

## Effective Youth Ministry Practices

By Tom East, Center for Ministry Development

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 is 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 is pretty awkward, is not it? Youth ministry is more than a program; it is a relationship between the parish and its young members. This relationship has many dimensions; 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 accomplished in collaboration with the National Federation for Catholic Youth Ministry. "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. The findings from these interviews were shared and refined at a national symposium held in May 2002 with 55 leaders in youth ministry, including diocesan leaders, parish youth ministry coordinators, national organizations, publishers and training organizations.

Among the findings from this project, there are six practices and five high impact program elements that parishes found to be integral to effective youth ministry.

### Effective Practices

- **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 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 relationship 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.
- **Partnership with families is critical in effective youth ministry.** Leaders connect with families and provide consistent communication about youth ministry. They also provide

opportunities for parent and family involvement as well as family-based activities and resources.

### High Impact Program Elements

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

- **Adolescent Catechesis is at 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 conference 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 was not overwhelming. Youth ministry did not 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 for which youth ministry has not prepared the young.

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 does not mean we do not have a youth group or that we do not 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.

#### A Willing Parish

In the first interview, the researcher asked a young woman, what does a parish need to do to have effective youth ministry? She replied that it wasn't really about doing something; it was what the parish needed to be. The parish needed to be "a willing parish." Some might think just being "willing" is a minimal expectation, but the young person meant something much more. A parish must be willing to experience the change that comes with being a community with active youth members. This insight is very descriptive of the parish communities that were studied in this project. They were willing. They were willing to let young people in their midst become full members in the community. They were willing to put their energy and resources into developing youth ministry. They were willing to let youth be leaders and share in ministries side by side with adults. Most of all, they were willing to truly be in relationship with the youth in their midst. These parishes took the time to get to know and grow in friendship with young people. Through this relationship, the community changed and grew.

This insight matched with our experience of youth ministry as a research team. There is something intangible about parishes that are effective in their youth ministry efforts. Many communities name youth as a priority, set goals for initiatives with youth, and assign leaders to lead the ministry. Unfortunately, many of these communities fall short of their hoped-for outcomes. These communities may have a different starting point than the willing parish. Some of these communities may want youth ministry to happen because they are worried about youth or because they know the community needs young members. But in the end, some communities are not willing to let go and move over and make room for the change and disruption that accompanies a truly effective youth ministry. As parents of teenagers know, having youth in the house is not a quiet thing. It is not business as usual. Youth bring their new ideas, their opinions, and their way of doing things. A family with children that becomes a family with teenagers renegotiates the ways they eat, recreate, pray, divide chores, and celebrate their lives together. In a similar way, a parish community that comes to know and treasure the youth in their midst will experience new ways of praying, celebrating, serving, and learning. It is not about always letting youth have their way, or about discarding the traditions of a community. But it is about letting youth have *a way to truly belong*. Youth and the community learn together and are transformed in the process. The community is not turned on its head in chaos throwing out all care for everyone other than youth. But there are fundamental changes in communities that get to know youth and are willing to have them be part of the community in an authentic way.

Working through these changes as a community is part of what builds a parish with effective youth ministry. Each community will find its own way, but the leadership of the parishes in this research helps point us toward more effective and dynamic youth ministry.

Note: *The Effective Youth Ministry Practices in Catholic Parishes* is a project of the Center for Ministry Development and Saint Mary's Press, in collaboration with the National Federation for Catholic Youth Ministry. The results of this project will be shared in a book entitled, *Effective Practices for Dynamic Youth Ministry*, by Tom East. This book will be published this spring by Saint Mary's Press. The results will also be highlighted in a national workshop series by the same title to be held in 15 locations in 2004. For more information about this project please contact: Tom East, Director for the Center for Ministry Development, 253-853-5422, [tomeast@cmdnet.org](mailto:tomeast@cmdnet.org).