

# Effective Youth Ministry Practices and Models

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By Tom East

Where would you start in trying to describe youth ministry in a parish? Youth ministry is more than just the gatherings, activities, and events. It's more than the leadership team. It's more than the newsletter or fliers. *How do you describe a relationship?* Imagine describing your most significant relationship only in terms of what you do or when you get together. It's pretty awkward, isn't it? Youth Ministry is more than a program; it's a relationship between the parish and its young members.

Like a relationship, youth ministry has many dimensions. At its heart, there is a pattern of listening, caring, responding and sharing. When choosing a model for your parish youth ministry, you are choosing a way to put all of your resources together to build this relationship. Resources help you with lots of the elements that will go into your model, but each parish will find a different way to put the pieces together.

## Parishes with Effective Youth Ministry

Youth, adult youth ministry leaders, and parish staff members described their experience of youth ministry as a "web of relationships." Youth ministry nurtures these relationships between youth and their peers, youth and their families, youth and the youth ministry leaders, and youth with the parish community. This was just one image among many that surfaced in interviews conducted as part of a research project of the Center for Ministry Development and Saint Mary's Press. "The Effective Youth Ministry Practices in Catholic Parishes" project included interviews with nearly 400 youth, adult leaders, and parish staff members from 96 parishes from around the country. These parishes were implementing a vision for comprehensive youth ministry, but they were responding with different models for their different settings. The results of this project reveal important considerations when choosing a model for youth ministry. Parishes with effective youth ministry had these characteristics.

- **Youth ministry is supported and understood by the parish community.** In these parishes, youth felt valued and welcomed in their parish, and they felt included in parish life. Everything youth experience in the parish is part of their experience of youth ministry. This means that to be effective we pay attention to Sunday liturgies as well as we do to Wednesday night youth gatherings.
- **Effective youth ministry responds to the real lives, needs and interests of youth.** The leadership team for youth ministry knows the youth in the community and provides innovative and changing events, gatherings, and opportunities for involvement that respond to youth's needs from this relationship.

- **Effective youth ministry is marked by generous hospitality and intentional relationship building.** Extending personal invitations, providing warm welcome, nurturing relationships, and building community are all ongoing within youth ministry. Through these actions, a web of relationships is nurtured and through the relationships youth grow personally and spiritually. The individual programs or events are secondary to the development of trusting relationships and community, through which ministry happens.
- **Effective youth ministry has a variety of ways for youth and their families to be involved.** Ministry is multifaceted; there are different ways to be involved and different levels of involvement. These parishes also connect with families to promote participation and to reinforce youth ministry involvement.
- **In parishes with effective youth ministry, youth are active in making youth ministry happen.** Youth are not passive receivers of ministry, but rather they have ownership and shared leadership in the programs, activities, and community life. In these communities, youth witness to their faith with their peers.

In addition to these qualities, these parishes also noted specific programs or components in their youth ministry model which led to effectiveness.

- **Faith formation is the “heart of youth ministry.”** These parishes use a variety of methods to evangelize and catechize youth, but each community planned intentionally to share the faith in a way that connects with the real life issues and concerns of youth.
- **Service experiences are transformational for youth and for those they serve.** These experiences broaden youth’s perspective and help make faith real. These hands-on experiences of serving developed youth as disciples and helped them to feel valuable.
- **Youth expressed a strong desire to participate in liturgy that engages their whole person.** Youth want to be part of the parish’s celebration of liturgy and they hunger for music and homilies that touch their souls. Youth involvement in liturgical ministries is important to youth and is an important sign of hope for the parish community.
- **Youth retreats were noted to have a unique ability to touch the hearts of young people and help youth to grow closer to God and the community.** Youth described these events as life changing, while parish leaders noted the changes they saw in youth and the enthusiasm these youth bring to the parish as a whole.
- **Extended trips, camps, national conferences, and World Youth Day were important to youth and to the development of youth ministry.** These experiences helped build community and helped youth develop their

sense of pride for their faith identity.

As you can see from these descriptors, the youth ministry in these parishes is multidimensional; a variety of youth can find themselves in these youth ministries. Even though these parishes were active, the variety wasn't overwhelming. Youth ministry didn't become a circus, but there was enough variety that youth could find different starting points and could grow at their own pace. One thing that these communities actively avoided was developing youth ministry as a parallel youth congregation to the parish community. This need to include youth in parish life is also noted in mainline youth ministry publications. Kenda Creasy Dean critiques the separate youth congregation approach in the book, *The Godbearing Life—The Art of Soul Tending for Youth Ministry* (Nashville TN: Upper Room Books, 1998). She describes this approach as “the one-eared Mickey Mouse model of youth ministry” (p. 31). In this model, the congregation as a whole (visualized as a large circle) has an attached but separate youth congregation (visualized by a smaller attached circle). Youth experience belonging, worship, and service as part of a youth congregation running in parallel tracks with the adult congregation. At the end of years of participation in a youth congregation, a young person may never make it into the adult congregation because it is foreign to them. The energy, style of worship, and network of relationships are a whole new world that years of youth ministry have not prepared the young person for.

As Creasy Dean states,

“The upshot of the overwhelming dominance of youth-group models of ministry was a deepening chasm between youth ministry and the theology of the church as a whole. When youth graduated from the ‘youth group’—the only form of ministry many young people had ever experienced—they effectively graduated from church as well” (p. 30).

To avoid “parallel congregations,” we can focus on youth in the congregation at the same time that we provide for ministry to youth with their peers. This doesn't mean we don't have a youth group or that we don't gather youth. It means that youth ministry includes more than just one gathering of youth or one kind of activity. Youth ministry includes gathered ministry and non-gathered ways to minister. Youth ministry attends to youth in different settings: individual youth are ministered to and invited to share their gifts, youth are ministered to as part of a youth community, youth are also ministered with as part of their families, and attention is also paid to promoting youth's active participation in parish life.

To promote this comprehensive approach, effective parishes develop a model for youth ministry that includes:

- **A pattern for gathering with youth on a regular basis**

These regular gatherings can be weekly, bi-weekly, or monthly. Because youth can count on these gatherings, a community can be nurtured and developed. Parents can also actively encourage participation because it becomes part of the family pattern.

- **Special events and ways to gather with youth**

These events are all the gatherings of youth that aren't part of the regular pattern. This would include day-long service events, Friday night socials, retreats, trips, youth conventions, open-gym night, and a variety of ways for youth to get together with caring adults. These offerings round out the youth ministry program and provide ways for youth with different interests to participate.

- **Intentional methods for providing adolescent catechesis**

Adolescent catechesis includes both the informal, teachable moments within youth ministry and the intentional faith learning. Through the regular gatherings, the special events, the non-gathered strategies, the family connections, and the involvement of youth in parish life, youth grow in faith. There are a variety of ways to attend to catechesis. Some parishes infuse a curriculum for faith growth throughout youth ministry. Some parishes provide faith formation for youth within events and programs with the whole parish community in an intergenerational model. Other parishes provide religious education and sacramental preparation as a distinct element of youth ministry. The important common factor is that effective parishes *plan* for faith formation for adolescents as an intentional part of their model.

- **Opportunities for youth who want to grow deeper in faith**

Some youth are looking for a community to belong to and a chance to socialize with other youth. Other youth in the parish are looking for a way to learn and grow in their faith by going deeper into issues of discipleship and conversion. Sometimes, but not always, these interests can be associated with grade level: freshmen and sophomores can be more interested in community, while juniors and seniors can be more serious about faith growth. Effective parishes provide for both starting points. Youth who are committed to growing in faith want a chance to be with adults and other youth who are similarly committed. They can become annoyed and distracted by youth who don't want to be there. This is a serious weakness of the "one-size-fits-all" model for youth ministry; youth who feel that youth ministry is just social or that teaching is watered down will go elsewhere. To be effective, a parish should include opportunities for youth who want to go deeper in their faith.

- **Non-gathered ways to connect with youth**

There are a lot of ways to minister with youth without having them come to the parish or to an event. This would include sending things to youth: e-mail prayers and greetings, birthday cards, study kits, newsletters, prayer cards, emergency phone number cards, and other resources. This also includes being present to youth—as a youth ministry team—where they are, by attending youth events such as sporting events or concerts.

- **Ways to connect youth to the life of the parish**

Youth are ministered to as part of parish life. Through the variety of components of the parish's ministry, youth experience ministry side by side with adults and children. Ministering to youth through parish life includes helping youth to

participate in the sacraments of the parish, especially in Sunday liturgy. It also means including youth in faith formation events for the whole parish community. Many parish events become a youth ministry strategy when we are intentional in making sure that youth are included in the prayers, stories, examples, and teaching of the event. For example, the parish mission can be part of the youth ministry's Lenten preparations if we take the time to prepare the mission speaker to speak to youth in the assembly. Community building activities of the parish and parish service projects can also be part of youth ministry.

- **Ways to connect with families**

Youth are growing in their autonomy and need their parents as much as ever. To minister to youth in the midst of this paradox, we plan for ways to connect with families by communicating with parents, by providing parents of adolescents with helpful programs and resources, by considering the impact of youth ministry on families as we plan, and by providing occasional gatherings for families of adolescents.

- **Ways for youth to be involved in ministry, leadership, and service**

Besides being ministered to, youth desire a way to share their gifts; they long for a chance to serve. An effective model for youth ministry will include ways to encourage youth to be involved in liturgical and catechetical ministries, in leadership for youth ministry, by sharing leadership in the parish and by involvement community service. These involvements can be introduced by special projects, but for many youth, these involvements can become regular commitments. This is especially important for juniors and seniors in high school who have a lot to contribute and are sometimes more interested in sharing leadership and attending special events than in being part of an ongoing youth community.

## Looking at Different Models

There is not one model that puts these pieces together in the perfect way for every parish. In *Renewing the Vision*, the United States Bishops encourage parish communities to put the pieces of the framework together creatively: "By offering this framework, we seek to provide direction to the church's ministry *and* to affirm and encourage local creativity" (*Renewing the Vision*, p. 20). Effective parish youth ministry is responsive to youth; by listening and knowing young people and their families, these parishes develop a model for youth ministry that works for their community. These communities provide youth and their families with a combination of continuity and innovation. Continuity comes from having regular patterns for participation and traditions and events that youth can count on each year. Innovation provides responses to new needs and situations and brings new energy to youth ministry, as leaders and youth try new things. In the Effective Practices research, one parish staff member described it this way: "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" (Effective Youth Ministry Practices Research Summary, p. 4).

Here is a sampling of how different communities put the pieces together:

### **Model 1 - Weekly Youth Night Plus!**

This suburban parish with 1500 families provides a weekly youth night on Wednesday nights. These gatherings include a combination of catechesis, which is offered approximately every other week, and the other components of youth ministry. Community building and prayer are a consistent part of each gathering. An important part of the weekly gathering is the announcements which help youth to link up with parish events, family resources, special events, and other aspects of youth ministry. Youth are encouraged to participate in the gatherings by e-mail notes, a phone tree, and a monthly newsletter. Each year youth receive a birthday card on behalf of the parish and an emergency phone number card with a prayer on the back. Special events include a social or community builder, offered on a weekend night once a month. Every other month, there are service projects offered as a weekend day or as an ongoing involvement during the week. Sacramental preparation is provided for a variety of youth; youth who seek initiation or first communion and confirmation are part of the Christian Initiation process with the adults in community. Confirmation preparation is a six month process that is offered to youth who are fifteen years of age and older. After confirmation, youth are encouraged to become lectors, ushers, music ministers, and Eucharistic ministers for the parish liturgies. Special events for this community include a fall retreat for all youth, a leadership retreat and a mission/service trip in the summer. Parents of youth receive regular newsletters and are invited to participate in a parent of teen support group that gathers each fall. Families of youth are gathered for an annual picnic and sports day each summer.

### **Model 2 - Small Faith Communities, Plus!**

This is a large suburban parish with 2500 families, whose regular pattern of gathering is in small faith communities. Youth are divided into "cell" groups of ten to twelve members with two adults. These groups meet at the parish or in family homes on a weekly basis. Once a month, there is a special event that can be a service event, a community building social, or a retreat. Different small groups take responsibility for planning, publicizing, and leading these special events which are provided for the whole youth community. Catechesis is provided within the faith communities. In their junior or senior year, small groups are formed for Confirmation preparation for those youth who choose to prepare for the sacrament. Similarly, there is a small group of youth who are in the process for Christian Initiation. Weekend retreats are offered each season of the year for different interests or grade levels of youth. Youth are encouraged to participate in the parish community. One way that this is accomplished is that each small group chooses an aspect of parish life to focus on in a particular season. For instance, one group takes on the role of greeters for one of the parish liturgies for a particular month. Another group assists with the parish food pantry for a season. Prayer is a special focus of the small groups. Each small group surfaces prayer needs that become part of a book of prayer intentions and/or part of the prayers of the faithful for the parish as a whole. Each group

also receives prayer requests from members or groups in the parish that are included in their prayer time weekly. Parents of youth in each small group are gathered each season for a meeting with the small group leaders. At this meeting, they pray for youth, talk about the upcoming season, provide parents with resources and at-home ideas, and answer questions from the parents. Small group leaders make an effort to be present to youth events for the youth in their group by attending concerts and sporting events. Small group leaders are also encouraged to write notes, send e-mails, and send a birthday card and a patron saint day card to each youth. Small group leaders divide their youth and call each young person for a check-in once a month.

### **Model 3 - Weekly Religious Education, Plus!**

In this small town, the parish focuses the youth ministry around a weekly religious education class. These classes run from September to May in between masses on Sunday and on Monday nights. For freshman and sophomores, these classes provide a systemic review of catechesis topics. Juniors are invited to participate in a year-long confirmation preparation process that includes weekly classes. Seniors are encouraged to participate in service and ministry internships that are focused around a ministry mentor process. Three or four youth work with two adults in a particular ministry involvement during the year and gather monthly for prayer, spiritual direction, and community building. The religious education classes are complemented by a variety of special events. Monthly there is a social on a Friday or Saturday night. Twice during the school year there is a special service event. Each year there are weekend retreats—one for the freshman and sophomores, one for the confirmation preparation, and one for the seniors, which focuses on life choices. Parents of youth are gathered twice during the school year for a meeting which includes prayer and a speaker. Parents also meet with the religious education class catechists once during the year for a check-in. Catechists make an effort to keep in touch with youth outside of the class time through e-mails, notes, and by attending youth events. Each month, there is a special youth involved liturgy, which is prepared for the parish community by a particular class from the high school religious education. These liturgies involve youth in preparation, and throughout the ministries, including environment.

### **Model 4 - Monthly Events, Plus!**

In this rural community, the focus of the youth ministry program is a monthly event. Many families travel a great distance to get to the parish, and this makes weekly gatherings at the parish impractical. This monthly event lasts from 1 p.m. to 9 p.m. on a Sunday. The event includes community building, catechesis, and other components of youth ministry. In the evening there is a special liturgy for youth as part of the program. This is followed by a meal and a closing session. Each month has a different theme and a different team of adults and youth who divide responsibilities for planning and implementing the program. In this community, confirmation is provided every other year for 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade students. This community joins with two other neighboring parishes to provide an annual retreat that is offered each year in the late spring. Each summer the youth and adults from the parish participate together in a mission trip to a community in need. This parish takes advantage of technology to reach youth;

each youth receives a weekly e-mail update that includes a prayer and reflection for the week, community news, and information about the upcoming events for the parish. Parents receive an e-mail update monthly that also includes links to websites, books, and resources that will guide them as parents of youth. The youth ministry pages of the parish website are rich with pictures of youth, links to helpful sites, and threaded conversations on topics of faith.

### **Model 5 - Youth Ministry as Parish Involvement, Plus!**

In this small urban community, youth are a vital part of parish life. Youth participate in leadership committees of the parish, they are part of each choir, and they participate side by side with adults in the frequent service projects and programs of the parish. This parish has monthly faith formation events that are truly intergenerational—children, youth, and adults of all ages participate together in programs that focus on preparing for events in the liturgical year and preparing for parish wide sacraments. Confirmation preparation for this community is a family based program within which families guide the preparation of their youth and are gathered on a regular basis for prayer, support, and community building. Youth are regularly gathered for an “open gym” night during which the parish facilities are opened to youth on a Friday night from 8 p.m. to 12 midnight. These nights are usually scheduled in conjunction with high school sporting events and other occasions when the church wants to give youth a safe place to come and be together with caring adults. Other socials and special youth events are provided quarterly. The parish staff takes a special interest in making contact with youth. The youth of the parish are divided among the parish staff members who meet with youth at least twice a year and make an effort to make contact with youth throughout the year. The parish staff considers itself to be “the youth ministry team” and provides special programs as needed that help youth with school or help them find employment and pastoral care assistance. In a similar way, the parents of youth are regularly contacted by the parish staff, who check in and connect parents with needed resources. One of the key features of this community is “an open door” to the parish offices. Youth and their parents feel comfortable coming to the parish for help. “We don’t need to do a needs assessment here,” remarked one staff member, “the needs walk in the door and we listen and respond.”

## **Choosing a Model**

One of the things you may have noticed about the parish descriptions is that each parish attended to the elements that were described for effective parishes. Each parish found a way to provide:

- A pattern for gathering with youth on a regular basis
- Special events and ways to gather with youth
- Intentional methods for providing adolescent catechesis
- Opportunities for youth who want to grow deeper in faith
- Non-gathered ways to connect with youth
- Ways to connect youth to the life of the parish
- Ways to connect with families
- Ways for youth to be involved in ministry, leadership, and service

- Each parish also attended to the components of youth ministry, but with different emphasis depending upon the needs in the community, the resources of the parish, and the situation of the parish families in terms of ability to gather at the parish and have access to resources.

To choose your model for parish youth ministry, take time to listen to parish leaders, parents of youth, and youth themselves. Think about your community. What model fits with the ways your parish gathers and your style of being community? What are the issues and concerns? A variety of factors about your community could impact and shape your model. For instance:

- **Distance** – The distance of families from the parish impacts the ability of youth to gather weekly or several times during a week for a variety of programs.
- **Schools** – If significant numbers of youth in your parish attend Catholic high school, this would affect youth participation in the catechetical aspects of youth ministry.
- **Urban, Suburban, and Rural** - The demographics for your parish will impact the model for ministry. Many urban parishes include a stronger pastoral care focus because youth ministry has been seen as a way to protect youth from violence or challenges in urban life. Suburban parishes often have lots of resources but also struggle so that youth and their families don't become lost within large, mobile congregations. Rural parishes know their youth by name and by family but are sometimes challenged by low numbers of youth and low energy in small gatherings. These parishes make a greater priority at participating in regional or national events so that youth don't feel so isolated.
- **Ethnic and Racial Diversity** - The racial and ethnic groups that comprise the parish can impact the style of youth ministry and the choice of a model. Different ethnic communities have different styles of ministry with youth. For instance, many African American or Hispanic communities more naturally gather as a whole parish than many European American communities which tend more towards schooling and graded level models for faith formation (see *Godbearing Life*, p. 212 and *Black and White Styles of Youth Ministry: Two Congregations in America* by William R. Myers). Most parishes include different communities, but it is important to work with the strengths of your parish community so that a model doesn't feel imposed.
- **Vibrancy of Parish Life** - Another important consideration would be your evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of parish life. In the study of effective parishes, there was a correlation between parishes with effective ministries overall and parishes with effective youth ministry. Many of 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. 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.

- **Parish Confirmation Preparation Model** - Many parishes have two-year, multifaceted confirmation preparation programs for high school youth. Much of what we hope to accomplish in youth ministry is provided for within the confirmation process. The process also consumes most of the parish's energy and leadership that could be put towards the development of youth ministry. Youth's time for parish involvement is also consumed within confirmation preparation. Often, these communities struggle to keep youth involved after confirmation. If you are looking to implement a more comprehensive approach to youth ministry, one major initiative may need to be a change in the confirmation preparation to a more short-term approach.

These are some of the factors and implications. To be effective as a parish, choose a model that seems to fit your community, and adapt and innovate within that model as you go along. This process is very much like being a parent—there are things we choose about how we parent—who will watch our children, how we celebrate holidays, how will divide responsibilities, how will we discipline. As parents, we make choices that match our values, but we shift and grow with these choices as our children grow and change. As youth ministry leaders, we choose a model that matches with our values, and we shift and grow as we need to so that we can serve and include youth.

## **Conclusion**

In *Renewing the Vision*, youth ministry is described as the “response of the Christian community to the needs of young people, and the sharing of the unique gifts of youth with the larger communities” (RTV, p. 1). An effective model provides for this pastoral response and for the inclusion of youth's gifts. Each parish will find its way to dynamic ministry by listening, choosing, responding, and including youth and their families.