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Principles and Practices of Youth Ministry

Summary

The youth ministry of our parish is entering its 9th year of ministry since the first NET (National Evangelization Team) implemented the Life Teen model of ministry. Since 2002, youth ministry has seen two NET teams, three coordinators of youth ministry, and numerous volunteers and participants who have in one way or another encountered Christ in varying and unique ways. Many of these youth continue to be active participants within our parish or are actively involved with other ministries locally or nationally.

During Easter, the Pastoral Council offered every parishioner a copy of the book, *Rediscovering Catholicism*. The author urges us as Catholics “to live the faith more fully with each passing day, allowing it to reach into every corner of our lives,” and continues on to say that “if just a handful of people in one place and one time will give their whole selves to seeking, discovering, embracing, and living this life, they will change the whole course of human history”¹. Therefore, it is our mission as youth ministry to *foster a culture that promotes personal holiness and the missionary desire to share the gospel message with other youth*.

We are currently adopting a form of ministry which engages youth individually through spiritual, intellectual, and moral formation and challenges them to draw their peers into relationship with Christ. We provide opportunities for youth involvement through weekly gathered activities such as Edge and Life Teen, promoting youth ministry in schools, and events directed towards their formation.

The teachings of the four post-conciliar popes have consistently reaffirmed the fundamental identity of the Church which “exists in order to evangelize”². In particular, they have sought ways to engage the youth within the life and mission of the Church as a whole. As our parish approaches nearly a decade of active youth ministry, it is important for us to examine the importance, successes, and future of our ministry to the young people of our community.

¹ Matthew Kelly, *Rediscovering Catholicism*, (Cincinnati: Beacon Publishing, 2002) 50.

² Paul VI. *Apostolic Exhortation, Evangelii Nuntiandi*. 14. 08121975. Web. 23 Oct 2010.

Vision for Youth Ministry

In order for us fully appreciate our parish's mission and activity, we must examine our efforts through the lens of the Catholic Church as a whole and the unique cultural environment in which we now live. The Church in Canada, as well as other countries within N. America and Europe, is facing rapidly declining numbers. In a report by CBC, it was found that among Canadian Catholics outside of Quebec, regular church attendance has fallen from 72% in the 1950's to 32% in 2000, when the study was conducted.³ Although national statistics do not necessarily correlate with local realities, we must acknowledge that we live in a culture where fewer people are engaged within the life of the church and that the average age of regular Mass attendees is rising. In his encyclical *Redemptoris Missio*, Pope John Paul II says that "...it is painfully clear that many Catholics (and other Christians) have not been effectively incorporated into life in Christ. Baptized as infants many have never made a personal commitment to the Lord Jesus and the Gospel. As adolescents and adults many drift away from the Church"⁴. After raising the question of how Christ can be brought to these young people, John Paul II goes on to state that "Clearly, the ordinary means of pastoral work are not sufficient: what are needed are associations, institutions, special centers and groups, and cultural and social initiatives for young people"⁵. This is the demand that the pastoral leadership of the parish have hoped to meet with the establishment and continued support of youth ministry. Yet, it is clearly not enough to just "do something for the youth". What is required is a directed and comprehensive approach to engage the youth within the church.

In 1997, the US Conference of Catholic Bishops issued *Renewing the Vision: A Framework for Catholic Youth Ministry*, as a blueprint for ministry to youth within N. America. The Conference proposes that "all ministry with adolescents must be directed toward presenting

³ "Church Attendance." *cbc.ca*. CBC News, 02102003. Web. 27 Oct 2010. <<http://www.cbc.ca/news/background/catholicism/churchattendance.html>>.

⁴ John Paul II. *Encyclical Letter, Redemptoris Missio: On the permanent validity of the Church's missionary mandate*. 36; par 1. 07122007. Web. 23 Oct 2010. <http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_07121990_redemptoris-missio_en.html>.

⁵ *Redemptoris Missio* 37; par. 8.

young people with the Good news of Jesus Christ and inviting and challenging them to become his disciples”⁶. Within this mission, they put forward three goals which youth ministry should aim to accomplish:

Goal 1: To empower young people to live as disciples of Jesus Christ in our world today.

Goal 2: To draw young people to responsible participation in the life, mission, and work of the Catholic faith community.

Goal 3: To foster the total personal and spiritual growth of each young person.⁷

Through fulfilling these three goals, we incorporate youth within Christ’s mandate to the church to “Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you” (Matt 28: 19-20). This is the missionary heritage that has enlivened the church since its beginning and the one that we as a local church are called to further.

This is our challenge as a parish, to bring up disciples from among the youth to help them grow in holiness, and further the evangelistic mission of the Catholic Church. We desire to bring youth to the church that have either fallen away or have never come. This is an uphill battle as we struggle with a cultural understanding of the Catholic Church as an outdated and irrelevant institution. While we know that Christ’s message is for everyone, it is often best communicated to non-believing youth by peers. For this to work, these youth and young adults must be spiritually, intellectually, and personally formed and equipped to live as Christian disciples within their schools, families, and other social circles. The challenges that a person faces in living out these practices are often unique to the individual and, in turn, require a similarly unique ministerial response.

This reality of youth ministry demands an approach referred to as Relational Ministry. At the core of Relational Ministry lies the concept that “faith is caught, not taught”. While a person can know many things *about* Jesus Christ, they do not necessarily have a personal relationship with Him. More often than not, it is through the personal testimonies of friends, family members and scripture, that a spiritual longing for Christ is realized. From this desolation comes the

⁶ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. Renewing the Vision: A Framework for Catholic Youth Ministry. Washington: United States Catholic Conference, 1997.

⁷ RV, p. 2.

desire to know Him more intimately. Youth ministry provides spiritual mentors as guides for this journey. Mentors who will pay special attention to the individual's spiritual needs and questions. In turn, these mentors continue to grow as disciples since "faith is strengthened when it is shared"⁸. It is our model then to raise spiritual mentors who will reach out to youth and call them to become mentors to others.

Through prayer, love, and personal testimonies youth are challenged to reach out to the community on a far broader scale than can be done within the walls of the church. It is therefore our mission as a youth ministry to *foster a culture that promotes personal holiness and the missionary desire to share the gospel message with other youth.*

Often the success of a youth program is determined by a number of attendees at events. In order to achieve this aim, other Catholic churches and Protestant denominations have compromised their message in hopes of achieving a large number of attendees at their events. Instead, we choose to follow Christ's model of empowering individuals to continue the mission He originally entrusted to 12 apostles whom he had taught during His three years of public work. Through the preaching of these apostles, the church grew exponentially. However, this was not achieved until after they had been through extensive formation.

It is the goal of our youth ministry to form missionaries for both our own community and the church at large. While this is an urgent necessity, it is one that takes time and is predicated on individuals choosing to commit their lives to the service of Christ. In the words of John Paul II:

This is what is needed: a Church for young people, which will know how to speak to their heart and enkindle, comfort, and inspire enthusiasm in it with the joy of the Gospel and the strength of the Eucharist; a Church which will know how to invite and welcome the person who seeks a purpose for which to commit his whole existence; a Church which is not afraid to require much, after having given much; which does not fear asking from young people the effort of a noble and authentic adventure, such as that of the following of the Gospel.⁹

⁸ John Paul II. Message – World Mission Day. 1992

⁹ John Paul II. Message – World Day of Prayer for Vocations. 1995

Foundations for Youth Ministry

As one of the longest running youth ministries within the province, our members have contributed to bringing the gospel message to thousands of youth within our community and throughout Canada. This includes parishioners who volunteer with our parish and its youth ministry as well as diocesan activities and national and international missionary groups. Youth ministry has provided an atmosphere to foster these individuals' search for Christ and discernment of how God is calling them in a unique way to build His Church.

Many of these young people have gone on to become participants and leaders within different parish ministries: CWL, Knights of Columbus, choirs, lectors, altar servers, ushers, Vacation Bible School, Catechesis of the Good Shepherd, and Pastoral Council, to name a few. This of course does not take into account the volunteer hours contributed by the teens and young adults while leading the youth events themselves. While many of the teens primarily volunteer within youth ministry activities, many of our former participants and leaders have gone on to be key members within other ministries. Many Canadian churches have found themselves missing an entire generation that has seemingly slipped away unnoticed. Our parish has been given the atypical gift to be able to refer to "the youth" and their activity within the church. We have been able to engage these youth and should realize that most of our active young adult parishioners have, in some way or another, been affected through youth ministry.

While examining the fruits of youth ministry, it would be inadequate to not acknowledge the role that our young parishioners have taken in the New Evangelization throughout Canada and internationally. Many of our youth have gone on to take part in World Youth Day, NET, Catholic Christian Outreach (CCO), diocesan events, seminary, teaching, youth ministry in other parishes, diocesan volunteers, and parliamentary candidacy. This year alone, we have three missionaries volunteering with NET Ministries. These three individuals will be working with teams to lead over 100 retreats throughout Canada and Ireland and helping to establish a parish youth ministry in

Yellowknife, Northwest Territories. Our young adult leadership team (Core) has been reforming after losing five members over the summer. Three have committed to work with CCO as university campus missionaries for the year in Halifax and Vancouver, one has begun teaching religion for the Ottawa Catholic School Board, and the last has taken a position as the Coordinator of Youth Ministry for the Archdiocese of Winnipeg. Please keep two of them in your prayers as they discern a possible vocation to marriage and careers with CCO.

While it is difficult, if not impossible, to keep track of every person who has in one way or another been influenced by our youth ministry, it is evident that it has played a formative role within the current parish landscape as well as extending far outside of this local community. No other parish in Canada has sponsored more NET missionaries than our own. Through additional formation, many of these missionaries from NET and other groups have returned to our parish and continue to strive for holiness while living out their baptismal call in local ministries. From this rich missionary heritage, we must be keenly aware of the particular spiritual gifts granted to us and how we can use them to further the Church's mission within our parish and beyond.

Implementing and Mobilizing Youth Ministry

It is our purpose as a youth ministry, to foster a culture that promotes personal holiness and the missionary desire to share the gospel message with other youth. We achieve this by:

- 1 - Providing opportunities for youth to encounter Christ and be formed spiritually, intellectually, and virtuously as disciples, and
- 2 - Encouraging openness to one's particular missionary call and the personal commitment to the action of the Holy Spirit.

The context for this ministry occurs both through group programming and individual mentorship.

Edge - Our primary means of youth mentorship is through the Edge ministry. Edge is a program that lasts for two hours every Friday night during the school year. The primary function of Edge is to introduce youth in grades 7 and 8 to the person of Christ and to familiarize them with the teaching and practices of His Church. Edge nights are led by the Crew team which is comprised of teens in grades 9-12. The Crew, under adult supervision, are responsible for

planning and executing Edge nights, which often consist of leading prayer, catechesis, and pastoral guidance. The challenge of being a Crew member is in presenting oneself as a Christian disciple on Fridays as well as in school and with friends where they are seen by the Edgers. While the primary ministry of Edge is to the Edgers themselves, we have found that the fruit is often most clearly seen within the Crew who become spiritual mentors to the Edgers they encounter on Friday nights and outside the walls of the church through their everyday interactions.

Life Teen - Crew members are encouraged with the other parish teens in grades 9-12 to attend the Youth Mass and LifeNights on Sunday evenings. It is during these nights that the teens are taught about the truths of the Catholic faith and are continually challenged to commit themselves to the teachings of Christ and His Church. The Core team is guided and encouraged by the Coordinator of Youth Ministry to pursue Relational Ministry with the parish teens.

Fellowship in Schools - While Edge and LifeTeen are the principal settings for youth ministry, the teens are encouraged to take initiative in searching out opportunities to share their faith. Last spring, a group of youth from our parish who attend Lester B. Pearson Catholic High School independently worked to form a weekly program for grade 9 and 10 students during lunch. The teens provided catechesis and led discussions for their peers on topics including the love of God, reality of sin, forgiveness, commonly asked questions, and others. The teens found the program to be successful and are looking for ways to improve it for this year.

Outreach - Another youth initiative last year was a weekly outreach event on Monday afternoons called “Monday Fun-day”. This was simply a time for the youth to socialize with each other at the church and typically involved some sport. One regular attendee of Monday Fun-day has asked to be baptized into the church this year through our RCIT (Rite of Christian Initiation for Teens) program.

Classroom Presentations - Another ministerial opportunity that is being pursued this year is classroom presentations. Typically 2-4 young adults have 30 minutes with every grade 9-12 religion class (800 students by year’s end) to teach the gospel message, share their personal testimonies, and provide the opportunity for a prayerful response to Christ. During the

presentations, these students are taught that a relationship with Christ is not only possible but offered to them if they simply ask Him to enter into their lives.

Gr. 7 & 8 Retreats - We are currently in the initial planning stages for two daylong retreats for grade 7-8 students at the parish. The retreats will incorporate the school board theme “Though we are many, we are one body in Christ”, the basic gospel message, and an opportunity for the youth to respond to Christ’s call. These retreats will be led by our high school teens and young adult volunteers.

Weekly Adoration - Beyond the various outreach activities we have, there are also formation opportunities offered for the youth. Every Tuesday from 4-5 o’clock the teens are invited to come to St. Margaret-Mary Chapel in Cumberland for an hour of silent adoration. There are typically between 4-12 youth who take part in this time of weekly prayer.

Faith Studies - Over the summer, parents of our youth led a CCO “Discovery” faith study for the youth at their house. During this time, the leaders challenged them to examine the foundational truths of our faith and how they might be lived out in daily life.

While the approaches and methods of youth ministry are varied and adaptive to particular circumstances, the underlying purpose is to create an atmosphere that fosters individual faith and encourages youth to share their faith with others. The teens are led by the examples of faithful young adults who have taken up the responsibility of mentoring youth to become full and active participants within the life of the church. Through the perpetual transmission of faith from person-to-person, we begin to see the rise of a new generation. One that is fully committed and faithful to the magisterium and its teachings; a generation of zealous apostles dedicated to the church and its mission to spread the good news to the whole world.

O Lord Jesus Christ, keep these young people in your love. Let them hear your voice and believe what you say, for you alone have the words of life. Teach them how to profess their faith, bestow their love, and impart their hope to others. Make them convincing witnesses to your Gospel in a world so much in need of your saving grace. Make them the new people of the Beatitudes, that they may be the salt of the earth and the light of the world at the beginning of the Third Christian Millennium! Mary, Mother of the Church, protect and guide these young men and women of the 21st century. Keep us all close to your maternal

heart. Amen. (Prayer at the conclusion of Pope John Paul II's Homily for the World Youth Day in Toronto, Canada. July 28, 2002)

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