting of the lectors, it ranges from 14 to 84 and the same thing with the music ministry. It is a good age range where everybody is involved. Servers on Sunday could be a 35-year-old man and a 15-year-old girl. It is all mixed, everybody doing things together.

I think that youth ministry focuses on the youth but it is a parish life and even community life ministry. It is all-inclusive, but it has the focus on youth. Also I think it needs to be intentional. I feel like we can provide a bunch of programming and each program I feel needs to sort of have a connectedness...

I hope for inclusive community involvement - that there is never a thought that says, "Oh what about our youth?" It just comes naturally that your youth are invited in, and are accepted, and are put to work as viable people in our parish. That would be my goal.

Related Finding:

- 12.1 Intergenerational ministry within the parish helps youth build relationships within families and all generations. The rewards are the stories shared and the positive relationships that enrich all involved.

Quotations from interviews:

(Young people becoming integrated into the small Christian Communities of the parish.) Is has been four years now. It is a wonderful intergenerational experience. The kids get to hear from the adults that have been involved in groups for 15-20 years. The adults get to see these young people taking a step in their faith and they see that hope...

What we started this year was an intergenerational program. Everyone comes to that and shares a meal together—parents, little kids, big kids, whatever. And then we all break out into our age appropriate groups and have a session. Each group focuses on a

common theme. And we've all agreed, as a catechetical staff, this is what our theme is going to be so we have a formation session. We want to focus on the baptism theme and so everyone is looking at that in their session. And so then we come together at the end and have a family ritual that everyone experiences together and kind of pulls together everything. Now the struggle with it is how to balance that with youth ministry and everything. But I'm starting to see, what we're starting to see is that family connection happening more...

...including all age people from the parish has really drawn the parish, and the youth seeing adults, grandmas, grandparents in a different light and vice versa, there is such a reward.

We do inter-generational altar serving at our parish. It's very, very neat because we have a man of 82 years old. He's very good at serving. We've had some new servers this year. Two of the little girls, he helped them, and it was just amazing. I almost started crying in church. He was so proud. He was just helping them standing there. When the kids will call him and ask him to fill in when they can't make it to serve, he just loves that. He just is so honored.

Additional Findings

Diocesan Support

13. Parishes with effective youth ministry receive support from their bishops and diocesan offices of youth ministry. Their seminaries educate seminarians about the importance of youth ministry.

Quotations from interviews:

...the fact that there is support on the archdiocesan level and that we have associates and that we have a whole church out there that is supporting that. Supporting what you are doing, that is very hopeful for me. It gives me a lot of energy, and it is very helpful.

I also think that this is a topic that is discussed in seminaries more than it was ten years ago, or twenty years ago. Somehow youth ministry has gotten itself on the plate, something that has become integrated into parish finances and parish council. I think that's very hopeful.

...just a few weeks ago, there were nine seminarians there just from our diocese that have been in youth ministry. And that's where it's going to change. Those are the ones that we're ministering to now. And there's a big change already.

The thing that started it this year was when the Bishop had the deanery reconciliation service, and we all went. He had a clear vision of what he wanted, and it was a huge event. We had 700 kids who came, and all the priests of the deanery. It was a wonderful event, very well planned, very deep. The liturgy was very striking to the kids. We did lots of art and environment at the direction of the Bishop. At first it was like, "Are you kidding? We can't. I'm not doing all this." We did it. It was worth it.

The other thing that gives me a lot of hope on the other level is to have a diocese that understands youth ministry and to have the bishop's support and to have the kind of youth ministry office that we've got and a diocesan director that can inspire...

Written Resources

14. Good written resources help youth ministers plan effective youth ministry. Good resources were identified as short and easy-to-understand, where they the youth ministers can pull from different resources to create lessons, retreats, etc. A lack of good resources for intergenerational and family ministry was expressed.

Quotations from interviews:

But one thing that I want to mention in our parish that doesn't work, books don't work. One thing that does work, and you will be happy to hear this: "Catholic Youth Bible" works. We use that all of the time.

We don't go chapter to chapter. We take a bunch of books and pick out many sources, and pick out the best icebreaker that goes with that theme. We pick out the best

discussion exercise. And then, of course, the Catholic Youth Bible does have a book too that goes with different exercises and activities, which we use a lot for faith formation and retreats and stuff. Plus it has so many just cultural types of things that you can learn and how to pray it, learn it, and live it. So we just pull all of that out.

I would add, at the same time, there have to be excellent resources for the catechist. Resources so they are not speaking out of their ignorance. I find a lack of resources in intergenerational and family ministry, and I am writing a lot of my own materials and borrowing from the protestant type things.

I find that there is nothing out there in my ministry that helps me equip the team with short condensed easy-to-understand things about our faith.

So we're not doing it full-fledged, like you know, it's just a resource, the book is on the shelf. When we need it, we pull it out. So just that extra resource helps.

Role of 18-21 year olds

15. In parishes with effective youth ministry, there is a split in understanding the role of the 18-21 year old. Some parishes bring people in this age group back immediately as ministers to high school youth. Other parishes provide separate programming for their continued formation, but they must be 21 or older before they can minister to high school youth. All agree that this is an age group that needs more attention.

Quotations from interviews:

I'm 21 years old. I'm the youngest core member we have, just a young adult to youth. The power that, the way that the Lord has really worked through the youth that I've been involved in has been through other youth or young adults simply living in the culture with these teens and sharing their faith in an everyday way.

But also college students that have graduated have asked if they could come back and help with those nights. And it's really hard saying, "No, the high school (teens) still are running that."

We try to overlap with the college kids because that is the group that you lose. You are losing the freshman in college and once they graduate high school, that is it. We try to bring them back to help out.

...(what) doesn't work, letting the high school students graduate and still wanting to continue the youth ministry as helpers. I saw that doesn't work because they are too close in age. And also the seniors want to be the seniors, and they don't want to keep on having those older people hovering over them. I did see that. And they also don't know where they blend. ...bring them back at age 21 and have that as a standard. I see that process happen, and they just cannot wait. I mean I just had a call this week, "I'm going to be 21 in two weeks, can I come up?"

...when the college kids come home on their Christmas break, we've been holding the last two years a retreat or an overnight and whoever comes—two years ago it was 4, this year was 9. We just get together and talk about what's going on in their lives. I think there's that follow-up from high school to college and hopefully that will work down the road.

Meeting Youth Where They Are

16. Effective youth ministry meets young people where they are and invites them to recognize God in all aspects of their life. Adults not only recognize the importance of non-church activities, but are present at school and community events in support of the young people.

Quotations from interviews:

I really agree that they are accepted as kids and not as adultified children but as a 15 year old who sometimes giggles, you know, or a 17 year old who is embarrassed to stand in front of whatever. We have to accept them where they are at. That is a sign of respect.

I know that sounds kind of corny, but anyhow, as far as the sports and all of that you can't compete with that. Don't plan things in conflict. Work with coaches or bandleaders. I have found that the high school will work with me on things because actually the youth ministry feeds the high school because it helps them have better kids. It is like co-existence, like a working kind of thing. So I never try to fight it. As a mater of fact, I try to always be in tune with what is going on with the kids and their extra-curricular, to be supporting them and telling them that these things are important, just make sure that they are not more important than God. Things like that and that God is present in sports teams and you have all that going for you.

Of course relationships, I think, are the second most important thing. That's huge. Just having adults in the community who will represent us at the games, be there at school, be there for a phone call, or during a hard time, or a fun time.

...not everybody is on the same page as far as what the real true formation of youth ministry is all about. I think that is a huge barrier. If they don't have that concept, they're just not going to understand. They need to meet the kids where they are. We don't set up a time frame of what works for us. We have to be where the kids are. We have to be very understanding. They're not always going to be there. That's just the way it is. They just can't be. That doesn't mean that their faith still isn't there. I think that gets to be a real obstacle.

Taking young people where they're at and having open minds and open hearts when we work with our young people. Just that sense of presence, whether it's at church or simply going to a ball game or to a concert. Our young people really know that you're there in the stands, and it means a lot to them. I was sharing with some others a couple of weeks ago, I went to a wrestling tournament for four year olds to 13 year olds. The next Sunday

two brothers came in and gave me the flyer for the next tournament. "Are you going to be at this one? You came to the last one." It's really neat to see their excitement.

At-Risk Youth

17. Effective youth ministers have a passion for reaching youth who are marginalized or at-risk. They befriend those rejected by their peers, reach out to kids who cause trouble, and provide a center and programs for neighborhood youth.

Quotations from interviews:

You know I have gotten past the point of saying this is a justification for why I happen to be at an affluent parish. There are needs that kids have regardless of what their income is. More than that, a lot of these kids in school and in home are being groomed to be movers and shakers and leaders. God knows they better have...values and a sense of God when they go into being the head of companies and corporations and stuff like that. Sometimes you think you will work to get the kids off the street. You know? These kids are at risk where some will attempt suicide or some are sexually active; and all the at-risk behaviors are there across economic lines, but it is just different.

You try to bring them in the church and you need to meet them where they are. I am in a very deprived area of the city. Most houses are still boarded up. It is like giving them a home. It is a blessing that they come to church, as far as I'm concerned.

...we're surrounded in a cluster where there are kids in the inner city that we see as important to give them the opportunity to hear a different voice. And so the different voice that we hope that they hear is this voice of our Lord and how he can pertain to them and give them a sense of direction so they don't get caught up into some of the other things they can get caught up into.

The fact that our youth center and the kids come there and it is a beacon in the neighborhood, and they don't distinguish our after school program at all. It is in the building and above our church and really says that we are there for the kids. They know where to go if they are in trouble, and where other kids come. They know if someone is in trouble or needs help or whatever, and they have someplace to go.

I mean I'm always drawn to the bad kids. The more trouble they cause us, the more I'm attracted to being with them because I think these are the kids that really need me the most and just to sit and visit and talk to them, you find out so much about these kids and what they're really about, maybe why they are the way they are.

A few years ago, we got some grant money so we have evolved where we have an after school program that is the basis of our program. We are open there for the kids six days a week, Monday through Friday, Friday nights and Sunday nights for the high school kids. We are open for junior high and high school kids. Out of that I have another full

time person on my staff and five other part-time people. One is a tutor and a couple run sports things and some who do arts and crafts.

Those are the kids that I find the most interesting. I just love the kids who have been rejected. Oftentimes they think on their own, they have a little bit of an edge. I found out a couple of years ago, just by mistake, one of our families was living in a homeless shelter here in town. My parish was meeting in this building. This mother had lost her place. Incredible story. Got to know their friends. They started bringing their friends. It was all in terms of one kid who was on the fringe. That one kid introduced me to other kids. Everybody is looking for a place that they can belong.

Helping Youth in Crisis

18. Parishes with effective youth ministry provide timely opportunities for young people to pray and talk when crisis strikes; particularly when the crisis is the death of someone they know.

Quotations from interviews:

This past year one of the coaches of the high school was killed in front of the high school and we had classes that Wednesday night. We asked them to help us prepare a memorial service. ...we invited those that wanted to speak. And it was really neat because four of them got up together who had been in football and they were just—the moral support, that—if I can't go on, you'll pick up. And it was really great for everybody.

It was towards the close of the Catechetical Night. We received word that a freshman girl had been killed in a car accident. When class was over, I gathered her friends together and told the girls. There was a group of four girls, and she was one of those four that did everything together. I gathered the other three and told them what had happened. That was a very powerful experience to hold them in your arms and try to pray with them and talk to them about it and just be there and listen to what they had to say and what they were going through. Then, the follow up on that was very powerful for me and I think for them too. We talked about how Jesus was crying with them because he didn't want the girl to die.

Recently, we had three kids that were killed in a car accident a couple weeks ago at our high school. And so the next day when I went up to the school to be in the cafeteria and I had kids I hadn't seen since 5th grade come up and just need a hug and just need to talk. And it was so meaningful to me because it's not that they just see me as someone who has pizza parties or something, but they can really share even the hard times in life.

I had four suicide attempts in nine years and this year I had three and watching some of those families take ownership to what's happening to their kid. And I think to watch them take ownership is very important, and knowing that we as a parish were able to be resources for them. Watching their kids struggle, being able to recognize that the

church could help them get through this, instead of worrying about saving face and worrying about saving their kids; that's been important...

Varied Programs and Activities

19. Youth ministry provides numerous and varied activities for young people to engage in the youth ministry program and parish life.

Quotations from interviews:

Youth ministry is active; I don't care where it is, it has to be across the parish; it has to be active. It can just be about anything, honest. Active is being a Eucharistic minister in Mass; active is being a religious education assistant or teacher or whatever; active is being a part of your youth group or going on a trip or just talking to somebody at school about your faith. It has to be active.

They do just a lot of stuff. They help with the office of religious education, ... Every year they have an African American quiz bowl and they have a talent show. We don't have a school, and that is a disadvantage. Our youth ministry comes from us walking the streets and inviting people to come and participate. We also have an after school program. I have two retreats a year. One is for girls and one is for boys that we call "Let's Talk About It," and it can be anything. So they have a lot.

It's very vital. They're a very active part of our parish. I think there is a lot of service and recreational and spiritual. I think those three components. We have lectors, and we have Eucharistic ministers, and I didn't say our children were totally involved in the parish, but I do try to make it be a parish-wide community. However, that becomes difficult. I do have ten catechists that are very dedicated and work very hard and diligent with my young people. We have a dance ministry. We have a drill team ministry and the children learn scriptures through drill even. They have a lot of collaborative ministry going on in as much as they interact and have youth council and come together once a month. They plan three events a year. One is spiritual, and one is social, and one is service.

They wanted variety in their program. They said they wanted more service projects. They wanted not to just do worksheets and books, not to sit in the classroom the whole time. What else? Of course, they wanted to do a few fun things like dances or lock-ins. Ski trips. Things away from the parish. It was interesting to find out what their interests were, what they wanted to see come out of the program.