

Moving from Event-Centered Ministry to People-Centered Ministry

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For years as a volunteer and then as parish staff, the model of Young Adult Ministry that I followed was based on what I call the “Cusick Model” because it was pioneered by Fr. John Cusick of the Archdiocese of Chicago. This model holds that a comprehensive ministry with young adults consists of activities in four areas: Social, Serious, Spiritual, and Service.¹ In practice, the most common implementation of this that I come across is actually reduced to three areas: Social, Spiritual, and Service. And, even when all four areas are used, “Serious” is usually referred to as “Study” instead.

The Cusick Model has served Young Adult Ministry very well for many years. I have utilized it to draw hundreds of young adults into ministry involvement. My goal was to engage as many young adults as possible in all four activity areas in order for them to grow in faith. The assumption was that involvement in activities across these four categories would ensure growth in faith over time for the participants.

Concerns Noticed

Although my ministry efforts were drawing good numbers, which is too often the primary gauge of success, I started to have concerns. I noticed that, although social events were highly attended, many fewer people came to serious/study events, spiritual events, and service events. This was not completely unexpected, however, the disparity in numbers from social to serious/study appeared to be increasing over time.

On top of that, I was seeing very little movement across types of activities. Many young adults came to the one type of activity that was most attractive to them, and stuck to only that one type. Our leadership team even focused effort to deliberately invite people from one type of activity to another, without much success. Although we were providing what we thought was a well-balanced buffet of activities, people were not choosing a balanced meal.

This model seemed to be good at meeting people where they were at through the variety of activity options, however most of the time it was unfortunately leaving them where they were at. I was no longer seeing the degree of success that I had witnessed in the past.

New Ministry Model

Eventually, I realized that, if the goal was to move people forward in the spiritual journey, then a new model was needed today. Although the Cusick Model had been successful for a long time, it was no longer bearing the same amount of fruit. Times had changed and young adults had changed, often being at points further away from the Church than in the past.

¹ John C. Cusick and Katherine F. DeVries, *The Basic Guide to Young Adult Ministry* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 2001), 50-54.

The model that I have found to be more successful in bringing about growth in faith is a model of accompaniment that focuses on where people are in the spiritual journey rather than the types of events that they are participating in. The key change was moving from event-centered ministry to people-centered ministry. Meeting people where they are at and then accompanying them to the next step in their journey was possible through activities that target people in different stages of the spiritual life.

I refer to this new model using terminology from Pope Francis, calling it “Forming Missionary Disciples.”² The model has four movements: Witness/Pre-Evangelization, Proclaim/Evangelization, Mature/Discipleship, and Send/Apostleship. Each movement is also connected with an invitation from Jesus to those he encountered: “Come and See,” “Follow Me,” “Remain United in Me,” and “Go and Make Disciples.” (See the model diagram)

This model is not something that I invented, but a combination of models already being used elsewhere. It and similar models can be found in many places today where the focus is on evangelization, although the terminology may not match exactly and the divisions between movements may not quite align the same.³

The initial movement of “Come and See” is characterized by the pre-evangelization tasks of building relationships with people, developing trust, and witnessing to the Gospel through one’s actions. Although this invitation does not require any commitment on the part of the person being accompanied, it must eventually be followed by the invitation of “Follow Me,”⁴ which does call for a decision to be made. This second movement is characterized by proclaiming the Gospel explicitly through words, introducing the person to a relationship with God, and facilitating a direct encounter with the Lord himself. The hope is that this effort of evangelization culminates in an interior conversion of heart and an intentional decision to follow Jesus as his disciple. Of course, the Holy Spirit is the one providing movement within one’s heart (shown in the center of the model diagram), even as we do our best to foster the conditions for this movement, so this is not fully under our control.

After the milestone of choosing to follow Jesus as his disciple, the next movement is to “Remain United in Me,” reorienting all aspects of one’s life to following Jesus. The more significant the reorientation needed, the more time this stage can take. This third movement is characterized by formation for the lay apostolate: spiritual formation through prayer and the sacraments, doctrinal/intellectual formation through continuing catechesis, and human/communal formation in human relations, virtue, and serving others through life within an active Christian community.⁵

After accompanying The Twelve disciples for three years of training and mentoring, Jesus sent them as Apostles to “Go and Make Disciples” throughout the whole world. Likewise, young adult disciples need training and mentoring in order to become apostles who understand

² Pope Francis, Apostolic Letter *The Joy of the Gospel* (24 November 2013), no. 120.

³ For example, see *Divine Renovation* by Fr. James Mallon (Novalis, 2014).

⁴ Pope Paul VI, Apostolic Exhortation *On Evangelization in the Modern World* (8 December 1975), no. 22: “even the finest witness will prove ineffective in the long run if it is not explained, justified... and made explicit by a clear and unequivocal proclamation of the Lord Jesus. The Good News proclaimed by the witness of life sooner or later has to be proclaimed by the word of life. There is no true evangelization if the name, the teaching, the life, the promises, the kingdom and the mystery of Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God are not proclaimed.”

⁵ Pope Paul VI, Vatican II Decree *On the Apostolate of the Laity* (18 November 1965), no. 28-32.

their calling to be disciple-makers and feel comfortable sharing their story and God’s story with others. This fourth movement is characterized by practical formation for the lay apostolate,⁶ often referred to as apostolic formation. These young adult “apostles,” another way of referring to “missionary disciples,” are the ones who then evangelize the world and create a socially just world through guiding people forward on the spiritual journey.

Diagnosis

This new model reveals that the Cusick Model could easily be implemented without any activities squarely targeting people in need of evangelization or apostolic formation. In fact, I have often seen this to be the case for young adult communities, as well as parishes as a whole. Hosting social events is easy and can be done by almost anyone. If there are enough disciples already present, then some sort study/spiritual event, such as a bible study or praise and worship night, often becomes a regular event. Service activities can be held periodically too.

However, this leaves gaps for the two movements of evangelization and apostleship, resulting in no movement around the circle shown in the model diagram. Invitations to people at social events to come to discipleship activities fall flat because that would require them to skip the movement of evangelization. Until a person has been evangelized, they typically have little interest in such “churchy” activities. Telling disciples that they have the obligation to go and make disciples without providing any training yields people uncomfortable with carrying out that mandate. This results in little to no evangelizing action actually taking place. Lacking these two movements, the engine of missionary disciple formation does not even turn over let alone run on all cylinders.

Conclusion

The Cusick Model worked well for young adult communities composed of significant numbers of disciples to help them grow in their own faith journey. However, it does not ensure that new disciples are being made through evangelization or that new disciple-making apostles are being formed through apostolic formation. Since young adults in general have moved further away from the Church over time, at least in part because fewer disciples are being made previous to reaching young adulthood,⁷ a new ministry model is needed to ensure that all young adults can be reached and accompanied to grow in faith regardless where they are at in their spiritual journey.

This new model of Forming Missionary Disciples is people-centered and relationship-based rather than event-centered. It requires that people are accompanied by missionary disciples, which implies the need for a community to be producing missionary disciples. Accompaniment, evangelization, training, and mentoring all take a significant investment of time and effort – much more than merely planning events. This is especially difficult amidst the very busy schedules of ministry staff and volunteers. And yet, this new model offers the potential of bearing new fruit, and bearing it abundantly.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Sherry A. Weddell, *Forming Intentional Disciples* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 2012), chapter 1.