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### **Practical Issues in Youth Ministry**

While the number of Catholics seems to be increasing, the number of *practicing* Catholics is decreasing. Church attendance seems in recent years to be dropping at an alarming rate. According to a 1990 pole (Bibby) the percentage of Canada's population that goes to Catholic church is expected to drop from 13.5% to 7% by 2015. As time goes on, the average age of church goers seems to be on the rise. Young people are coming to church in fewer and fewer numbers.

The reasons for this drop in participation by young Catholics must be analyzed and then counteracted. This is the very sentiment that has led to the resurgence of youth ministry within Catholic churches. Parishes are hiring youth ministers with increased frequency, and dioceses are also establishing commissions geared toward the facilitation of youth ministry. Within this context, the Church is attempting to re-establish ties with today's youth, in order to bring them into full and active participation in its communal life.

These attempts have met with limited success. The first step in a process of establishing youth ministry is to become aware of where youths are at in their lives today. Then youth ministry can find ways to address the specific needs of our young people within our Church.

*Youth Today*

Adolescence is a period of significant growth and development; physically, emotionally, and psychologically. It is at this time that young people begin to feel the need to define themselves as individuals, and begin to have to take responsibility for their lives and the choices they make. Physically they undergo huge changes, and they have to come to terms with their *raging hormones*, and the new feelings that they experience. It is usually at this time that young people begin to move beyond relationships with members of their own gender, and start to explore relationships with those of the opposite sex.

Fowler gives a detailed description of the faith development characteristic of this age group. Referred to as the "conventional" stage of faith development, this stage is distinguished by the individual's faith becoming that of a larger group. Of primary importance to those in this stage of development is the need to "belong" to a group, and to thus define oneself through that belonging. This group mentality tends to be the source of authority for these young people. It is in this aspect that the conformity one sees within young people emerges. Being liked by other peers, looking good, and being treated well by friends are of primary importance within this age group. According to Fowler, their needs include participation in family and community life, strong but realistic role models, opportunities to explore and question their faith, and chances to try new things and challenge themselves.

Davies defines some of the primary concerns for most teenagers. First among his list is the desire for popularity. This is characterized by a desire for an attractive personality and conformity, often at the expense of individualism (10). Davies also notes that conformity peaks at around the age of thirteen, and declines slowly after that (*ibid.*). Second on Davies' list is the importance of prestige. This is similar to popularity, and deals with ones standing with respect to others. This sense of personal prestige can be

satisfied in a variety of different ways, from the most noble to the most deviant. Often the measure of prestige is based on ones appearance. In addition this desire for prestige often leads to peer pressure (11).

Friendship ranks third on Davies list of youth priorities; it helps young people develop and enlarge their social base beyond that of their families. These friendships consist of "crowds" of acquaintances, "cliques" of closer and more exclusive friends, and "dyads" of one on one friendship, the latter being of the greatest value to these teenagers. It is in the latter class that concern for self-image and popularity with the other are overcome. Davies notes that the feelings of loneliness and alienation experienced by many teens today are a result of a lack of close friendships of this type (12). These feelings of loneliness also lead to the aforementioned peer influence, as young people search for approval and companionship from others. Next on Davies list is the importance of dating, although quite often actual dating is not as frequent as one might expect. This concern for dating often results in young peoples dealing with their physical sexuality before they are emotionally ready (14).

Most teenagers have a wide variety of demands on their time and attention. Between music, TV. and movies aimed at teens, school, family, friends, sports, and more and more frequently, jobs, youths today very easily fill up all of their free time. It can be very difficult for the Church to try to fit itself into this long list of commitments (McCarthy and Tooma 66). Therefore it becomes necessary to find ways to integrate the Church's role into these other demands.

Also according to McCarthy and Tooma, many youths are searching for a deeper level of spirituality: "...they hunger for a relationship with God, have an interest in prayer, and are searching for a sense of the holy life" (67). However they feel a sense of alienation from the institutionalized church, seeing it as impersonal, authoritarian, and unwelcoming. Its important to note that for many teens, their attitude towards God and their personal faith is often separate from their attitude towards the church and its

institution. These youths show their dissatisfaction with church through decreased attendance. Four reasons are given for decreased involvement in church on behalf of teens: being too busy, seeing church leaders and members as hypocritical, feeling that the church doesn't fulfill their needs, and feeling that church is boring (ibid.).

Searching for the satisfaction of their spiritual needs outside of major Christian denominations, some youths develop an interest for the occult and new age. Others move toward the more individually focused fundamentalist and evangelical branches of Christianity.

In my view, the importance of establishing effective youth ministry is enormous. The Church is needed to assist parents in upbringing these youths, particularly by helping them to develop healthy relationships with others, in building their own self esteem, and particularly in helping them to overcoming the negative effects of peer pressure and conformity. The Church is needed to help guide youths' in the fulfillment of their natural spiritual hunger, in addition to their natural hunger for belonging and community. It is within this framework that the work of youth ministry is laid out. It then remains the mandate of youth ministry to address the needs of today's youth in a healthy manner, and in doing so bring these youths into fuller communion with the Church.

A problem arises however when it comes time to find a youth minister or run an effective youth ministry. Youth ministry is one of the most challenging areas of ministry, and not everyone has the special gifts and charisms to be a youth minister. The generation gap is a two way street. Just as many youths feel they can't relate to their elders, so too many adults have trouble relating to and communicating with youths. Many are even intimidated by youths.

Youth ministry can also be an enormous time commitment. A youth minister can easily find him/herself working full time hours (and quite often on a part time salary). Just as youths have a number of demands competing for there time, adults also have a similar list of demands. Youth ministry often takes an inordinate amount of time because

youth ministers find themselves responsible for a wide variety of tasks and responsibilities, many of which are completely unrelated to each other by anything other than the fact that youths are somehow involved. As a result most people are very reluctant to offer their time for the purposes of youth ministry.

Youth ministry must therefore find a way to address the needs of today's teenagers in a way that doesn't scare potential youth ministers off by the amount of time or the diversities of abilities required. Rather than approaching youth ministry as one person's responsibility, we have to move towards regarding it as a team effort, the responsibility of a number of individuals with distinct talents and abilities. From there we can move to the reality: that of regarding youth ministry not as the responsibility of a chosen few, but rather of the entire community, with each member thereof contributing in his/her own unique way. In this way we will see that the task of youth ministry truly is a mission of the entire church.

### *The Nature of Youth Ministry*

There are a large number of approaches that one can take to youth ministry. In fact, the philosophy behind youth ministry is undergoing a transformation in recent years. In the past, youth ministry focused primarily on the "youth group" within a specific parish. Much more holistic approaches are now being proposed and incorporated; they will be discussed below. Much of what will be presented is based on material provided by Mary Ganton, the Director of the Youth Commission for the Archdiocese of Edmonton, and by a book entitled *Leadership: Guides to Youth Ministry* by East and Roberto.

The old model of youth ministry centered around the youth group. Within it, youths' inherent need to "belong" is addressed by organizing a group of young people

together at a regular times, to do some activity together. All forms of youth involvement generally took place within the youth group, which would then maintain itself by asking new members to join. It was based on a number of often erroneous assumptions: that the needs of those youths involved are similar, that youths like to join these groups, that all the youths are available at the same times, and that one or a few adult leaders can meet the needs of the entire group. Based on the information presented in the last section, it is clear that these assumptions can not be made of today's youth.

In addition to these problems, there are a number of others as well. One big problem that often faces youth groups is that quite often the focus of the youth group is centered around the dynamism of the groups adult leader. When this is the case, quite often the youth group is very successful, that is until the youth minister leaves, at which time the ministry quite often falls apart. In addition, when this happens, the focus becomes less on Christ and more on the youth minister; this can often lead to that group's forgetting to live by basic Christian principles and often becoming cliquey forming and exclusive. If the youth minister is the type that enjoys the adulation of those youths within his/her group, s/he may gain what is often referred to as a "messiah complex", the results of which can be disastrous. While young people need a strong role model that they can follow, they also need to be empowered to become leaders themselves, rather than becoming dependent on the youth minister. Through empowerment, the youth minister can set up the ministry to continue and thrive after s/he moves on.

Another big problem that often occurs with this model of youth ministry is clique forming. Often when youth groups begin to experience success and a certain level of closeness between its members, the group becomes exclusive, or at least very difficult for new members to enter. Clique forming is a natural tendency for people in this age group, so the youth minister often has to take active steps to prevent them from occurring.

Another problem related to this one occurs when people become so attached to the youth group that they refuse to leave. These older members maintain their membership

into adulthood, married life, parenthood and so on. The result is a generation gap within the youth group itself. Those older members are in a different developmental stage in their lives than that for which the group was intended. This occurrence can often discourage the entrance of new members. If a number of older people refuse to leave, quite often youths stop joining the youth group because it is no longer a youth group. Someone in junior high school can not relate to the problems of someone who is in university, or someone who is beginning a career and starting up as mortgage.

Many youth groups are charismatic in focus. While I don't believe this is a bad thing in itself, particularly for those who are comfortable with charismatic forms of spirituality, I feel that it is important to have other forms of youth ministry available for those young people who might not be comfortable expressing their faith in a charismatic way. Many youths don't get involved in youth ministry simply because of their lack of comfort level with the charismatic methods that are used.

Goals are often lacking in this youth group model of youth ministry. As a result, often the youth group's activities are unrelated to each other and lacking focus. A more comprehensive model is suggested that centers around well defined goals into which diverse activities of the group are integrated.

The proposed comprehensive model can be described as a more holistic model of youth ministry. It involves not just the youths in their relation to each other, but also their relation to their families, their Church communities, and to the greater civic community and social issues. It does so by establishing a central youth ministry team with various skills and abilities, so that it can manage and direct the wide diversity of activities and responsibilities of the youth ministry.

Three goals are outlined by the approach given by Ganton and Roberto. They are as follows

- Goal 1: Youth ministry should be directed toward the personal growth of the individual.

- Goal 2: Youth ministry should lead young people into greater participation in the life and mission of the faith community.
- Goal 3: Youth ministry should empower young people to live as Disciples of Jesus in and with respect to the world. (Roberto 35)

With these basic goals set, one can then proceed to focus on specific ways of fulfilling them. In order that this ministry may be comprehensive, Roberto define eight specific areas that can be focused on (31,32). Specific individuals and resources may be directed to these areas based on the gift of those individuals or nature of those resources, all under the coordination of a central youth ministry team. In describing these areas below, I will also point out the specific needs being addressed in today's youths.

The first component identified is *advocacy*. This involves looking at the specific needs of youths and their families. For example, it focuses on the social problems facing these youths, and on taking action in some way on behalf of these youth to bring about change. In this area, young people are empowered and given a voice to address the issues in their lives (ibid.). It is here that the youth realizes that the church is with them, and willing to journey with them in the specific areas and events that concern them.

The second area is in *catechesis*. In this area, youths are educated in the faith and encouraged to develop their spiritual lives. They are encouraged to question, investigate, and understand their faith on a deeper level. Through this area, the church can guide the faith development of its young members, and bring it into deeper communion (ibid.). Thus we can avoid having youths develop individualistic faith perspectives.

The third area of work is in *community life*. In this area youths are enabled to develop healthy relationships with one another and with adults through Gospel values. This will lead to the healthy development of their own self-image and self-esteem, and lead to more meaningful participation in the church as a whole (ibid.). In this way, the church can satisfy the youth's natural need for a sense of belonging in a productive and safe environment, separate from the negative effects of peer pressure.

The fourth area described is in *evangelization*. In this area lies the missionary aspect of youth ministry. Youths are exposed to the Good News, through words and actions, and called to a deeper relationship with Jesus Christ. Roberto describes this as the "energizing core" of youth ministry (32). It is here that youths get excited, not just about being together, or working toward some common goal, but about doing it in the name of Christ and for Christ. Through evangelization the specifically Christian aspect of youth ministry is displayed.

The fifth area is in *justice, peace, and service*. Here youths are encouraged to live out the Gospel by directing it at the problems of our world. Their social conscience is here developed, and they are empowered to take an active and concrete role in specific social causes (ibid.). Here they are encouraged to move their faith and focus away from themselves and towards others, and to develop their capacity for selfless love.

The sixth area is in that of leadership. This involved training young people to act as leaders in youth ministry, and then later on into other areas. It is in this area that the youth ministry is maintained for the long term (ibid.). Through this area, the specific need of youths to feel empowered and learn how to responsibly wield their new found control over their own lives is directly addressed.

The seventh area is in *pastoral care and guidance*. Here healthy life skill development is addressed, as are specific areas of guidance, for example healthy gender relationship development. Counseling and youth crisis support also falls into this category, along with referral to outside agencies when necessary (ibid.). It is here that the church provides guidance in the various developmental issues youths are faced with today.

The last component of comprehensive youth ministry is in *prayer and worship*. Here youths are provided with the opportunity to worship as youths, in a way unique to them and in a way that they can relate to and make personal. They are assisted in deepening their spiritual development and prayer life in communion with other

Christians. It is here that they are guided to fulfill their spiritual needs in a communal way, and are brought more fully into the sacramental life of the church (ibid.).

Through this diversity in approaches, a youth's spiritual development is allowed to develop in a fully balanced way, and they can learn to live as Christians, as Christ truly intended. In addition, from the management perspective, individual leaders can take charge of specific areas according to their individual charisms, and the entire responsibility of youth ministry does not have to reside solely upon one person. As well, specific youths are enabled to focus on specific areas of interest and need for themselves, all under the umbrella of youth ministry. For example, if a young man wants to become involved in urban ministry, he can do so without having to become involved with a charismatic prayer group. This model allows for a large number of youths with a wide variety of needs to find a place for themselves within the church. They have the option of choosing the area of greatest interest. A last benefit in this model is that a particular parish's youth ministry does not depend exclusively on one specific area for its overall survival.

It is important to note that youth ministry programs can be either formal or informal. *Gathered Programs* include those activities that are organized and scheduled, and focus around the gathering of large groups, like meetings and events. *Non-gathered Programs* are focused more on small groups or individuals, for example counseling or spiritual direction, mentoring, community service, etc. (ibid. 39) Both should be used in youth ministry at the appropriate times. To focus exclusively on one or the other can result in an unhealthy and unbalanced ministry.

The youth minister's main focus then is to evaluate, coordinate and to delegate. S/he should evaluate what needs exist for the youths of their respective community. S/he then should look at the gifts and charisms of all those working under his/her supervision and assign them duties accordingly. These people are easier to find than in the youth group model because a less substantial time commitment is required on their part, and

they aren't asked to take responsibility for areas for which they are not gifted. In this way all the many areas of concern in youth ministry can be dealt with most effectively. The youth minister is to ensure that there is a balance in the various different areas, and that there are people to fill each role within this overall framework.

Thus we have a method to effectively provide youth ministry within a parish, and in doing so satisfy some of the basic needs of these young people, all within the overall mission of the church. It is a method that is all inclusive, which in a way makes youth ministry the responsibility of the entire community. It is a method that allows people to give according to their gifts, and their time constraints, working under the premise that a large number of people, each playing a small part, can get a lot of work done. Now all that remains is to identify some of the more practical elements involved in the implementation youth ministry.

### *Practical Issues*

As Mary Ganton pointed out in a presentation on youth ministry, the secret to a successful youth ministry is pizza. Youths like to be fed, particularly with foods like pizza, chips, burgers, i.e. what we would typically call junk food. What Ganton has effectively done in making this observation is display the importance of knowing about young people and the way they like to live their lives. One has to know what issues are important to youths, what they like to do on their free time, why they like or don't like going to school, what hopes and fears they have for the future. This involves listening to their music, watching their TV. and movies, and most importantly, having conversations with them. When this is done, an interplay has to be maintained between experiencing the lives of teenagers as a teenager would, trying to see things as teens see them, and also maintaining the objectivity of an adult. When this is done, those youths that the youth

minister works with can regard that minister as a friend, but also as one who invites them to grow into maturity themselves. Youth is an age that begs for challenge. Therefore it is the task of the youth minister not just to get youths to like him/her, but to challenge them to grow beyond themselves. I believe this is one of the most important attitudes one must enter youth ministry with. In this way the youth minister acts in the place of Christ, who completely shared in our humanity, and at the same time encouraged us to grow beyond it to share in the divine life.

This is related to the need to provide programs and activities that are age appropriate. It is necessary to be familiar with the faith development of young people, using characterizations like Fowler's, mentioned above. A variety of instructional methods should also be employed, particularly multi-media techniques, with which youths are already comfortable and familiar.

My approach to youth ministry is to set it up to continue when I leave. This may at first sound lazy, and many would not take this approach out of a refusal to be lazy. It is these individuals however that often burn out first. In my view the mark of a good leader is to empower those under his/her leadership to become leaders themselves, to become motivated not by their obedience to the leader or desire to please him/her, but by their own inner commitment to doing a good job. This attitude of empowerment should certainly be directed towards youths, who are just on the fringes of learning to take responsibility and having real power over themselves. By training young people to be leaders in our church, we are taking steps to maintaining the church's future.

Empowerment however isn't an automatic reality. Youth's particularly must be empowered first through guided leadership. The youth minister must always be ready to assist these young people, and even to take over, but then only if absolutely necessary, and in a way that does not undermine the confidence of the youths involved. As youths become more and more capable, they are given more and more responsibility and

freedom, and thus become leaders themselves, who can make positive contributions to the church and to our society.

Using an attitude of empowerment, a holistic youth ministry can be set up that meets the needs of a large number of youths. It is possible to set up such a large network of people and activity because of the large number of people taking on leadership roles in small or in large ways. The youths involved are encouraged first to be participants, but then gradually to take on the roles of leaders, each according to their own gifts, and contribute to the maintenance of the ministry. In doing this they learn to work with adults, and also contribute to the overall mission of the church. With such a method in place, it may be possible to feed these emerging leaders into other ministries, and thus contribute to the maintenance of the church as a whole. Thus the church will become not just a group of largely inactive members, but rather will become a group of leaders, ready to use their own gift to spread the kingdom of God. Through this type of ministry, I believe we can serve our young people the best, by bringing them into full discipleship as members of the Body of Christ, leading us into the future.

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