

Collegeville Ministry Series

YOUTH MINISTRY

Revised Edition

Jeffrey Kaster



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Preface:

Inspiring Missionary Discipleship

“Why am I so committed to Jesus Christ and the Catholic Church, when most of my immediate and extended family members (who were all raised Catholic) are not?” My coworker asked me this question recently after she spent a weekend at a family reunion. My response was, “It’s because you’ve seen the white rabbit.”

The white rabbit story is one of my favorite youth ministry stories. Edward Hays retells this story from the Desert Fathers and Mothers in early Christianity:

Once upon a time a spiritual seeker went out to the desert to ask a wise old monk in his hermitage the question: “Why do some people live their whole lives in a dynamic religious search while others never begin?” The old man smiled and told the seeker the following story.

“One day I was sitting here quietly in the sun with my dog. Suddenly a large white rabbit ran across in front of us. Well, my dog jumped up, barking loudly, and took off after that big rabbit. He chased the rabbit over the hills with a passion. Soon, other dogs joined him, attracted by the barking. What a sight it was, as the pack of dogs ran barking across the creeks, up stony embankments and through thickets and thorns! Gradually, however, one by one, the other dogs dropped out of the pursuit, discouraged

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by the course and frustrated by the chase. Only my dog continued to hotly pursue the white rabbit. In that story, young man, is the answer to your question.”

The young man sat in confused silence. Finally he said, “Abba, I don’t understand. What is the connection between the rabbit chase and the quest for holiness?”

“You fail to understand,” answered the old hermit, “because you failed to ask the obvious question. Why didn’t the other dogs continue on the chase?”

“And the answer to that question is that they had not seen the rabbit.”¹

Edward Hays explains that the spiritual journey requires seeing the white rabbit. It requires having a personal and real experience of the divine mystery. Without this encounter, the spiritual life is just too difficult and, like the other dogs in the story, one drops out of the chase.

When my coworker was in high school she saw the white rabbit. She had experiences of God at her parish, in her family, on youth retreats and mission trips, and in the Eucharist. She experienced the transforming love of Jesus Christ. This experience of God’s grace has been pivotal for her continuing quest for holiness. Youth ministry, at its best, works to provide young people and their parents with opportunities to see the white rabbit and continue its pursuit.

Youth Ministry Is Not Easy

This booklet is for parish leaders who feel called to help young people and their families have experiences of the divine mystery. It is for parish leaders who recognize that it will not be easy to activate the young church to become what Pope Francis calls “missionary disciples.” The purpose of this book is to provide a basic understanding of youth ministry. It is not a quick-fix book with five easy steps. Rather it seeks to provide a foundation to answer two basic questions: What is working in youth ministry? And what does working actually mean?

Youth ministry in the Catholic Church is not easy. It is not easy because the Catholic Church is in serious trouble. Three major signs point to this trouble: (1) Catholics are leaving the church; according to the Pew Research Center 41 percent of Catholics born and raised in the United States no longer affiliate with the Catholic Church.² (2) Few Catholics attend Mass; the Georgetown Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate estimates that only about a quarter of Catholics attend Mass weekly.³ (3) The church is financially strapped; the United States Conference of Bishops' Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People reported that the church paid out just over one hundred million dollars between July 1, 2013, and June 30, 2014, in costs related to abuse settlements and therapy for victims, with a total of nearly three billion dollars from 2004 to 2013.⁴ It is essential to admit right up front that youth ministry within the current context of American Catholicism is not easy.

I include this brief contextual understanding of church and notion of the difficulty of youth ministry because I've met many parish leaders who think that if they just hire the right person or just develop the right plan, then youth ministry will flourish. It is true that youth ministry can flourish, but if we are honest we have to admit that the church and its ministries can remain entirely irrelevant for large numbers of baptized youth and parents. This can be true even with a hired youth ministry coordinator and a good plan. Youth ministry is not easy.

But when has authentic Christianity ever been easy? In Mark's gospel, Jesus tells the disciples three times that he will suffer and even be killed. The disciples didn't like the message. In chapter 8, Peter even rebukes Jesus for saying this. But Jesus doesn't mince words with Peter and says, "Get behind me, Satan," and then goes on to teach the disciples to "take up their cross and follow" (Mark 8:33-34). Just like the disciples, we forget that Christianity has never really been easy. The question for parish leaders is, Do you feel called by Jesus Christ to minister to the young church and their families for the long haul? If you can answer this question with even a tentative yes, then this book is

for you. If you want a quick fix, then this book will not be helpful. I hate to be pessimistic, but I actually believe there are no quick fixes in youth ministry. Youth ministry for the long haul means that congregations year after year commit to help raise the next generation of Christian disciples.

A Revised Text

This book is actually a revision of one published by Liturgical Press over twenty-five years ago. The original text flowed out of my experiences of youth ministry as both a volunteer and a full-time paid youth ministry coordinator in the 70s and 80s. Since its original publication in 1989, I've served ten years as a diocesan consultant for youth and fifteen years at a university and seminary. During these years two changes have dramatically impacted youth ministry. The biggest change resulted from new diocesan policies regarding safe environments for youth. For example, it would now not be appropriate for a youth ministry leader to be alone in a private space with a high school youth or for an adult alone to give a youth a ride home after a youth ministry activity. Now many dioceses have policies that adults cannot give a ride home to a youth without another adult being present. Much of the language and many of the examples in the 1989 publication advocated forming friendships with high school youth. New understandings related to the power differential between high school youth and youth ministry leaders have evolved and youth ministry is now done differently because of these things. Pope Francis speaks of the need to learn an “art of accompaniment”⁵ in ministry in *The Joy of the Gospel*. Accompanying youth is essential for successful youth ministry today, but this is significantly different from the friendship model of youth ministry advocated about twenty-five years ago.

A second major change is the shift from youth ministry as primarily a youth group with a team of young adult leaders serving youth to recognition that it takes the whole parish to do youth ministry. The whole parish needs to especially help

parents foster faith in their children. Youth ministry in the 90s focused almost exclusively on youth. Youth ministry today has a dual focus: youth and their parents.

When Liturgical Press approached me to consider revising this text I was hesitant at first. Although I teach university courses in youth ministry and I run a summer theology institute for youth, I recognized that I have not worked with high school youth and their parents on a daily basis for twenty-five years. For this text to be helpful, I realized that it had to be grounded in the practical experiences of those who currently do parish youth ministry.

To solve this problem, I invited eleven exceptional youth ministers (most of whom are students or alums of Saint John's University School of Theology and Seminary) to what I called a youth ministry summit. The summit had five outcomes: (1) to analyze how Catholic youth ministry had changed from the 1980s to today; (2) to decide what from the 1989 *Youth Ministry* text was still relevant for youth ministry today; (3) to identify what needed to be updated; (4) to develop a framework for the revised youth ministry text; and (5) to determine who would be interested in helping to write chapters for this revised text.

The youth ministry summit was a highlight of my professional youth ministry career. I am most grateful to those who participated: Peter Bierer, Rico Duran, Craig Gould, Holly Hoey-Germann, Jessie Johnson, Scott Kieffer, Chris Kostelc, Donelle Poling, Amy Schroeder, Angie Slattery, and Emily Wyatt. The content and organization of this little book is a direct result of the conversation at this youth ministry summit. I am most grateful for these companions on the journey of Catholic youth ministry.

Chapter 1 in the book provides an overview of leadership in youth ministry. It explores three basic components of leadership: clarifying where you are going (goals); knowing your starting point (context); and then creating steps to make progress toward the goals (strategy). This chapter also presents a case study of an innovative method of involving adults in youth ministry.

Chapter 2 highlights what has been learned from fifteen years of youth ministry at Saint John's University School of Theology

and Seminary's Youth in Theology and Ministry program. This program has in many ways been a research laboratory into youth ministry.

Chapters 3–5 provide theological foundations for effective youth ministry. Chapter 3 focuses on the primary goal of youth ministry: empowering young people and their parents to live as Christian disciples. Chapter 4 explores conversion and the variety of ways youth ministry leaders might think about fostering conversion. Chapter 5 reflects on a very important question that is rarely asked in youth ministry circles: What are the theological foundations for your parish youth ministry efforts?

Chapters 6–7 explore key curricular efforts essential for building an effective youth ministry. Chapter 6 focuses on community and its essential importance in youth ministry, and chapter 7 addresses the often missing curricular component of vocational discernment.

This book is a collaborative effort. Members of the youth ministry summit took on a variety of writing tasks in this text. In chapter 1 Peter Bierer, senior high youth formation director at Pax Christi Catholic Community in Eden Prairie, Minnesota, writes a case study of a new model of adult leadership development. In chapter 5 you will read Craig Gould's theological principles that provide a foundation for the Peacebuilders youth ministry program he directed at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago. Donelle Poling, youth ministry director at Saint Joan of Arc Catholic Community in Minneapolis, Minnesota, wrote most of chapter 6. A first draft of chapter 7 on vocational discernment was written by Amy Schroeder, pastoral associate for junior/senior high faith formation at the Church of St. Rita in Cottage Grove, Minnesota.

I am very grateful to Liturgical Press for the invitation to revise a text that I had written over twenty-five years earlier. This project provided me with a wonderful opportunity to reflect on how youth ministry both has changed and remains the same. I am also grateful to Jessie Johnson, coordinator of the Youth in Theology and Ministry program, for her work on editing each

chapter. I am also most grateful to the Lilly Endowment—and particularly Craig Dykstra, Chris Coble, and Jessicah Duckworth for their pastoring of the dream of theological programs for high school youth. Much of what is contained in this text would not have been possible without their generous support.

The book was also a collaborative effort in another way. The twenty-five Youth Ministry Network members of the Archdiocese of Saint Paul and Minneapolis discussed the first drafts of the chapters on conversion, community, and leadership development. A number of changes resulted from this dialogue. I am very grateful for the input I received from these professional youth ministry coordinators. It is my deep and abiding hope that this text can be helpful.

I dedicate this book to all the volunteer and professional youth ministry leaders who have given so much time and energy to proclaiming the Good News of Jesus Christ to young people. I believe these folks are a greatly underappreciated gift to the church. Their very lives provide an incredible witness of Christ's love. I know many youth ministers who work full time for the church, but still live close to the poverty line because of their low pay and high debt from college loans. These youth ministers lay down their lives daily in service to the young church and their families. Most of the church does not realize their heroic Christian service, but I have seen it and want to acknowledge it. I also dedicate this book to the spouses and families of youth ministers, who often are the unheralded heroes who make it possible for youth ministers to work sometimes sixty or seventy hours per week. May God bless you!

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Youth Ministry Leadership*

Over the course of two thousand years, Christianity has grown from a small band of disciples to more than two billion Christians today—nearly one-third of the world’s population. This miraculous growth is certainly the work of the Holy Spirit, but it also is the result of extraordinary leadership. Jesus is without a doubt the most exemplary leader to have ever lived. He took a small group of mostly uneducated Palestinian Jews and empowered them to be leaders who changed the world. He continues to inspire generation after generation of exceptional leaders. Much can be learned about leading youth ministry today from examining Jesus’ leadership.

The Art of Accompaniment

How did Jesus lead? It is easy to miss the most radical aspect of Jesus’ leadership. Jesus did not go to Jerusalem and set up a school where he could teach his disciples his message. He did not set up shop and let people come to him like the other rabbis of

* A portion of this chapter was written by Peter Bierer, senior high youth formation director at Pax Christi Catholic Community in Eden Prairie, Minnesota.

his time. Rather, Jesus went out to the people. He did outreach relational ministry. As he walked throughout Galilee and Judea he accompanied the blind, the rich, the poor, the outcasts, and the religious leaders. He went fishing with Peter and ate dinner with Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. Most importantly, he visited the homes of those on the margins.

The Bible story of Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1-10) illustrates the leadership of Jesus and the power of accompaniment. Jesus is walking through the town of Jericho and he sees Zacchaeus in a sycamore tree. Jesus calls to Zacchaeus and asks to come to his house. The good people of Jericho start grumbling because Jesus intends to visit the house of a public sinner, a tax collector. Luke's gospel concludes the story with the conversion that happens within Zacchaeus as a result of Jesus' outreach. He tells Jesus, "Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor." Jesus says to him, "Today salvation has come to this house."

So often youth ministry leaders begin their planning by thinking about the programs that can be offered to get youth to come to the church building. When congregations think about starting youth ministry, they nearly always start thinking about planning youth groups or youth activities. Church leaders love to start programs. The problem is that with today's busyness fewer and fewer youth or adults are willing to take the time to attend church programs. Jesus' model of leadership does not begin with a program. It begins with relationships, with accompaniment. It begins with going out to visit people on their own turf. Jesus brings the Good News of the reign of God, first and foremost through his presence with people. Through Jesus' outreach relational ministry he teaches, heals, liberates, and provides the prophetic challenge of the gospel.

Why is youth ministry so frustrating? I believe the simple reason is because youth ministry leaders often begin with the question, How can we get youth to come to us? instead of the question, How do we reach out and accompany youth and their families?

Pope Francis is challenging the entire church to embrace this type of radical leadership. He calls for priests, religious, and lay leaders to be schooled in this “art of accompaniment”: “In our world, ordained ministers and other pastoral workers can make present the fragrance of Christ’s closeness and his personal gaze. The Church will have to initiate everyone—priests, religious and laity—into this ‘art of accompaniment’ which teaches us to remove our sandals before the sacred ground of the other (cf. Ex 3:5). The pace of this accompaniment must be steady and reassuring, reflecting our closeness and our compassionate gaze which also heals, liberates and encourages growth in the Christian life” (Joy of the Gospel 169).

Visiting Homes

The very best youth ministry strategy that I employed when I was a parish youth ministry coordinator was visiting the homes of high school youth and meeting their parents. In my first year I visited the homes of all the ninth-grade students who were in the confirmation program. At that time it was about sixty families. The next year I did this with the next group of ninth-graders. Within four years I had visited the homes of every family in the parish with children in ninth through twelfth grade. The meetings were scheduled for only thirty minutes. The agenda for the meeting was twofold. First, it was to listen to the concerns of youth and families. During the visit I asked, “How might the church be helpful to you as a family?” The second agenda item was to get feedback from the youth and parents about future youth ministry programming. I asked the parents and youth what youth ministry activities they would like to see. The result of this effort was amazing. So many parents said to me, “This is the first time anyone from the church has ever visited my home.”

I remember two specific visits. On one visit the family was so hospitable that they warmly welcomed me with blueberry muffins just out of the oven and hot chocolate. On another visit I sat at the dining room table with a troubled ninth-grade boy

and his mother and father. The atmosphere throughout the visit was very cold. I did not see much love visible in this family. In the thirty minutes I saw only anger, disrespect, and hurt. After I left his house I realized that this young man needed love and care from the church (and perhaps a referral for family services).

The visits taught me much about the context of different families in the parish. They established an initial relationship between the youth ministry staff and the parents. For the most part the parents felt like the church listened to and cared about their family.

Jeff was in ninth grade. His father had died the previous year. He was the youngest member of his family and the only one still living at home. A month or so after my home visit, Jeff's mom invited me over to watch a Minnesota Vikings football game with her son. I went over to his house and Jeff and I watched the game together. We discovered that we both liked to yell at the official and get excited about the game. At the half, Jeff's mother brought us some pizza to eat. After the game we spent time playing video games. Jeff beat me in game after game of the old-school Atari Missile Command game.

I did not try to teach Jeff anything that first afternoon. I did not ask him about any church doctrine. I simply had a good time being with him. During the next three years of high school, I accompanied Jeff and his mom. After a month or two, Jeff started attending youth ministry activities like our retreats, service projects, and summer camps. Jeff heard the Good News of Jesus Christ proclaimed and he became actively involved in the community of faith. He grew in his Christian life.

One of the great joys in ministering to youth is that young people grow into adults pretty quickly, and sometimes a relationship that starts in youth ministry grows into an adult friendship. At this writing, Jeff is currently fifty-two years old and I am sixty. He is now one of my dearest friends. I am no longer his youth leader, but we are companions on a journey of Christian discipleship.

How Realistic Is This?

Is it realistic to ask youth ministry leaders to visit the homes of high school youth? This was the hot topic of discussion at the Youth Ministry Network meeting after reading a first draft of this chapter. Many of the youth ministers said it was completely unrealistic to expect professional youth ministers to visit youth and parents in their homes. They basically said, “It may have worked to visit the homes of youth years ago when you were in parish youth ministry, but it couldn’t work today. Especially with all the new safe environment policies and work expectations that often demand sixty-hour workweeks. How could youth ministers possibly add this into their schedule?”

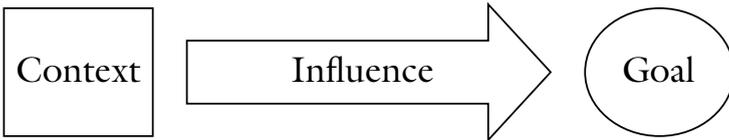
I listened to this concern and thought about it for some time. Eventually, I came to two conclusions. First, I don’t think one individual youth ministry leader needs to visit the homes of all the youth in one grade. Pairs of adults who are part of a youth ministry leadership team could do this. Or better yet, an involved high school youth and an adult could do this together. In larger parishes with hundreds of youth in a grade, a plan would have to be devised where multiple teams would visit homes. It would not be realistic for one youth ministry leader to visit two to three hundred homes in a year.

My second conclusion is that this outreach ministry is needed more today than ever. I think there is a fear of going outside of the boundary or comfort zone of the church. Rather than waiting for youth and parents to come to us in the church, we need to visit them on their turf. This was the primary method that Jesus used. It was the best youth ministry strategy I used in my fifteen years of parish youth ministry. As Pope Francis teaches, youth ministry leaders need to learn this “art of accompaniment.” This is an essential step in effective youth ministry leadership, especially given the religious context of youth and families in the United States. It is not easy; however, I strongly believe that art of accompaniment is essential.

Defining Leadership

In discussing youth ministry leadership it is very important to understand or define what the term means. Out of the hundreds of definitions of leadership, we will utilize the well-known definition by Paul Hersey and Ken Blanchard: “Leadership is the process of *influencing* the activities of an individual or a group in efforts towards *goal* achievement in a *given situation*.”¹ According to Hersey and Blanchard, leadership has three main parts.

Leadership Components



The first and most important part of leadership is that it is oriented “toward goal achievement.” Stephen Covey’s second habit of highly effective people is “to begin with the end in mind.”² This sounds so simple, but in reality very few youth ministry efforts clarify their goals. Without goals, youth ministry efforts tend to spin their wheels and end up with the lowest common denominator: youth ministry becomes only entertainment or pizza and volleyball. But leadership’s first priority is to clarify its goals, and the goals of youth ministry must go beyond simple entertainment.

The main message and the main goal of Jesus centers on the theological concept called the reign of God or kingdom of God. Jesus preached and taught more about the reign of God than any other topic. In Mark 1:15 we hear Jesus’ first public words: “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.” Salvation is always oriented toward the reign of God. This certainly includes eternal salvation in heaven, but, like the Zacchaeus story, the reign of God also happens in the present. Perhaps the easiest way to

think about the ultimate goal of Christianity is found in the Lord's Prayer where Jesus taught us to pray the words: "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." The ultimate goal of Christianity is to bring God's kingdom to earth here and now, realizing that only in eternal life will it be fully realized. Theologians talk about this in terms of "already, but not yet." Salvation and the reign of God are here already, but they are not yet fully here. The goal of Christianity and the church is to bring a little slice of heaven to our families, our communities, and the world.

The second essential aspect of leadership is gaining a clear understanding of the "given situation" or "context." This means that leadership not only demands knowing where the organization is headed (goal) but also demands that it understands its current context. Knowing the context means taking the time to clearly understand the culture, history, background, geography, socioeconomic status, needs, and sociological trends impacting the youth and parents of your congregation. The visitation of the homes of families of ninth-graders was an exercise of contextual analysis. Youth ministry done in Beverly Hills, California, will not be the same as youth ministry in Saint Cloud, Minnesota. The goals might be identical, but because the contexts are different, the same strategies may not work.

This is a major problem with youth ministry (and education in general), because parish leaders often get enticed by the "best new thing in youth ministry" with proclamations of effectiveness in every parish. Unfortunately, one size rarely fits all. An approach that works effectively in one context may completely fail in another. Hersey and Blanchard's definition of leadership is helpful in that it encourages understanding of both the context and goals for youth ministry.

The third essential part of Hersey and Blanchard's definition of leadership is "influencing." Influencing basically means motivating, inspiring, persuading, or engaging people to take steps from their present location toward the goal. Youth ministry leadership constantly seeks to influence youth and their parents

toward conversion, discipleship, and engagement in Christ's mission. This aspect of leadership is basically the youth ministry plan or strategy. It answers the question, Given the contextual situation of our youth and parents, what should we do to progress toward accomplishing our goals? What is the plan? How do we influence participation in the plan?

In many ways, this is the most challenging part of leadership because plans often fail. Youth ministry is challenging because it is quite difficult to influence youth and parents toward faith goals within the current context of American culture. A key to successful leadership in youth ministry is recognizing that this is a long-term challenging effort that will often include a number of failures along the way.

Hersey and Blanchard's definition of leadership is helpful because it provides an overall framework for youth ministry leaders to do effective youth ministry. It focuses youth ministry around three basic questions:

1. What are the goals of youth ministry?
2. What is the context for youth ministry?
3. What is the plan to reach these goals within the given context?

Many congregations develop a youth ministry team made up of adults committed to youth ministry and teenage leaders. Once a team has been formed, these three questions should become the focus of their youth ministry leadership.

The Vision of Catholic Youth Ministry Leadership

The Catholic bishops in the United States help parishes as they seek to provide youth ministry leadership. The bishops have developed an extraordinary vision for Catholic youth ministry in the document *Renewing the Vision: A Framework for Catholic Youth Ministry*. Simply stated, the vision for Catholic youth ministry is that "it takes a whole church."³ This vision

means that it is the responsibility of the entire parish to foster the discipleship of young people. It rejects the notion that one person can be hired to minister to all the youth and their families. Instead it asserts that a youth ministry leader can be hired to help the parish take responsibility for fostering the faith of youth and parents.

The bishops' comprehensive vision competes with a more common vision of youth ministry sometimes called the "pied piper vision." This is where a church seeks to hire a charismatic leader as a youth minister who, like a pied piper, can play a tune that attracts all the youth and leads them to Christian discipleship.

These competing visions highlight two problems. First, churches really want to hire a pied piper. They want to hire an expert or charismatic guru or Christian hipster who will attract youth. During most conversations I've ever had with parish councils about starting youth ministry, someone says, "At (fill in the name) Protestant church down the road, they have a great youth minister who is really attracting all the youth in the area. We need to hire someone like that." Church leaders often want to hire someone who is extraordinary to do the youth ministry for the parish.

Now, it can be true that there are a few truly charismatic youth ministry leaders who can develop a large following of young people, but the Catholic bishops of the United States have rejected this vision because it doesn't work in the long run. Even if a congregation does find such a pied piper (which is actually quite rare), he or she frequently leaves after a short while and then the youth ministry program dies. The next person hired typically fails because youth stop coming to church events (the new youth minister is just not like the pied piper). And then the next person hired fails too (one still not like the pied piper). Finally, the church stops hiring youth ministers. If you question this analysis, simply look at the parishes in your diocese that have a revolving door for hiring youth ministry coordinators. Often this is a problem of vision. The youth ministry coordinator is

not hired to empower the whole church to engage youth. He or she is hired to do the youth ministry for the whole parish.

The bishops' "it takes the whole church" vision challenges parish leaders to get their hands dirty in the soil of planting and nourishing the faith of the young church. Parish leaders cannot simply wash their hands and let someone else do the youth ministry. This does not necessarily mean that the parish council president leads a week-long youth mission trip, but it does mean the parish council president sees to it that a high school youth representative or two are full members of the parish council. Or the parish council president might ask, "How might the leaders of parish committees, liturgy, pastoral care, catechesis, evangelization, justice, and stewardship engage youth in their ministry?" Notice how this vision is completely different from the pied piper vision.

The bishops' vision for youth ministry is extraordinary. Rather than separating youth out of the church into a parallel youth ministry church structure, this vision seeks to integrate youth into the parish community. This is actually very important. The current research on youth shows that even those youth who have been highly involved in only youth group activities in high school often abandon their faith practices after they leave home. The bishops' vision argues that if youth are connected to the life of the parish and are engaged in leadership responsibility in the parish, they are more likely to stay actively involved.

Connected to the vision, the bishops have also established three overarching goals for Catholic youth ministry. This is very helpful to know because it provides a framework for leadership to establish parish youth ministry goals. The goals are stated in *Renewing the Vision* (9–11):

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 community
3. To foster the total personal and spiritual growth of each young person

Case Study: Pax Christi Catholic Community, Eden Prairie, Minnesota

Peter Bierer developed a creative approach to fostering youth ministry leadership in his parish. He wrote the following case study showing the innovative ways adults are engaging high school youth in his church.

It's Sunday afternoon and a group of twelve ninth-, tenth-, and eleventh-grade young men and women are clad in aprons, standing around a kitchen counter listening to Amy talk about the wonders of kale. They are learning how to make kale chips and salad. If this isn't strange enough already (how many teenagers do you know who learn how to cook with kale?), this group had just finished a short study on Christian discipleship and what it means to be a follower of Jesus. Eric, the other adult in the room, used stories, videos, Scripture, and provocative questions to help the group members reflect on their own experience of being a follower, and what it means to follow Jesus as a teenager in today's world. In another room there is a group of young people having a similar conversation, only instead of cooking, they are learning how to sew. They are making clothing for impoverished girls in Africa and studying Catholic social teaching. In another room a group of teens is exploring their faith through a study of the natural world. There are groups of teens meeting with adults all over the church, all throughout the week, being formed in the faith while playing basketball and soccer, learning to play the guitar, writing plays, singing, painting, knitting, doing a book study, and just about anything you can think of doing. This is the senior high faith formation/youth ministry program at Pax Christi Catholic Community in Eden Prairie, Minnesota.

When I was hired at Pax Christi, I was asked to create a new youth ministry program. I knew right away that I wanted to create a ministry that was a reflection of the parish, its mission and values, its charisms, and not just a reflection of me, the youth minister, and my personal preferences. In order to achieve this

goal, I needed to spend time getting to know the community and the hopes, desires, and needs of its members. I also knew that it would be impossible to create this new ministry on my own. If I wanted a youth ministry that was a direct reflection of the parish, I needed to have parishioners involved in the planning, building, and implementation processes. I am very grateful to my pastor and my supervisor for allowing me to take my time with this process. Their trust and support were vital in the success of the ministry.

I spent my first several months at Pax Christi in observation mode. I maintained a functional youth ministry program while engaging in countless conversations with youth, parents, staff members, council members, and other community members. I asked a lot of questions and I did a lot of listening. These conversations not only taught me more about the parish, but I was able to develop relationships with people across the community. When it came time for me to begin developing a vision for the youth ministry, I formed a leadership team made up of adults with whom I had spoken during my time of observation.

By the time I formed this leadership team there were two basic goals I had developed for the youth ministry: (1) I wanted to incorporate *passion-based learning*, and (2) I wanted more adult involvement in the ministry. *Passion-based learning* is an educational model that allows students to learn about a particular subject through the lens of a personal interest. For instance, students may study math and geometry through the lens of their interest in soccer. The teacher helps the students map out learning goals and guides them in learning about the relationship between math and soccer. Not only are the students interested in the soccer portion of the learning, but they are much more interested in the academic learning because it has become relevant and immediately applicable to their life. It is my opinion that faith formation is most successful when we can help learners see the relationship between faith and the things they are most interested in. Passion-based learning reveals Christian discipleship as something that is interesting, relevant, and maybe even something the young person is already doing!

In order to address my second goal I needed to find out what obstacles existed that prevented adults from being involved in youth ministry. It is not surprising that adults would tell me that they were too busy to volunteer, and that they did not know enough about Catholicism to be a teacher. My decision to use passion-based learning would also help to address this issue. The leadership team developed a recruiting plan wherein we asked the adults of the parish, “What’s your thing?” We wanted to know about their passions, enthusiasms, hobbies, and expertise. “Do you love to paint? Are you a home chef? Do you coach basketball?” Once we got people thinking and reflecting on their gifts and talents, we asked them if they would be interested in sharing their “thing” with the youth of the parish in a six- or seven-week session. The adults could choose the time, dates, and location of the class (with some limitations, of course). We wanted them to focus on the idea that God calls us to discipleship *through* the things we are passionate about, the things we love. At this point we told them that these passion-based offerings were going to be the new senior high youth ministry and faith formation program. We would work with them to develop lesson plans that would help to make the connections between their “thing” and discipleship.

The response was phenomenal. We have almost three times as many adults involved in the youth ministry as we did when I began at Pax Christi. We have more youth involved in the programs and a noticeably higher level of learning satisfaction. Teens are able to choose which passion-based class they want to belong to. Relationships are being formed between youth and adults. Our entire parish community has been invigorated and enlivened because of this invitation to explore the depths of faith through the things we love. Adults have expressed great personal joy and fulfillment because of their participation in the ministry. Many have said this is the first time they have been able to share their gifts with the community. They have also talked about their own faith formation taking place as they reflect, plan, teach, and learn with the young people through the lens of their

shared passion. Adults and youth alike are finding affirmation in their interests and passions. They are engaging in vocational discernment, and they are growing in discipleship in the Way of Jesus Christ.

There are multiple levels of leadership present in the development and implementation of this youth ministry, most of which have been very collaborative. As the youth minister I made the decision to share my leadership with other members of the community. Had I chosen a model in which I was the only leader, I am certain the youth ministry at Pax Christi would have failed. I chose to work within the parameters allowed to me by the parish leadership (the pastor, councils, and my supervisor). I then invited a group of highly qualified adults to become leaders who would create the vision for the ministry and help to implement the vision. Together we worked to recruit and empower more adults into the ministry to become leaders based on their personal gifts and talents. We promised to work with them as much as they needed in order to be successful in their passion-based course. These adult leaders are now doing something similar with the teenagers in the ministry. They are giving the youth of our community a vision of what Christian discipleship looks like and they are empowering them to become leaders who can address the needs of the world through their gifts and talents. The next step is to invite these young people to become leaders in the youth ministry, the parish, and the world.

Practical Application: A Basic Plan for Parish Youth Ministry Renewal

Step 1: Recruit a youth ministry team, council, or task force. One person can never do this alone. Include parish staff, concerned parents, young adults, and high school youth.

Step 2: Pray together as a leadership team. When you gather as a leadership team don't just say a prayer at the start of the meeting, but spend time praying together. This helps the leadership team grow into a visible community of faith.

Step 3: Learn together about youth ministry. Read and discuss this book, the bishops' *Renewing the Vision*, and/or other youth ministry books that can help the team understand youth ministry.

Step 4: Develop a strategic plan for youth ministry and review this with the pastor and parish council.

1. Establish the youth ministry goals.
2. Analyze the context of youth and their families.
3. With the goals and context in mind develop a plan for the year for engaging youth and their parents. Create a calendar for the year. Do not try to do too much. It is better to do a few things well than to do many things poorly.

Step 5: Begin the youth ministry activities/plans.

Step 6: Spend time about twice a year evaluating the successes and areas of growth in the youth ministry activities/plans. Adjust your strategy based on this information.

I believe this is the time for creative responses from local congregations on how to reach out to youth and their families. There is not one right way to do youth ministry, nor is there one program that will work in every parish. Congregations will become youth-friendly when church leaders put time and energy into developing creative plans for connecting youth and adults. It takes the whole church.

Conclusion

Effective youth ministry in parishes today needs a group of adults and teens committed to helping the parish empower young people to live as disciples of Jesus Christ. The vision of youth ministry leadership from the bishops of the United States is that it takes the whole church to foster Christian discipleship. The bishops teach that congregations should not seek to hire a pied piper youth minister who will do the youth ministry for the parish. Instead they believe it is the responsibility of the entire congregation to engage youth in the life of the parish.

A group of committed adults and teens will be well on their way to successful youth ministry if they clarify the goals of youth ministry, analyze the context for youth ministry in their particular community, and then develop plans to make progress toward the goals. Youth ministry is hard work! Perhaps the motto of youth ministry should be the words attributed to St. Augustine: “Pray as if everything depends on God; work as if everything depends on us.” This prayer empowers youth ministry leaders to fearlessly utilize their own power to make a difference, while simultaneously remembering that God is in charge.