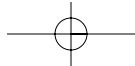
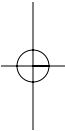
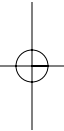
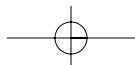
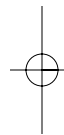
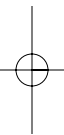
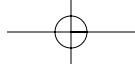
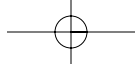


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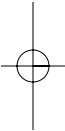
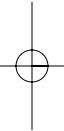




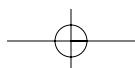


Thriving in Youth Ministry

Robert J. McCarty, DMin



Saint Mary's Press™



To the young people of Saint Francis of Assisi Parish, in Fulton, Maryland, who have been my touchstone in youth ministry, keeping me “real” and “honest,” and who constantly energize me with their enthusiasm, their faith, and their love of life.

To Maggie, my wife, friend, and co-minister, who loves and cares deeply for young people and who is my role model for relational ministry with teenagers.

To my “breakfast club” and to my “dinner club”—my friends and spiritual companions with whom I share this faith journey.

To my colleagues in youth ministry in all their varied settings, who share a passion and a commitment for this vocation and for whom youth ministry is not just a profession but a worthwhile adventure.



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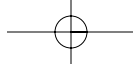
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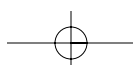
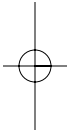
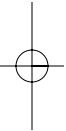
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Foreword

Do you know that the best thing to do in a rapidly falling elevator is to lie down and spread out in the middle of the floor? Are you aware that you need to open a window as soon as you hit the water if you want to escape a sinking car? And to survive a severe lightning storm when you are in an open area, you must immediately kneel with your hands on the ground and your head bent low. But what do you need to survive—better yet, thrive—in youth ministry?

At this writing, 6,870,000 responses have been recorded in the search engine for the word *survival*. What exactly does it mean to survive something (or someone)? When I think of survival, images of jungles or deserted islands or even a certain reality show come to mind. Interestingly, *survive* is often defined as “to live longer than, to outlive or outlast, to remain alive.” The competitive nature of that definition aside, how can a person not only survive but also come alive and thrive in this vocation of youth ministry? What are the skills, the attitudes, and the actions that necessitate a vibrant and healthy ministry with young people?

Recently I looked around at our archdiocesan Association of Professional Youth Ministers meeting and discovered that I am tenured! Twenty years in parish, school, and diocesan youth ministry sometimes means standing alone in a sea of younger and physically fitter colleagues. Although this does not mean I have all the answers, it does mean I have survived the years (not to mention the struggle to balance personal time, spouse time, family time, ministry time, and the tensions and graduations and collaborative efforts and trainings and meetings and conflicts and . . .). And yet I don't feel like I have *just* survived. I still feel very blessed to work in ministry, to use the gifts of my baptism for the young Church, and to share my journey with young people and have them share their walk with me.

I still feel energized when young people experience the larger Church at World Youth Day or at the National Catholic Youth Conference, when they realize their ability to make a difference at work camp, or when they want to know more in a Bible study. I still consider it a worthwhile challenge to watch and listen to other ministers (some of them adults!) and to work collaboratively with them in building the Kingdom.

Thriving in Youth Ministry is invaluable because it provides exceptionally practical strategies for thriving—not just surviving—in ministry. Robert McCarty is a seasoned veteran of countless years and ministries to the Church, and continues to work not only nationally in youth ministry but also at a basic grassroots level in his parish. I am impressed by his wealth of knowledge, his vast experiences, and his passion for faith and ministry. I am especially moved by Bob's long-term commitment to the Church, serving as a prophet to many and an advocate for this ministry in particular. It is an intentional endeavor to

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thrive in youth ministry. Reading this book offers each of us the opportunity to recognize areas where we have grown and also those where we still struggle. As Bob affirms, competency and furthering education are crucial to a healthy youth ministry life.

The book's chapter on practical strategies for thriving in ministry is perhaps the most personally enriching and challenging. Advocating for youth ministry, developing a youth ministry commission, communicating effectively with the pastor and staff, and maintaining balance are all messages we need to hear and rehear! And the spirituality chapter reminds us that the house will fall if it is not grounded in the master builder. Finally, the reflection questions at the end of each section beg for sharing in a supportive setting. All of us need to search out caring friends and colleagues who will walk through youth ministry and this book with us. Bob suggests concrete ways to thrive in this field by entering into a book-club-type youth ministry sharing group.

Thriving in Youth Ministry is a gift to those of us in the field. With Bob's wisdom and in his writing, we have been given a map pointing us in the most effective direction (sometimes a narrow path) to thriving in this worthwhile vocation.

May each of us continue to touch the lives of our young Church as we invite the Holy Spirit to shape and form our ministry.

Patrick Sprankle
Husband, father
Director of youth ministry
Saint Louis Parish, Clarksville, Maryland

Preface

Since the first printing of *Survival in Youth Ministry* in 1994, Catholic youth ministry as a profession has moved from surviving to thriving! Thus the title change for the second edition of this book: *Thriving in Youth Ministry*. Although it is an especially exciting time for the practice and profession of youth ministry, the information and strategies in this edition are as pertinent and applicable today as they were in 1994.

Indeed the field of youth ministry has changed in the last decade. The role of the parish youth ministry coordinator is increasingly understood as integral to the pastoral ministry of the faith community, rather than as a “luxury” position filled only in times of sufficient finances.

The thriving growth in the field of professional youth ministry leadership certainly reflects the explosion in lay ecclesial ministry since Vatican II. Moreover, comparing the shifts in youth ministry leadership since the first edition of this book highlights the changes in the field:

- ◆ *Number:* In 1992, there were 2,850 paid youth ministers (20 or more hours per week); in 2002, there were 5,446. (*Diocesan Youth Ministry Directors 2000*, p. 15)
- ◆ *Gender:* In 1992, youth ministers were equally divided between male and female; in 2002, 77 percent of youth ministers were female. (*The Emergence of Lay Ecclesial Youth Ministry as a Profession*, pp. 3 and 5)
- ◆ *Education:* In 1992, 33 percent of youth ministry leaders had a graduate degree; in 2002, 21 percent of youth ministers had a master’s degree. (P. 3)
- ◆ *Longevity:* In 1992, one third of youth ministers lasted a year or less in their positions, and they felt the least satisfied and supported of the ministers. In 2002, the average length of experience for youth ministers was seven years; 69 percent of those youth ministers expected to stay in youth ministry for at least five additional years and 30 percent for an additional ten years. (P. 4)
- ◆ *Age:* In 1992, 50 percent of youth ministry leaders were under thirty years old, and 85 percent were under forty years old. This contributed to the stereotype that youth ministers had to be young. However, in 2002, the median age for youth ministers was forty years old, and 50 percent were over forty-five years old. (P. 4)

Youth ministry leaders in this millennium have more experience, benefit from an increasing number of academic and ministry formation programs, are staying in youth ministry longer, and are older. And other significant developments in the field point toward the growth of youth ministry as both a practice and a profession:

P R E F A C E

- ◆ A shared and comprehensive vision of youth ministry was heralded by *A Vision of Youth Ministry* (1976) and reinforced and expanded by *Renewing the Vision: A Framework for Catholic Youth Ministry* (1997).
- ◆ The role of youth ministry leaders is expanding to include early adolescent and high school ministry, sacramental preparation, catechesis, and sometimes young adult ministry.
- ◆ The role of the youth ministry leader is shifting from being the “doer” of ministry to the “enabler” of ministry, to becoming an animator of ministry in which the faith community is the setting and locus for ministry.
- ◆ New models for youth ministry are emerging. A number of megaparishes have a multiperson youth ministry staff. Also an increasing number of multiparish and regional youth ministry models broaden the role of the coordinator.
- ◆ An emphasis on youth ministry formation is reflected in an increasing number of diocesan youth ministry training and certification programs. Several programs are accredited by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops’ Committee on Certification and Accreditation.
- ◆ The number of independent ministry providers that are separate from but supportive of dioceses has increased as the field responds to changing needs and concerns. Those providers offer training, resources, and consultation and program services.
- ◆ The establishment of a professional organization in 2004, the National Association for Catholic Youth Ministry Leaders, provides networking in the field and advances the practice and profession of youth ministry. This is a natural progression from the various diocesan and regional associations that were formed in the past two decades.
- ◆ Competency-based standards for lay ecclesial youth ministers, developed first in 1989 through the efforts of the National Federation for Catholic Youth Ministry (NFCYM) and revised in 2003, identify the knowledge and skills integral to the profession of youth ministry.

Clearly Vatican II heralded profound changes in our understanding of ministry and ministry roles, reflected in the growth of the lay ecclesial youth minister as a vocation and a profession.

We have moved beyond merely surviving this ministry, and we are grateful to all those who pioneered this ministry throughout the early waves of lay ecclesial ministry. This ministry is now thriving, and the entire faith community, especially the young Church, has received a great blessing.

Introduction

What could be better than working for God? and with young people? Youth ministry is perhaps the most exciting and challenging ministry in the Church today—just ask any youth minister. But as more and more people choose it as a vocation and a career, an alert should be sounded. Given the wide range of competencies and skills required and the vagaries of adolescents, youth ministry may be the most difficult and challenging ministry. There has long been an assumption that the average tenure for a professional youth minister is not very long. A common myth puts that tenure at eighteen months.

In 1992, for example, the *New Parish Ministers: Laity and Religious on Parish Staffs* study, conducted by the National Pastoral Life Center, noted that youth ministers had the shortest occupational life span among all parish ministers: more than one-third stayed in the field for one year or less. Even when remaining in the profession, youth ministers probably ranked just behind migrant workers in length of time in one place (p. 52).

However, a 2000 study conducted by Ministry Training Source for the NFCYM reported that the mean number of years of experience for youth ministers had risen to nine and a half, with the median at seven years. Clearly the profession of youth ministry leadership is coming of age (*The Emergence of Lay Ecclesial Youth Ministry as a Profession*, p. 5).

There is still something, though, that happens to a person after taking a position in Church ministry. That “something” is not always positive or healthy—and youth ministers are especially subject to it.

Many enter the ministry with high aspirations and hopes but leave feeling disillusioned, bitter, and angry. Some even have their faith shaken by their ministry experience. Again, the 1992 *New Parish Ministers* study stated:

[Of all ministers,] youth ministers seem to derive the least satisfaction and support. The full-time youth ministers find ministry the least affirming, their co-workers the least affirming, their supervisors the least satisfied, parishioners the least satisfied, and youth ministers are least likely to encourage others to enter this ministry. (P. 102)

That experience has changed dramatically in the past decade. Youth ministry leaders are increasingly positive about their ministry in the Church. According to the NFCYM study, 78 percent consider their ministry to be very fulfilling, and 20 percent find it moderately so. Eighty-five percent rate their ministry as very much or moderately effective, and they find the pastor, bishop, and diocese to be supportive of their ministry (*The Emergence of Lay Ecclesial Youth Ministry as a Profession*, p. 23).

I continue to be convinced of the personal, professional, and spiritual value of ministry in the Church, including youth ministry. Having worked in professional youth ministry since 1973, I continue to be excited, challenged, and grateful for the opportunity to

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minister to, with, and for young people. My purpose in writing this book, therefore, is to explore with you problematic characteristics and conditions of youth ministry and to share the strategies and practices that I, and others, use not only to survive youth ministry but to enhance it. In other words, the purpose of this book is to answer the question, What can we do to maintain the enthusiasm, excitement, energy, and sense of call that initially attracted many of us to youth ministry?

To answer that question, I will do the following:

- ◆ describe the effect of professionalism, power, and authority in the Church on our experience of youth ministry
- ◆ identify some of the myths that pervade our ministry
- ◆ examine the tensions, conflicts, and frustrations that affect longevity in our ministry
- ◆ describe patterns of spiritual health, along with ways to foster it
- ◆ offer practical strategies for thriving in youth ministry
- ◆ provide self-reflection exercises for assessing and improving our survivability

My Perspectives

This book is written from the viewpoint of several perspectives that I hold about adults and youth ministry. Those perspectives greatly color my approach to and understanding of the survival issue in youth ministry.

We, as adults in youth ministry, tend to be experience rich and language poor. You and I are rich in the experience of youth ministry. We all have our stories of successes and failures, of frustrations and joys, of young people and programs. But most of us seldom reflect on those experiences in order to learn from them. Sometimes we don't have the words or the language to articulate those experiences so that we can benefit and learn from them. I hope this book will provide the opportunity to reflect on and the language to articulate the experiences you've had in ministry, and thereby enable you to gain more enjoyment from this challenging ministry.

Even though ultimate answers for issues in youth ministry are not always possible, we must raise these issues to make survival a clear and prominent objective. To call attention to issues is not to be pessimistic about either the ministry or the Church. Rather, awareness of the problem is the first step in any change—and is a first step in thriving in ministry. So seeking awareness of issues in youth ministry can be a healthy, optimistic, and hopeful sign for the ministry.

We tend to resist change, even change for the good. An honest reading of this book may challenge long-held perceptions, attitudes, and ministry styles, which we can actually influence and control to make positive changes. To survive, we may need to view our ministry differently, redefine our roles, and reset our priorities.

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Thriving in youth ministry, then, needs to begin with an honest assessment of our ministry, with its frustrations and problems as well as its blessings and joys. This assessment should alert us to the aspects of our ministry that need to be challenged and changed, and provide the awareness we need to consider behaviors, attitudes, and approaches that foster a healthy experience of ministry.

I do not pretend to have all the answers for all the issues and situations confronting youth ministers today. Situations are so varied and issues so individual that claiming solutions that work in every instance would be foolish. However, it is vital that we begin to define, discuss, and respond to the elements affecting healthy participation in ministry.

Format

This book utilizes a workbook format. Each chapter first discusses particular issues affecting survival in youth ministry and then, at the end, provides reflection questions and worksheets for applying key insights and learning to your own situation. Much of the content of the chapters is based on my experiences in parish and diocesan ministry and my conversations with volunteer and full-time youth ministers. Interspersed you will find quotations from youth ministry leaders who participated in the 2002 “Effective Youth Ministry Practices in Catholic Parishes” study, conducted by Saint Mary’s Press and the Center for Ministry Development, in collaboration with the NFCYM. The comments illustrate important aspects of a comprehensive vision of youth ministry and the role of the youth ministry leader.

Suggested Use

For individuals, reading the book chapter by chapter and doing the reflection exercises at the end of the chapters might be the most helpful process. However, it may be a more valuable experience if two, three, or even a small group of people read the book together. For people who have already begun to network for mutual support, sharing, and prayer, this book can be a great help in giving direction and structure to that effort.

Audience

This book was written with professional youth ministry leaders primarily in mind. However, what is perceived in the terms *professional* and *youth ministers* needs to be more clearly described.

Professionals are not only salaried or stipended youth ministers. Professionals are all people, salaried or not, who have ministerial competence in, along with responsibility for, significant aspects of a youth ministry program in a particular setting. Given this perception, many volunteers who serve as youth ministry leaders in various settings are regarded as professionals. That perspective is further defined in chapter 1.

The generic term *faith community* in this text refers to the parish, school, or diocese, or any other level or dimension of community in which the Church is ministering to young people. Therefore, youth ministry leaders include coordinators of youth ministry programs, parish youth ministers or advisers, school campus ministers, retreat team members, cate-

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chists, coaches, those involved in outreach programs, diocesan youth offices, and all others ministering to young people.

So, the audience for this book consists of any paid or volunteer staff person with responsibility for youth ministry. The new minister as well as the seasoned veteran will find the material valuable, though each will read through the eyes of their own experiences.

Finally, though this book is written from the perspective of youth ministry, the issues and skills described within are valuable for those in all Church ministries, because many experiences are shared in common.

Reflection: Your Story

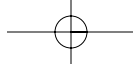
- ◆ Take some time to remember how you came to be involved in youth ministry.
 - ◆ What was your experience of Church (or youth ministry) during your teen years? How did that affect your decision to get involved in youth ministry as an adult?

 - ◆ As an adult, who called you to youth ministry? How did you first get involved? Did a particular person first invite you into this ministry? Who? What gifts did that person see in you for this ministry?

 - ◆ Why did you first become involved in youth ministry as an adult?

- ◆ Now take some time to reflect on your situation in youth ministry today.
 - ◆ What gifts or talents do you now bring to this ministry?

 - ◆ Why do you now choose to do youth ministry?



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- ◆ For how many years have you been involved in youth ministry? For how many more years do you expect to stay? Why?

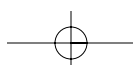
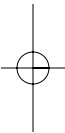
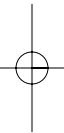
- ◆ What issues, concerns, or problems threaten your survival in youth ministry?

- ◆ Consider your first years in youth ministry.
 - ◆ When you first started in youth ministry, what did you do *right*?

 - ◆ When you first started in youth ministry, what did you do *wrong*?

 - ◆ What recommendations would you give someone who is just starting in a youth ministry position?

 - ◆ What are some key issues and concerns affecting your survival in youth ministry?



1

Professionalism, Power, and Authority

What we are really trying to emphasize . . . is trying to support each other's ministry. Well, it is not like we come up with the ministry and then you are off all by yourself, you don't need the help of other people. That is a no-no in our community, but our task is to build community. It is supposed to be a co-responsibility because church is a co-responsibility, trying to build one family working together. I think the youth ministry here really is very strong in that. They really try to reach out and support other ministries.

The pastor lets the youth minister do his or her job. The pastor is good at delegating. The pastor doesn't have to micromanage.

A great gift for a youth minister, or anybody in a leadership position, is knowing that you cannot do it all by yourself, and it is very important for you to surround yourself with good people, adults and kids.

(From interviews for the "Effective Youth Ministry Practices in Catholic Parishes" study)

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Three permeating issues greatly affect our experience of ministry in the Church: professionalism, power, and authority. Those are subtle and often unseen elements in situations, relationships, and conditions that create tension, conflict, and frustration in youth ministry. Recognizing and understanding them is a large part of surviving and thriving in youth ministry.

Professionalism

Our understanding and approach to youth ministry has been evolving in the Church since the mid 1900s. Initially articulated in 1976 in the document *A Vision of Youth Ministry*, and reinforced and expanded in 1997 in *Renewing the Vision: A Framework for Catholic Youth Ministry*, the practice and profession of youth ministry continues to evolve. However, youth ministry continues to be one of the newest professional ministries in the Church, especially on the parish level. When compared historically with the development of ministry in the Church in general, twenty-five years is, indeed, not very long. And as a young ministry in the Church, youth ministry often finds that it still needs to prove itself. Building up its professionalism—articulating a clear vision of the ministry, and identifying and advocating for the competencies and standards integral to the ministry—is an ongoing need.

We must be proactive in taking responsibility for our ministry as a profession and for ourselves as professionals. To be proactive means to take the initiative in creating vision and

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direction and in setting professional standards for it. In doing so, we begin to “own” our ministry and profession.

In the introduction to *Competency-Based Standards for the Coordinator of Youth Ministry*, published in 1990, the NFCYM stated:

By issuing national standards for youth ministry personnel, the NFCYM is giving direction to the future of youth ministry, as well as rewarding and affirming those persons already working in youth ministry for their formation efforts. By proposing and approving these standards, the NFCYM is ensuring the quality of its profession and is promoting professionalism for qualified persons. (P. vi)

These standards undergo periodic revision, and in 2003, after several years of collaborative effort between the NFCYM, the National Association for Lay Ministry (NALM), and the National Conference for Catechetical Leadership (NCCL), a common set of competency-based standards for lay ecclesial ministers was developed. The introduction states:

The certification standards, core competencies, and specialized competencies in this resource serve three goals: (1) to give direction to the future of lay ministry, (2) to recognize and affirm those persons already in ministry, and (3) to promote faithful, competent, and accountable lay ecclesial ministry. (*National Certification Standards for Lay Ecclesial Ministers*, p. vi)

Here, the NFCYM, the NALM, and the NCCL are challenging all those involved in pastoral ministry to achieve a professional level of competence. Being competent is necessary not only for the good of the Church to whom we minister but also is for advancing youth ministry as a profession and our own professionalism as lay ecclesial ministers.

Characteristics of a Profession

A profession and professionalism are closely related, and each has several specific characteristics.

A profession can be an occupation or a vocation.

For all of us, youth ministry is a vocation—a calling. For some it is also an occupation—employment providing a livelihood. But it is as a vocation that we consider youth ministry to be a profession. Consequently, whether we are involved in youth ministry as salaried employees or as nonsalaried volunteers, by way of our vocation, all of us are challenged to be professional and to meet professional standards.

A profession needs a shared vision of the “work” and of the “role.”

Our vision of youth ministry and our understanding of the role of the youth ministry leader are the result of the dialogue between our lived experiences and our theological and ministerial reflection. One of the strengths of Catholic youth ministry is the clearly defined and nationally accepted vision as articulated in the USCCB documents and enhanced in the NFCYM’s supporting documents. Those documents provide the framework for the development of youth ministry resources and curriculum.

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The five patterns that contribute to spiritual health on page 60 are from an unpublished keynote address by Doris Donnelly, given at the Hofinger Conference, New Orleans, January 1991.

The excerpt by Thomas Merton on pages 67–68 is from “Ransoming the Time,” by the NFCYM (Washington, DC: NFCYM, August 1988), board meeting handout.

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