

Effective Youth Ministry Practices in Catholic Parishes

A Research Project sponsored by the Center for Ministry Development
and Saint Mary's Press, in collaboration
with the National Federation for Catholic Youth Ministry

Preliminary Research Report

Research Method

To research effective youth ministry practices in Catholic parishes, the research team utilized a qualitative research method. In their book, *Beginning Qualitative Research*, our consultants for this project, Pam Maykut and Richard Morehouse describe this research method as follows: Qualitative research is a "research model that is primarily exploratory and descriptive, and for which people's words and actions are the main sources of data."

Group Interviews

The Research Team was trained in qualitative research methods by the research consultants, who designed the group interview and data analysis process. This team conducted 49 interviews in 13 sites across the nation with youth, adult leaders in youth ministry and parish staffs. A total of 140 youth and 232 adults were interviewed from the 96 parishes involved in the study. These parishes were selected by the diocesan and regional sites using the diversity criteria developed by the team.

Data Analysis

The research team worked from the transcripts of these interviews to identify the findings from this research. The team was divided into three groups, with each group focusing on one of the constituency groups from the interviews: Youth, Adult Leaders in Youth Ministry, and Parish Staff.

Symposium

The Symposium gathered 55 leaders from a variety of perspectives on youth ministry for the purpose of furthering the research and exploring implications for the field of Catholic Youth Ministry. The constituency of the symposium included diocesan youth ministry leaders, parish youth ministry leaders, and leaders from organizations involved in supporting youth ministry, such as publishers, training organizations, and national organizations.

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- The Louisville Institute
- An anonymous Catholic foundation
- The National Foundation for Catholic Youth

Research Findings

Overall, there were 121 findings from the three groups: youth, adult leaders and parish staff. There was a great deal of overlap and convergence among those findings, as well as some distinctive conclusions. The results described below are significant findings that emerged from combining the findings from the three groups. Each of these statements is supported by at least two of the three groups.

Parishes with Effective Youth Ministry

Overall Finding: Youth ministry thrives with the support of the whole parish community. (P1)

- Youth feel at home and are genuinely known and liked.
- Youth are integrated into the full life of the parish, including sharing their faith witness, and sharing in leadership and decision making.
- The involvement of youth is encouraged and affirmed.
- Parish staff and leadership are supportive of youth ministry and youth involvement.

I see a lot of teenagers that really love to be involved in their parishes and youth ministry gives them the opportunity to share their talents with their whole parish and to help build their faith even more so that when they become adults they'll still want to be involved in their parishes do even more things...

Youth

Other Findings:

In parishes with effective youth ministry, the parish community understands youth ministry. (P2)

- Parishioners know that youth ministry is everyone's responsibility.
- The community desires a youth ministry that is infused into parish life.

So I see them involved in part of the fabric of the parish of inviting people to come together with each other but also inviting us to reflect...

Parish Staff Member

Some aims of Youth Ministry are achieved within the ministries of the parish, while others are achieved within a youth peer community. (P3)

Youth ministry is active; I don't care where it is, it has to be across the parish; it has to be active

Adult Youth Ministry Leader

There is a beautiful dance going on between the ministry of youth over on one side, but it is at the same token bringing them in and keeping them part of the larger parish... There is a lot of faith in our youth ministries with that wisdom, I think.

Pastor

Pastor support for youth ministry is crucial. There are different ways to be supportive: some pastors work side by side with other leaders in youth ministry, other pastors are present to youth, but work to support and empower the Coordinator of Youth Ministry and team. (P4)

Support from the other staff and from our pastor. I mean if you're not getting (support) from the top, you won't get it...

Parish Staff Member

In parishes with effective youth ministry, the parish staff and leaders support each other and work collaboratively. The boundaries between ministries are permeable. (P5)

Youth ministry is just as important as religious education ministry as a base for ministry. That importance is placed on the ministry by the parish and by the priests of the parish and the staff of the parish; it is a priority of our parish.
Parish Staff Member

What we are really trying to emphasize... is trying to support each other's ministry. Well it is not like we come up with the ministry and then you are off all by yourself; you don't need the help of other people. That is a no-no in our community ... our task is to build community.
Parish Staff Member

Qualities and Dimensions of Effective Youth Ministry

Effective youth ministry responds to the real lives, needs and interests of youth. (Q1)

- Youth feel like they matter.
- Ministry is innovative and dynamic.
- There is not one model – in these parishes there is a relational pattern of knowing youth, innovating and changing in order to be responsive.

Youth ministry...lets the youth open up more and try to relate more to what youth go through in their everyday life, which is the difference and also gives us the chance to really speak out on how we feel and stuff like that.
Youth

So we joke about it but it is like experiment number 793... We shift if things don't go the way we thought they would go. You have to be flexible. Shifting position and the direction is very important because there is very little ultimately that doesn't work out.
Parish Staff Member

Hospitality and relationship building are foundational to effective youth ministry. (Q2)

- Young people are welcomed and accepted.
- Extending personal invitations, providing warm welcome, building relationships, and forming groups is intentional and ongoing.
- Web of relationships: youth with youth, youth with adults, parish community with youth, youth in their families.

...we sent out personal invitations and letters and just explaining 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.
Adult Leader

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.
Adult Leader

Effective youth ministry has a variety of ways for youth to be involved. (Q3)

- Boundaries between ministries are permeable.
- Ministry is multifaceted.
- There are a variety of levels of participation among youth and their families.

(Youth ministry)...needs to balance the social, the educational, the formational, the sacramental, the parish life of service and the really good youth ministry I think will have a lot of very permeable (boundaries), or no boundaries between (ministry programs.)
Parish Staff Member

(Effectiveness in our youth ministry is credited) to the multifaceted nature of the program. Not only does it make it a holistic program, but also it enables the program to tap into different young people who will respond to different things.

Parish Staff Member

In parishes with effective youth ministry, youth are active in making youth ministry happen (youth are not passive receivers of ministry.) (Q4)

- Youth have ownership of youth ministry efforts.
- Youth share leadership in programs and visioning.
- Youth witness to their faith with their peers.
- Leading programs helps youth grow in their own faith.

It's completely youth led. We have a team of youth and it's the most incredible thing that you'll ever do.

Youth

...so when we become seniors, we're going to be the ones leading the newer groups of kids. It's all about learning to be leaders.

Youth

Specific Programs / Components

Faith Formation

Faith formation with adolescents most often begins with real life issues and connects faith to life. (C1)

Faith formation is at the heart of youth ministry. To be effective and engaging with youth, faith formation has these qualities (C2)

- Facilitated by open-minded, authentic, faith-filled adults
- Engages youth's energies
- Includes community building
- Includes peer sharing, witness and leadership
- Teaches about Catholic identity
- Seizes teachable moments
- Is experiential, active and innovative
- Doesn't feel like school – doesn't lecture or have too much focus on text books.

I learn more doing that than I do in a classroom...

Youth

... it wasn't him teaching us, it was a conversation...

Youth

That's what I've seen with the kids, everything, at least with my confirmation I was taught by an adult and all the kids acted up like it was school. I've noticed that being a mentor for religious education, there are a couple that still act up but they want to learn more.

Youth

Service

The experience of service helps youth grow in faith. These experiences: (C3)

- Change their perspective
- Broaden their awareness
- Create empathy
- Help youth feel valuable
- Make faith real – hands on and “spirit” on
- Form community.

An effective method for engaging youth in service is theological reflection – connecting acts of service to beliefs, Catholic social teachings and everyday life. (C4)

... (youth who do service) put themselves into other people's places...it really has a whole life-long learning effect on those kids.
Parish Staff Member

...(doing service) teaches them compassion and patience and gets them motivated to continue doing service for other people...
Parish Staff Member

Liturgy

Youth have a different way of expressing faith within worship – it is more sensual. Youth's expression in worship needs to be incorporated into the parish's celebration of liturgy. Music and good homilies are important for youth to engage in liturgy. (C5)

The involvement of youth in liturgical ministries brings tremendous value to the parish community – providing energy, skill and a powerful presence. For the young people it builds faith, confidence and helps them develop gifts. (C6)

...We should be praising God with our entire bodies. With our hands, we need to clap, we need to sing. Mass should be joyful.
Youth

Extended Trips

Trips, camps, national conferences and world youth day are important because they: (C7)

- Help youth feel pride and enthusiasm in being Catholic
- Build community among youth
- Build community between youth and adults
- Create opportunities for leadership
- Amaze young people by connecting them with multitudes of other young Catholics.

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.

Adult Leader

Retreats

Youth retreats have a unique ability to touch the hearts of young people, build communities of faith, help youth to grow closer to God and draw youth back into active involvement in parish life. Retreats change the lives of young people. (C8)

- Youth mentioned the life changing impact.
- Adult leaders frequently mentioned some aspect of peer ministry / leadership.
- Parish staff talked about seeing the changes in youth.

I think everyone opens up and it just completely hooks everyone back in. There's a couple of kids, especially this time from our church, that had just been, had just gone. They don't come to church. I mean it's their choice. They don't have to. But this just helps bring them back in.

Youth

Leadership for Youth Ministry

Coordinators of Youth Ministry

Coordinators of youth ministry lead from mission, values, reflection on the components and an understanding of comprehensive youth ministry. (L1)

- They know that youth ministry is the responsibility of the whole parish.
- They come in a variety of ages and personalities.

- They act from a sense of vocation; they are aware that they are called to this ministry.

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.
 Coordinator of Youth Ministry

...(youth ministry is) not his (the Coordinator of Youth Ministry) responsibility but the parish's responsibility and he coordinates it all. This is the process we're working through.
 Pastor

Coordinators of youth ministry have personal attributes and virtues that make them successful (L2)

- healthy, well-balanced
- dedicated
- good communication skills
- approachable, loyal, enthusiastic.

What works is being an example and loving.
 Coordinator of Youth Ministry

It's a great gift that God has given us; the responsibility is to go with that gift.
 Coordinator of Youth Ministry

Coordinators of youth ministry animate dynamic ministry with youth in a variety of ways. (L3)

- They are especially valued because they invite, welcome and make youth and adults feel comfortable.
- They advocate for young people's place in the church and make it possible for programs to grow.
- They network with other youth ministers and connect to other parishes and the diocese.

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

Adult Volunteers

Adults who work with youth must be (L4)

- genuine / real
- have a passion for youth
- faithful
- active in building relationships based in faith
- present to youth where they are.

Training and formation is very important for adults working in youth ministry. They need to grow in their faith and learn skills for ministry. It is important that we match people to the right jobs. (L5)

...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 thing starts to happen.

Coordinator of Youth Ministry

Notes about Leadership

Leadership for youth ministry in these parishes includes youth as peer leaders (see Q4) as well as the parish staff and leadership (see P1 and P3).

Impact of Youth Ministry

Summary Finding: Youth Ministry has a profound impact on young people's lives and on the parish community. (I-1)

From the conversations with youth:

Youth ministry helps young people develop confidence, character, and the ability to share their faith in the world. (I-2)

I think that our youth ministry in general is about growing and becoming the best person you can be. Whether it's helping the community or just basically just being the best person you can be setting an example that is good for the community.

Youth

From the conversations with adult youth ministry leaders:

Effective youth ministry challenges young people to take risks, develop talents, learn about faith and morals and become better people. (I-3)

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.

Adult Leader

From the conversations with parish staff:

Youth ministry has a transforming effect on youth. Through youth ministry, young people: (I-4)

- Grow as people and as leaders
- Grow in faith
- Develop values and a moral compass
- Become change agents
- Develop skills to face life's challenges
- Continue parish involvement as college students and young adults.

"I think youth ministry helps ... the young people have a greater relationship with God. It makes them stronger in their lives as Christians and to just be able to grow to be very mature, healthy people."

Parish Staff Member

Youth ministry also has a tremendous impact on the parish community. Youth's involvement is energizing and is a source of pride for the community. (I-5)

- Youth Ministry empowers youth as witnesses of faith.
- It helps youth become active and develop as leaders for the parish.
- It involves youth in liturgical ministry roles that provide a powerful presence and energy to the community.

Effective youth ministry unleashes the power of youth faith witness to help young people grow in their own faith and to touch the hearts of peers and the entire faith community. Youth faith witness is vulnerable, bold, eloquent, deep, profound, authentic, vibrant, and moving. It includes, uplifts and invites.

Parish Staff Finding

"...across the board, in a number of program in our parish, the youth are not only involved in leadership roles, but we have young catechists and ...programs that are virtually run day by day by young people themselves."

Parish Staff member

Twenty Recommendations for Developing Effective Parish Youth Ministry

1. Assess strengths and areas for your parish to grow in comparison with the research findings. (see assessment questions that follow.)
2. Initiate conversations in your parish about effective youth ministry. Include youth, parents, youth ministry leaders and parish staff.
3. Invest time, prayer and attention to strengthen your parish's "web of relationships": youth with youth, youth with adults, youth ministry leaders with parents, parish community with youth, youth ministry leaders with parish staff and leadership, etc...
4. Identify ministries and aspects of parish life in which youth can become involved; - work with parish staff and ministry leaders to prepare for youth involvement.
5. Communicate a vision for youth ministry to the parish staff and the parish community.
6. Nurture your spirituality as a youth ministry leader.
7. Take positive steps to strengthen and/or develop your relationship with your pastor.
8. Collaborate with other parish staff and ministries.
9. Network with other coordinators of youth ministry.
10. Utilize local and national resources for developing responsive youth ministry.
11. Develop a youth and adult coordinating team to vision and plan for effective youth ministry.
12. Nurture the skills and the spirituality of the adults who work with youth in your parish.
13. Involve youth in leadership, ministry and teaching roles in youth ministry and in the parish.
14. Evaluate and develop faith formation efforts utilizing the directions in the findings.
15. Develop service experiences utilizing theological reflection.
16. Collaborate with other parish leaders to plan for ways to promote youth participation in liturgy.
17. Invite, prepare and involve youth in liturgical ministries.
18. Create opportunities for extended trips and retreats for youth.
19. Take the time to develop your skills as a coordinator of youth ministry.
20. Create more variety in the youth ministry offerings in your community by complementing your central ministry strategies.

Assessment Questions

Parish Support for Youth Ministry

- *How well does our parish know and value our youth?*

- *How are youth involved in parish life?*
- *In what ministries and aspects of parish life could youth become involved?*
- *In what ways are youth involved in leadership and decision making in the parish?*
- *In what ways do we encourage and affirm youth's involvement in parish life?*
- *How well does our parish understand youth ministry?*

Parish Staff

- *How well does our parish staff understand youth ministry and know about our youth ministry efforts?*
- *How well does our parish staff collaborate?*
- *In what ways do we make an effort to communicate with and involve our pastor in youth ministry efforts?*

Qualities and Dimensions of Effective Youth Ministry

- *How responsive is our youth ministry to the "real lives, needs and interests of youth?"*
- *How is our ministry innovative in responding to youth's needs?*
- *How are we nurturing the web of relationships in our community? (youth with youth, youth with adults, parish community with youth, youth in their families.)*
- *Are there a variety of ways for youth to be involved in our parish and its youth ministry efforts?*
- *How are we involving youth in leading youth ministry and promoting ownership of the ministry among the youth?*

Specific Programs / Components

- *What do we currently offer youth to promote faith growth and development?*
- *How engaging and effective are our faith formation efforts?*
- *In our faith formation efforts, in what ways do we begin with and make connections to the real life issues of youth?*
- *How are we making adolescent catechesis and faith formation the heart of our youth ministry?*
- *How do we provide youth with experiences of service involvement?*
- *How well do we connect service experiences with Catholic beliefs and the faith life of young people?*
- *How well are we promoting "full, active and conscious participation" of youth in the liturgies of our parish?*
- *How are youth involved in the liturgical ministries of our community?*
- *Do we provide opportunities for youth to experience extended trips?*
- *How do we provide for youth retreat experiences?*

As a Coordinator of youth ministry

- *How do I take the time to nurture my spirituality and skills for ministry?*
- *How do I develop collaborative relationships with parish staff and leaders?*
- *In what ways do I advocate for youth and their involvement in parish life?*
- *In what ways do I network with other youth ministers and with the diocese?*
- *How do I make youth and adults feel invited, welcome and comfortable?*

Adult Volunteers

- *How does our community invite and nurture adults of lively faith to work with youth?*
- *How do we provide training and formation for adults who work with youth?*

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