



Director of Youth Ministry
Catholic Diocese of Arlington

Survivors' Guide for New Youth Ministry Leaders

by Fr. David Sharland, YA

When developing a youth ministry program, it is essential to start first with the U.S. Bishops' 1997 document, *Renewing the Vision: A Framework for Catholic Youth Ministry* (RTV). This document should serve as a guide in developing your parish program of youth ministry. According to RTV the goals of youth ministry "state what it means for the Catholic community to respond to the needs of young people and to involve young people in sharing their unique gifts with the larger community" (RTV 9). Remember these primary goals in our ministry to young people:

1. *To empower young people to live as disciples of Jesus Christ in our world today.*
2. *To draw young people to responsible participation in the life, mission, and work of the Catholic faith community.*
3. *To foster the total personal and spiritual growth of each young person.*

Then, as you begin to design the framework of your parish youth ministry program, it is essential to keep in mind the eight fundamental components in RTV which are designed as a response to young peoples' personal and spiritual needs and the call to involve them in the faith community by establishing holistic and comprehensive programs.

The eight fundamental components described in the (RTV) document are *advocacy, catechesis, community life, evangelization, justice and service, leadership development, pastoral care, and prayer and worship.*

Renewing the Vision encourages integrating parish ministry with young people and their families into the total life of the church, recognizing that the whole community is responsible for this ministry. You, too, should remember these additional important themes as you prepare your program. It should be: *Developmentally Appropriate, Family Friendly, Intergenerational, Multicultural, include Community-wide Collaboration, and have Flexible/Adaptable Programming.*

The following tips will help ensure a solid and far-reaching youth ministry program:

- Prayer – Prayer (not just for your youth and your program, but for you and your relationship with the Lord) is essential to the success of your youth ministry. If you are not a man or woman of prayer, your program will not be what God wants, and will, in the end, fail. Nothing can take the place of prayer. Pray first, and last, and unceasingly. As Steven Curtis Chapman sings, "Let us pray, let us pray, everywhere and everyway, every moment of the day it is the right time."
- Communication will be the second key to success for your ministry. You will need consistent, direct communication with the teens to get them to come to the events. Personal invitation is always the best, whenever possible. Second, communicating with other professional staff and your volunteers is a must. Be especially mindful to communicate fully and regularly with your pastor or his designee.

- Get the Right People Together - The first step is developing a team for the youth ministry program. The team should include people who can be good adult role models, who are comfortable sharing their faith with youth and who like young people. The team should include a member of the parish staff if possible (pastor, director of religious education, pastoral associate, etc.). The team can also include selected young people who have demonstrated initiative, interest, and leadership abilities. The key is to avoid the “lone ranger” trap. Youth ministry is a team effort.
- Understand Your Youth Ministry Goals – Look at the past programs and the current situation of the parish. As you do this, you may find it very helpful to conduct a needs assessment. The purpose of the needs assessment is to identify what young people would like to see the parish offer and assess the best times and formats for meetings and activities. Your youth ministry efforts must begin with an understanding of the needs and (to some degree) the wants of the youth and their families. With this information, then you can brainstorm program activities and ideas. The discussion should use a holistic and comprehensive framework, developing ideas for each of the eight components in youth ministry. Do not try everything at once; do some things very well! Plan for quality activities and do not evaluate solely on the number of participants. Good programs and publicity will attract youth. Go for the short term, immediate successes at first. Then plan for the long term. Do not plan more than your team can actually do. This will lead you to develop the ideas into your actual programs, eventually creating a youth ministry calendar.
- It might be easier to plan in seasonal or three-month blocks. Do not forget that the summer is an important time for programming, especially for younger adolescents. In planning, try to achieve a balance of programs among the eight components of comprehensive youth ministry. Remember to check the diocesan Office of Youth, Campus, and Young Adult Ministries calendar. There is usually something going on that your young people can attend. It makes for easy planning and early success. You should also touch base with surrounding parishes for activities to which your young people can be invited. It is good for teenagers to see what others are doing and it helps them experience a larger sense of the Church.
- Assign Responsibilities and Leaders. Remember that you are not the only youth minister at your parish. You will need a team of committed adults to succeed. As you involve responsible students in leadership it is important to enable young people to take some responsibility for the program activities. But remember that they are not adults, and should not “run” your program. Engage your adult leaders in working directly with the youth to help them grow in their Christian leadership.



Here are some other great keys to success as you are getting started. Thanks to the folks at Youth Specialties for these, from an email from “Mike’s Funnies.”

- ❑ Subscribe to a popular magazine like *Rolling Stone* or *Teen* that will help keep you on top of the current youth culture.
- ❑ Join a youth workers' fellowship in your area. The Office of Youth, Campus, and Young Adult Ministries has numerous opportunities for fellowship, and you are well served to take good advantage of them. They can also be a great resource for you.
- ❑ Avoid making promises you can't keep. You aren't Superman.
- ❑ Prepare a good job description for yourself and stick to it.

- ❑ If your group is small, go in with other groups on things. Pool your resources. Share costs. Do not be afraid to invite another church to some of your activities, even if they are of another denomination.
- ❑ Always deal with problems as they come up. Do not expect them to go away on their own. They won't. Remember to communicate.
- ❑ Set up a "phone chain" to help spread the word regarding upcoming events. If you have ten young people who will call ten other teens, you can personally contact 100 teens in one evening. Personal contact is always the most effective.
- ❑ Periodically keep track of your time for a week to see where it is really going.
- ❑ Always arrive at the church early enough to greet youth and their parents as they arrive. Stay late for the same reason.
- ❑ Develop programs that reflect the needs, interests and energy level of the young people in your group, not the adults who work with them.
- ❑ Preview everything. Never use a video you have not seen or schedule a speaker you have not heard. Your students should not be treated like guinea pigs. And you do not want to have to answer for a big "whoops."
- ❑ Avoid creating an environment where youth and your youth program is "siloed." Get the youth involved in the life of the church--not just the youth group. They can serve in many ways, participate in worship, and attend other events and meetings.
- ❑ Lighten up and let teens be teens. They are not adults, so do not expect them to act like adults (entirely).
- ❑ Communicate availability. Do not give your teens the impression that you are too busy for them. That is why you are here. People first, then programs.
- ❑ When students help you with a game in front of the group, do not make fun of them. Use activities to build them up--make heroes out of them, not idiots.
- ❑ Do not do everything yourself, even though you can do it better. Learn to delegate.
- ❑ Occasionally invite the Pastor to a youth activity to observe the students and the program. It also gives youth a chance to see the Pastor as a real person.
- ❑ Keep parents informed. Lack of communication with parents can seriously limit or harm your ministry.
- ❑ Develop good job descriptions for your volunteer leaders. Make sure they know exactly what is expected of them and what is not expected of them. Provide them with good resources for the job you have asked them to do.
- ❑ Make sure every meeting or activity is well organized. It lets teens know they are important and reduces discipline problems.
- ❑ Do not worry about numerical growth. Size does not equal success. Health leads to growth, not vice versa.
- ❑ Avoid all double standard rules for leaders and students. Whatever goes for the teens goes for you and your staff.
- ❑ Always serve refreshments at meetings and activities. It is a relatively easy thing to do and everyone loves it. It also keeps them around a little longer for personal contact.
- ❑ Make learning the names of all the teens a top priority. You will never have a ministry *to* them until you *know* and remember their names.
- ❑ Avoid disciplining youth in front of their peers. It is best to handle discipline problems privately and one-on-one.
- ❑ Learn to say "no." Make time for your family and friends, your outside interests, and your personal growth.
- ❑ Do not attempt to be "one of the teens." If you are an adult, be an adult. Just be an adult who loves young people.

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