

Preliminary Report

From the National Symposium on Effective Youth Ministry Practices in Catholic Parishes

Symposium

The Symposium was a gathering of 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. One of the processes conducted during the symposium was an exploration of the themes that emerged from the key findings in the research. Each group explored the implications and the observable practices as identified in the findings and participant quotations for that theme.

Symposium and Research Process Outcomes

Overall Comments:

The research and the discussions at the symposium revealed a strong connection between the vibrancy of parish life in general and the effectiveness of youth ministry. In general the parishes that were studied were vibrant overall and the youth ministry reflected the general dynamism of the parish's ministries and the collaborative environment of the parish staff and leadership. Youth ministry includes ministry to youth within a peer community, involvement in parish and wider community life and ministry within their families. Effective youth ministry helps youth to move seamlessly from these ministry settings. This implies different strategies for parishes at different levels of development. A parish that has vibrant ministry overall should seek first to link youth to the life of the parish, then develop opportunities for youth to be ministered to within a peer community setting in areas that complement their involvement in parish life. Family connections can be made to both of these ministry settings. In parishes that are still developing vibrant ministry have a greater need to create community, faith education, worship and service opportunities for youth within a peer community while still making efforts to include youth in parish life. In these parishes, youth and youth ministry may be an energizing factor in helping develop more vibrant ministries overall. One way that this process was described during the symposium was that there was a continued shift from youth ministry as youth group to comprehensive youth ministry to parish as youth ministry.

The role of the coordinator of youth ministry as an animator of ministry was a key area of conversation. If youth ministry is truly reflective of the settings of ministry-- youth, family, parish and wider community--then the leader of a parish youth ministry is more than the youth minister. In fact, most parishes have many adults who function as a "minister" to youth. This leader is also more than a coordinator. The Coordinator of Youth Ministry role description can imply that the role is primarily programmatic. Because of the spiritual significance of this leader and the evolving role as one who inspires and supports ministries throughout parish life, the role of *animator* was suggested. Further discussion included mention of dioceses that call the leader of youth ministry, the Pastoral Associate for Youth Ministry.

The role of spirituality in youth ministry was a central theme of the symposium and a consistent theme in the research. All of those who work in ministry with youth need spiritual formation and more support for the ongoing development of prayer and spiritual practices.

This was also evident in the research when youth talked about the qualities of the adults who work in youth ministry and of the kind of faith formation or catechesis that they felt was effective. Youth are looking for inspiration and authenticity in the leaders who share faith.

Symposium participants noted the need for continued conversations. The parish leaders in particular, identified a need to be listened to by diocesan leaders and by the variety of leaders and structures that are intended to support the development of youth ministry. There was affirmation for a qualitative style of research that would sponsor continued conversations and an affirmation for continued gatherings across the spectrum of youth ministry leadership to help foster and form youth ministry development on the national level.

Symposium participants found that the research results resonated with Renewing the Vision – A Framework for Catholic Youth Ministry, a document of the United States Catholic Conference of Bishops. The results were very affirming of Renewing the Vision, especially the comprehensive approach to ministry and the integration of youth within parish life. The parishes in the research implemented the principles of this document in different ways, oftentimes organizing the variety of ministry initiatives around a primary ministry effort such as a youth community or sacramental preparation. Some components such as evangelization and pastoral care were not found to be mentioned explicitly in the research. Symposium participants suggested that the spiritual formation of leaders was more evident in the research than in *Renewing the Vision* and that this emphasis would complement the continued development of ministry.

I. What practices lead to effective ministry with adolescents?

The practices that lead to effective youth ministry can be divided into two categories: specific program initiatives and characteristics of the ministry.

Characteristics of the ministry

- Effective youth ministry is highly relational. The ministry takes place within a context of relationships of trust between youth and adults, youth and their families, youth and youth and youth within the larger community.
- The spirituality, integrity and sincere concern of the leaders who work with youth are of primary importance for youth in hearing the message and becoming part of the community.
- Effective youth ministry is marked by an environment of hospitality where all are welcome and are made to feel at home.
- Youth and their families experience youth ministry as a collaborative effort of the whole parish.

Specific Program initiatives

- Youth appreciate and grow from experiences of faith formation that are linked to everyday life. This faith formation is accomplished in a different way in adolescence: effective faith formation is hands-on, inspirational and does not resemble “school” styles of learning. The person who shares faith is of primary importance to youth in receiving the message.
- Extended programs such as retreats, service learning events, leadership training, conventions and trips are powerful experiences of community and faith growth for youth.
- Service experiences that are linked to learning about justice and faith teachings make a powerful impact on young people’s lives and their sense of vocation.

- Vibrant liturgy that engages the senses of youth in worship is integral to effective ministry. Youth want to be involved in helping to prepare and participate in the ministries of liturgy.
- Involving youth in leadership within youth ministry and throughout parish life is a key opportunity for youth to practice their faith and their skills.

II. What factors are in place within a parish community when youth ministry is effective?

The following factors are in place within parishes that demonstrate effective youth ministry:

- Youth are integrated into the full life of the parish .
- Youth feel at home and are genuinely known and liked by the parish community.
- There is a partnership wherein adults and youth learn from each other within the parish.
- Training and formation for youth ministry leaders is valued and provided for.
- Pastors and parish staff collaborate; they support and are knowledgeable about youth ministry.
- The Coordinator of Youth Ministry leads from a strong sense of mission and spirituality. This coordinator knows that youth ministry is the responsibility of the whole parish.
- The Coordinator for Youth Ministry advocates for young people's place in the church and makes it possible for programs to thrive and succeed.
- Partnership and alliance of families is seen as critical to effective youth ministry.

III. What resources, programs, and initiatives are most needed by parishes to develop effective ministry with adolescents?

Further research and development is needed in the following areas:

- Adolescent Catechesis and Faith Formation
- Retreats and Extended Contact Programs
- The Role of Spirituality within Youth Ministry
- Effective Practices in Diocesan Youth Ministry
- Ministry with youth from a variety of ethnic and racial cultures and ministry with youth in a multicultural setting.

Dioceses need support in order to

- Create structures and methods for listening to and responding to parish leaders.
- Begin working more directly with parish staffs to help them understand youth ministry and to foster greater collaboration.
- Provide consultation to parishes that are in a variety of stages of development of youth ministry and parish life overall.

Parish leaders need

- More opportunities for spiritual formation.
- More opportunities for discussion and mutual support.
- A Professional Journal to provide access to information about research and practice in youth ministry.
- Greater clarity and resources in the area of Adolescent Catechesis and Faith Formation.
- More access to resources for youth ministry.
- Further exploration of the role of the leader in youth ministry.

Parishes need

- Skills for collaboration among parish staffs and leadership.
- Models for ways that pastors can support the development of effective youth ministry.

- Tools that would help parishes to assess current ministry efforts and compare with the findings from the research.
- Access to training and formation for leadership.
- Greater clarity about the role of the coordinator of youth ministry and practical models for support and supervision.

Next Steps for the Symposium Project

The findings from the research and the results of the symposium will be compiled into a report and book that will share this information with all those who are interested in developing more effective youth ministry in Catholic parishes. The book will be published by Saint Mary's Press in spring 2004. This information will be made available in a variety of ways in addition to the book, including a national workshop series and downloadable reports posted on a common website.

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Funding for this project has been provided through the sponsoring agencies and the following foundations:

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

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