

Building Parish Young Adult Ministry

What foundational work needs to be done in local parish communities to help the Church encounter, accompany, form community, and send young adults?

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Our world is loud and chaotic, with more devices and events to demand our attention every day. Anyone can be overwhelmed by the simultaneous enormity and smallness of it all: we are so connected to the constant information stream that is available online, learning about events and talking to people who live in countries we will never physically visit. As we've all discovered, however, those virtual interactions do not fulfill the desire we have for relationship. That desire has deep roots in each of us. Made in the image of God – a Trinity of Persons in perfect relation to one another – we are truly made for relationship. What we long for is something authentic and deep, but what technology offers is often filtered and shallow. We are simultaneously connected and isolated. How can we, as a Church, help address the unsatisfied desire for community that is in the hearts of young adults? Let us look to the advice of St. Augustine: “Since you cannot do good to all, you are to pay special attention to those who, by accidents of time, or place, or circumstance, are brought into closer connection with you.”¹ He wrote these words in the fourth century; how can we do this in the twenty-first century? Parish-based Young Adult Ministries. This paper will outline some best practices for how to establish a young adult ministry, how to structure it, and identify common obstacles to success.

Establish

In establishing a parish Young Adult Ministry (YAM), the most important foundational element is the pastor's “buy-in.” Oftentimes pastors get criticized for not being supportive of YAM in their parish, but the best way to earn their support is through open, honest, and direct communication with him about the plan. Whether the leadership will be one person or many, a meeting should be set with them before they begin any outreach or activities. A pastor's resistance to supporting a new ministry is understandable if it has its beginnings without his knowledge or his approval. As a parish ministry, the pastor does have canonical authority over it and that should be respected. Thankfully, this current “moment” in the Church, when young adult ministry is being prioritized, this approval is much easier to attain than it was even five years ago.

If the parish ministry is brand new (or has existed solely as a volunteer-run operation), a pastor will expect it to run at no cost to the parish. This resistance to materially investing in the young people of the Church is a frustrating reality; it is a rarity to find a pastor that will offer, unprompted, a paid young adult staff position and budget. If a pastor approves the ministry, but refuses to pay for personnel or supplies, leaders ought not to lose hope of one day acquiring funding for YAM. These leaders should instead continue the work, being professional and responsible, maintaining records of their outreach, event frequency and attendance, and growth. After a period of time – sometime between six months and a year – they can bring those results back to the pastor and ask for his reconsideration of funding. If leadership competence and the extent of the necessary work can be tangibly demonstrated, he will be much more likely to offer

¹ St. Augustine of Hippo, *On Christian Doctrine*, Book I, Chapter 28

some sort of material support. Pastors are not investment capitalists, but rather stewards of assets; we cannot expect them to give something in exchange for nothing.

Structure

When establishing or growing YAM, many ministry models present themselves. A common mistake is to use a one-size-fits-all approach in an effort to serve all young adults together. Since, however, young adults are typically classified as 18-39 years old, the individuals pass through a number of life stages during this time period: college, professional life, and family life. These individuals have different needs at each of those stages. For an obvious example, a college freshman does not need a babysitter to attend an event, but it is an indispensable element in serving young parents. There can also be inherent social barriers between members of different life-stages that may cause alienation and result in lower young adult ministry involvement. It is therefore recommended that young adult groups have distinct programs for each life-stage, which meet the needs of young adults with a wide variety of circumstances, thereby creating a welcoming environment for them to build relationships and grow in their faith with their true peers. Specific attention ought to be given to individuals transitioning from one stage to another to ensure they receive a continuum of care.

This life-stage model is more work-intensive than your standard YAM structure, but it produces significant results. Contrary to common opinion, such a structure does not simply split an existing active young adult ministry into three smaller groups. Trials of this model in the Diocese of San Diego have shown that it increases parish ministry attendance by 200-300%. The reason for the results is simple: this model allows for a true care for the needs of the young adults. The programming they attend is always relevant and useful to them, scheduled according to their needs, and the people they met are not only their peers in age, but also in life-stage.

For all life stages, content can be categorized under the following headings: Faith Formation, Social Events/Community Building, and Service Opportunities. As much as possible, YAM should incorporate all 3 of these categories. Whatever events are offered, they should include four elements. The first and most essential is *consistency*. Events should be regular, ideally weekly, held at a consistent time and location. Whether your attendance is one or one hundred, the event should happen regularly. People need to know that this event will be there whenever their schedule allows them to attend; if they are left guessing if it's happening or not, they will not follow through on attendance. The second element is *education*. The young adults in the Church are hungry for formation, leadership, and concrete direction. Leaders should have the education and resources to answer tough questions, sharing that with their ministry participants. Third, leaders must make an effort to *listen* to the young adults. Whether they have questions, complaints, or concerns, a leader's job is to truly listen to the participants' needs and their stories. The fourth and final element is that events should be *active*. Humans are soul-body composites and the health of the whole person must be prioritized. Offer opportunities for the spiritual activity of prayer, the mental activity of learning, and the physical activity of exercise or sports.

Obstacles

Something you will often hear when pitching the concept of a young adult ministry to a parish priest is, "You should get involved with our youth ministry program!" This suggestion is not merely useless, but also detrimental to the establishment of a young adult community. There are two problems: first and foremost, youth and young adult ministries are very different types of ministry. This is true for a very simple reason: high school students and young adults are very different types of people. Everyone has different experiences of high school, but a universal

experience is that, in retrospect, every young adult can say that he or she is more mature now than they were in high school. Young adults are less driven by their hormones and emotions than teens, they have an increased capacity for critical thinking and judgment, and more maturity in how they approach their relationships, both with God in prayer and with their peers.

The second reason that this common pastoral suggestion is problematic is that by inviting a young adult to be involved in youth ministry, we are not inviting them to join their own community, but to build one for others. When a young adult is looking for community, they are looking for peer support, encouragement, formation, and prayer. If we direct them to youth ministry, assuming it's "close enough" to their needs, we are underestimating the young adult's maturity and their desire for personal growth. There must be a culture shift, a change in the expectations of parish pastors and councils: stop *taking* from the young adults in your community and starting *giving* to them. Feed them. Invest in them as individuals. When their need for spiritual food and community is met, they will move outside of themselves to give back in a way that is suitable to their gifts and talents. Not every young adult wants to help out in youth ministry and not every young adult should, but there's a more fundamental truth that needs to be acknowledged: parish young adult ministry is not a place to recruit young, able-bodied volunteers for the next parish fundraiser. Young adults are not the Church's workforce to be exploited, but disciples who need to be fed on the road to Emmaus².

A final obstacle to the flourishing of YAM is the isolation that results in peer leadership situations. When a young adult is tasked with leading other young adults on their faith journeys, it naturally separates that individual from his peers. Even though the given task is to accompany his peers, there is a sense in which he is cut off from authentically sharing his own struggles in the faith. Our young adult leaders are rightly asked to be models of Catholic living, careful that their personal behavior never reflects badly upon the Church in whose name they serve, but this can limit their free expression of their struggles and opinions with their peers. Thankfully, this sense of isolation can be remedied. First, a Diocesan YA Office should establish a community of young adult leaders where they can mutually support and assist one another in their ministries and in their personal struggles. Secondly, a Diocese YA Office should set up some sort of mentoring option for their young adult leaders. While their office can and should host young adult events, their priority ought to be supporting the parish young adult ministries and those that run them. One-on-one meetings should be set up where the Diocesan director checks in with a parish YA leader, listening to their frustrations, offering solutions to problems that arise, and encouraging personal growth as ministry leaders and as Catholic young adults.

Conclusion

This moment we are experiencing in the Church – a moment where the pastoral care of young adults is being prioritized – will pass. It is imperative that we capitalize on this momentum, not stopping with building Diocesan young adult communities, but bringing it all the way down to the parish level. Parish communities are what make up our particular church – one cannot have a diocese without parishes³ – and it is essential that our young adults are served within that community with programming that is relevant to their life stages, consistently offered, and stable through the years. In the words of St. Augustine – do good to those brought into close contact with you. Love them. Feed them. Only then can our young adults be the disciples our world needs them to be.

² Luke 24:13

³ 1984 Code of Canon Law, Canon 374, paragraph 1