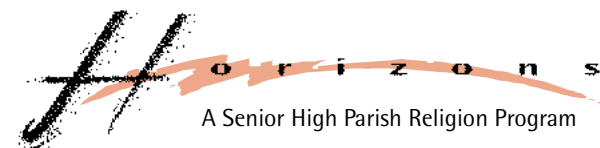


*Senior Year:
Last Things and Lasting Things*

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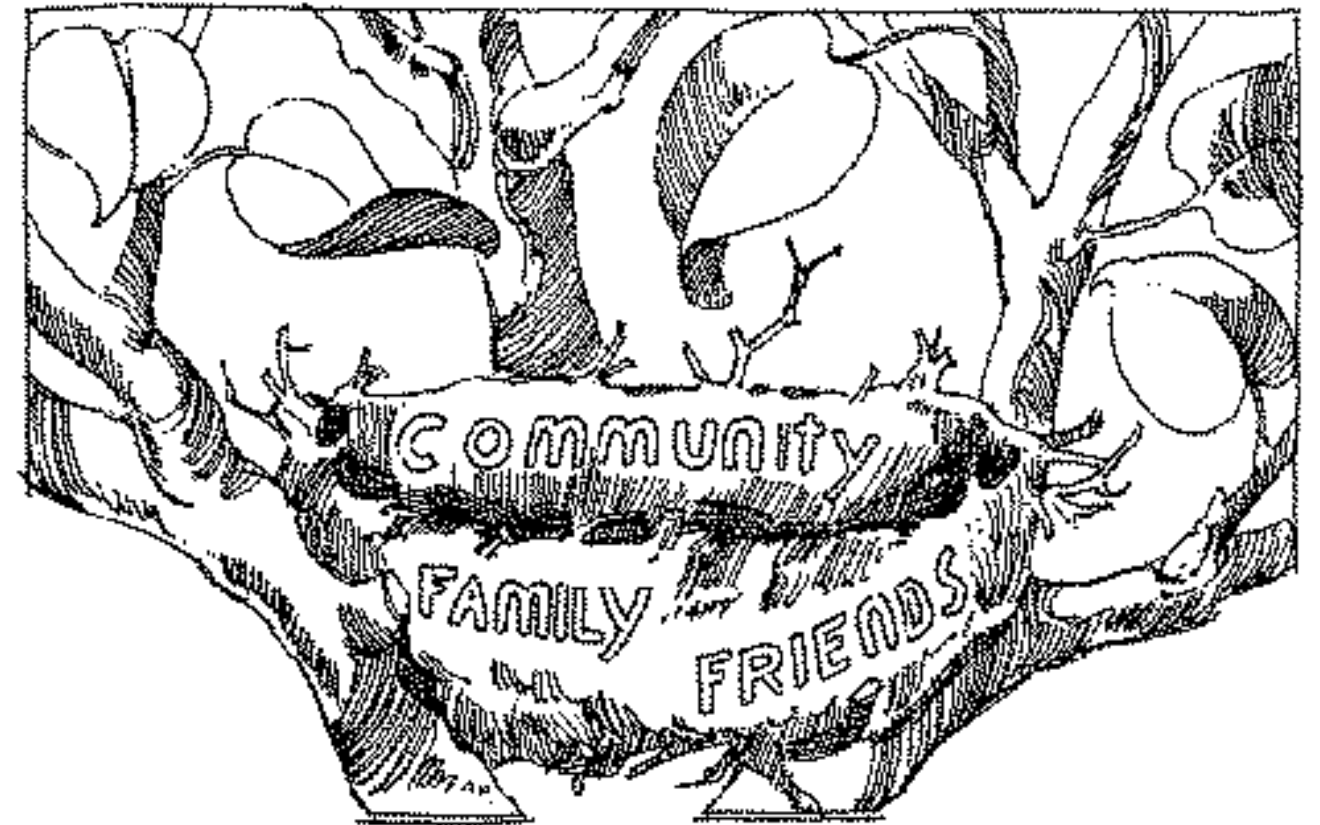
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Introduction



An Overview of This Course

Young people in our society wait with great expectation for their senior year of high school. The end of that year marks for them one of life's most important milestones—high school graduation. Other countries do not treat the completion of secondary education as a landmark event. Our culture is one of a few that recognize this as an important rite of passage. For us the year one graduates from high school is often used as an identifier, and class reunions often mark one's passage through adulthood.

Seniors in high school live in anticipation of this milestone. Throughout their years in high school, their days have been filled with people and events

that have helped to shape them. The memories of these things will sustain them into the future. As their final year of high school progresses, they begin to realize that many of the events that they eagerly anticipate and fondly remember will never happen again. They meet these “last things” with mixed emotions.

As high school seniors move on to the next stage in their life, they will genuinely miss many aspects of high school. Their memories and learnings of these aspects become part of the “lasting things” that they take with them as they continue on life's journey. It is the lasting things that we all recall when we think of our own high school years.

Parents and guardians may also find the senior year to be exciting, but at the same time, it can be

extremely stressful. Often their children challenge their authority and continually test limits. While the young people struggle for freedom to make their own decisions, their parents attempt to find comfortable ways to begin the process of letting go.

In spite of the difficulties that come along with change, seniors and their parents have much to celebrate. They know that graduation is ultimately a key event in their life. Family members and friends gather for the occasion, and for a short time, the senior is the center of attention. It is a natural time of affirmation and can provide the young people with a strong sense of pride in their accomplishments.

Senior Year: Last Things and Lasting Things is designed to give seniors a chance to dig deeper into the issues that are unique to this time of their life, such as the losses they experience, their excitement to get on with life, and their relationships with their family and peers. The course also helps young people to identify and explore the skills that can enable them to accomplish some of the critical psychosocial tasks of late adolescence. In addition, it offers an opportunity for the parents of high school seniors to come together for a session of sharing and reflection. This optional session helps the parents deal with some of the stresses that are normal to this stage of their child's life.

This course complements the Horizons Program's level 4 core course *Moving On: Embracing the Future*. It expands and enriches some of the themes covered in that course, especially the section on saying good-bye. *Senior Year* is intended to be taught as three 2-hour sessions for the participants and one 90-minute session for their parents. It is important to maintain a smooth flow to the course, and therefore it is recommended that the participants' sessions be presented in consecutive weeks; the optional parent session will work best if held between sessions 2 and 3. The course's activities, discussions, and reflections are designed for a group of about eight to ten young people. If the number of participants in your group differs considerably from that, you may have to make minor adjustments in the session plans. In some instances suggestions for these adjustments have been included in this text. If you need further assistance, consult your program coordinator.

Each session of the course focuses on a different topic related to the senior year of high school. Session 1 deals with the conflicting emotions that accompany the life task of leaving the nest. After an elaborate and unconventional session opening, it invites the young people to reflect on the many nests

they are preparing to leave as they move toward adulthood. Session 2 helps the participants look at their family ties and how those must change to accommodate the moving on that high school graduation precipitates. It introduces twelve tasks associated with this transition, including and expanding on the five tasks presented in the core course *Moving On* (see page 8). Finally, it challenges the participants to discover ways of dealing with the conflicts and issues that are naturally a part of their family life at this time. Session 3 focuses on friends and lasting memories. Through a panel discussion, older peers share their thoughts about the transition from high school to young adulthood, including their experiences of leaving and making new friends and the difficulties and joys of moving to the next phase in life's journey.

Senior Year is specifically written for young people facing one of life's biggest transitions. Developmentally they need to leave the safety and comfort of the nests of family and friends. When they do this, they need caring adults to encourage them to test their wings and stand by them. As the teacher of this course, you can leave the young people in your group with the lasting gift of knowing that the church community cares about them and that they continue on life's journey with the grace of God.

Background for This Course

The Adolescent and This Course

Seniors in high school can almost taste adulthood. They are filled with excitement and dreams. They are immersed in decisions about their goals for the next few years, goals that may well shape their entire life. They may view the passage from high school as a movement into a time of life when they will have complete freedom, and are often naive about the real world. Instinctively they know to be cautious and fearful, but they have difficulty admitting or recognizing that being an adult has its drawbacks and limitations. When they move to the next phase of life—whether it involves a job, the military, college, or whatever—they often will learn life's lessons the hard way. They face the unknown with great anticipation, and they are simultaneously hopeful, optimistic, afraid, and watchful.

Older adolescents are also at a crossroads in their faith journey. They are ready developmentally to internalize the faith values that have been presented to them by their parents, their church community, and other significant entities. However, they are also eager to investigate other avenues for finding meaning and purpose in life.

In addition to changes in lifestyle and faith issues, high school seniors also face changes in some of their present relationships and the beginning of new relationships. The critical psychosocial tasks that young adults face include seeking autonomy from their parents and searching for a personal identity. Saying good-bye to family and friends, letting go, and renegotiating the parent-child relationship will be an important part of the immediate future. As the search for a personal identity intensifies and the relationship with parents changes, it becomes important for a young person to find new supportive relationships. These new relationships might include a mentor and a sustaining community.

Senior Year can be an opportunity for a reality check. The young people who take this course want the chance to discuss their concerns and options for the future. They often find themselves filled with mixed emotions, some of which they may not be able to identify. They also may not know how to deal with their emotions effectively. This course is designed not only to help them share and savor the excitement they feel, but also to offer them practical ways to deal with their concerns about growing up, their fears about their future, and the family tensions and relational issues that are a part of the transition from adolescence to adulthood. Because of the topic and the age of the young people, the participants will bring a great deal of depth to the course. Your care, concern, and personal witness to the Gospel at this critical stage of life may have a tremendous effect on them. When the young people move on and remember the sources that have helped them find the answers to their life questions, you may very well be an important part of that recollection.

The following poem sums up the challenge that young people face in this time of transition:

The Journey

where are you going i asked
to places i have never been
was the answer
what do you plan to do i asked
my purpose will be evident at journey's end
who has planned your itinerary i asked
its plan will be revealed at times most unlikely
why would you consent to such a vague plan i
said
i accepted the challenge
when i accepted life was the answer
(Mary Eleanore Rice, in Grana, comp.,
Images, p. 135)

The Theology of This Course

Believing is possible only by grace and the interior helps of the Holy Spirit. But it is no less true that believing is an authentically human act. . . .

In faith, the human intellect and will cooperate with divine grace. (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 154–155)

Faith is always initiated as a gift from God. A central task of being human is to discover where, how, and when God speaks to us. Catholic theology teaches us that God is transcendent but is also available to and present in every human experience. In John 14:16 Jesus promised that God will be with us forever in the Holy Spirit. To live a faith-filled life means to respond to the ubiquitous presence of God.

The response to God's presence is not a singular event. Rather, it is a growing awareness that meaning and purpose in life come from our relationship with God, often as it is manifested in our encounters with other human beings. John Shea, in *An Experience Named Spirit*, writes: "Divine love is perceived through the struggles of human love. The arms of God embrace us through the human arms that hold us" (p. 164).

Young people struggle to find a sense of meaning and purpose in life. They genuinely hunger for a deeper relationship with God and instinctively seem to recognize that only in God will they ultimately discover that meaning and purpose. They know by now that the values that Jesus taught are the substance on which one bases life choices. Through continued encounters with the Gospel and with people whose life reinforces Gospel values, young people develop a sense of mission and purpose.

Senior Year addresses some of the basic life questions that concern older adolescents, and helps them explore the connections between meaning and a life direction that is grounded in the Scriptures, the teachings of the church, and the care of our God. The course also presents the teachings of Jesus as a foundation for the personal work the seniors must complete in order to negotiate successfully the transition from high school to young adulthood.

By leading the young people to an authentic experience of God's presence in their life, *Senior Year* can become a key formational moment in their faith development. Throughout the course they are reminded that they do not travel life's journey alone. They are assured that they will leave their family, friends, and parish community with a promise of continued support and the blessing of God's guidance. As they come to recognize God's grace permeating their life, they may grow in their ability to see the rich possibilities of life as a person of faith and a believer in the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

This Course and Evangelization

In *The Challenge of Catholic Youth Evangelization*, evangelization is described as "the initial effort by the faith community as a whole to proclaim through word and witness the Good News of the Gospel to those who have not yet heard or seen it, and then to invite those persons into a relationship with Jesus Christ and the community of believers" (National Federation for Catholic Youth Ministry, p. 3). Evangelization is also the ongoing witness of the community of believers and, as such, the basis and energizing core of all the ministries in the church.

The Horizons Program is grounded in a commitment to evangelize young people effectively. Each course reflects that commitment in both content and methodology. All the courses, even those on topics that do not appear overtly "religious," explore the connection between the lived experience of the young person and Jesus' proclamation of the Good News. All the courses employ strategies that actively engage the whole person, demonstrating that religious education can be not only informative but life-giving and even fun! In other words the Horizons Program tries to be "good news" not just proclaim the Good News.

Senior Year is designed to help young people at the end of high school capture the relationships and memories that have sustained them throughout

their school years. These are the nests of friends, family, and community that have nurtured their growth and faith. As they prepare to leave the comfortable nests of high school, they struggle with the issues of meaning and purpose in life. They hunger for and need the Good News that the Gospel offers. By leading them to an authentic experience of God's presence in their life and a recognition of the power that the Good News has in framing how they live that life, you become for them an important agent of evangelization.

Through this course you also have the opportunity to show the young people how the joy and excitement they experience in this period of life are a glimpse of the joy that can permeate their life when they take the Good News to heart. This response to a loving and caring relationship with the Holy One can lead young people to discover the deeper meanings to life's great questions and can help them find the answers they search for.

Teaching This Course

A Video Resource for Teachers

The information presented in this section identifies the elements requiring special consideration when leading *Senior Year*. The creators of Horizons developed an informative video to prepare teachers to lead any of the courses in the program. The video is accompanied by a guide that summarizes the content of the tape, offers additional tips for teaching adolescents, and invites the teacher to track her or his experience with the program.

Both the video for teachers and its companion guide are included in the resources developed for coordinators of the Horizons Program. Contact the program coordinator in your parish for further information.

Preparing the Learning Environment

The effectiveness of a course such as *Senior Year* depends, in part, on the physical surroundings of and community climate among the members of the group. High school students are likely to share their thoughts more readily and respond more positively if the space is comfortable and somewhat different from a typical school setting and the atmosphere is

conducive to introspection and sharing. Here are two suggestions for creating that type of environment:

Create a good physical atmosphere. You will need a physically comfortable space with sufficient room for the participants to move around. Some sessions require the participants to spend reflection time alone. It will be easier for them to resist the temptation to visit with other participants if they have enough room to separate from one another. Comfortable furniture and living-room lighting will help create a homey feeling. A flip chart or an easel with a pad of newsprint will be helpful for many of the activities. The traditional classroom is the least desirable situation. If such a room is your only option, try using music, candles, icons, or other sensory devices to create a more inviting environment. If the only furniture is standard school desks, consider bringing in a large rug and pillows and inviting the young people to sit on the floor.

Clarify expectations. At the beginning of the course, establish among the participants an atmosphere of mutual respect. Stress the importance of listening to one another and of refraining from hurtful remarks or put-downs. When necessary remind the participants of these rules. Even a brief cruel remark can ruin the experience for a young person with an already precarious self-image. It is important for you to set up an accepting environment so that the young people feel free to be as honest and as open as possible.

Preparing the Material

Before each session read through the session plan and try to picture the processes happening in your group. You may need to make some adjustments based on your knowledge of the participants and the physical setting. Some of the activities require preparation. This ranges from copying a simple list onto newsprint to coordinating an elaborate session opening. Allow yourself adequate time to get ready.

The success of *Senior Year* depends in part on the participants' willingness to become involved in the discussions and exercises. Many of the participants will have discussed most of the course topics with their peers at some point during this school year. Because of this and because of their age, most of the participants will bring a certain depth of understanding to the course—although that depth may

not seem apparent at first. Your role will be mainly that of a discussion facilitator. Take a moment and think about how you would discuss with other adults the topics of life changes, family conflicts, and relationships. The more you work to treat these seniors like adults, the more you will help them to feel comfortable enough to share openly. Be careful, however, to keep the sessions from becoming gripe sessions where family issues are aired without the benefit of all family members being present.

All the sessions for this course include brief periods of teacher input. Some of these presentations are informational, but most are intended to bring closure to a part of the session so that the participants might understand the connections between their life issues and their faith, between themselves and God. The session plans offer guidelines for these brief talks. Spend time putting these presentations together so that they are clear and hold the attention of the participants. Where it is helpful and appropriate, do not be afraid to share parts of your own story with the young people.

Sharing Your Own Story

Every course in Horizons connects elements of the Christian faith with the life experiences of young people. As an adult you have much to share from your own life that will be of value to the young people. You have had experiences of moving on, letting go, and saying good-bye. You have experienced the excitement that accompanies any predictable changes in life. You have made the transition from adolescence to adulthood, and you have separated from your parents. Your personal faith story can provide the young people with insights on how to recognize God's activity in their own life. In other words, your wisdom may be the crucial link to making the course relevant to the young people's life experiences.

Your willingness to share your experiences will enrich this course. It will also send the message that telling one's personal story in the group is okay. When you share your experiences with the young people, you show that you trust them enough to speak from your heart. And without saying it you also invite them to do the same.

Some commonsense guidelines can help you share your story in a way that adds to the understanding of the participants but does not distract them from their own life story:

- Be brief and to the point. Remember, the young people are there to reflect on their own life story, not yours.
- Talk about your experiences as a teenager without preaching or moving into the fatal “When I was your age . . .” mode.
- Share only the things that older adolescents are emotionally prepared to handle.
- Be realistic. Talk about your struggles, triumphs, and growth over the years. This will let the participants know that self-knowledge is indeed a process. Do not mislead them into thinking that adults have all the answers. It is also unfair to suggest or imply that adolescents have no answers.
- Be honest and sincere. The young people will see through you if you are not, and your effectiveness as a teacher will be diminished.

Using Journals

Keeping a journal, or simply writing an occasional journal exercise, is a good way for young people to internalize learning, record the events of their life, keep track of feelings, or explore a topic further. Journal activities also present an opportunity for one-to-one ministry to young people. A young person might write something in a journal that she or he would not feel comfortable sharing in a group or even talking about at all. If you assign journal activities, consider taking the time to read the young people’s responses—with *their permission*—and then write in comments or words of encouragement or affirmation. Your personal attention might make a big difference to a young person who is genuinely searching for insights on how to cope with the changes that are happening in her or his life. However, also allow for the possibility that by the time young people are seniors, they may neither need nor want you to read and respond to their journal.

Senior Year includes one or more optional journal exercises for use within each of its sessions. Sessions 1 and 2 also offer optional journal exercises for young people who arrive to a session early or who want to do some journal writing between sessions. Though we strongly encourage you to consider using at least some of these activities, they are not an integral part of the course. In fact, some practical reasons can be given for *not* including the journal component. First, if *every* teacher of *every* course in the Horizons Program chose to include journal keeping, the young people would quickly tire of the activity. Second, journal keeping is a time- and energy-

consuming process for teachers. Teachers of multiple courses could become frustrated, if not exhausted, by having to monitor a large number of journals. Finally, some people simply do not like to keep a journal. It is better to encourage journal writing as a form of personal exploration for young people than to demand it of them.

Carefully assess whether the journal option is a good one in your particular situation. Consult the program coordinator and teachers of other courses. If you do decide to incorporate journal activities into your course, some nitty-gritty questions must be answered: What materials are required? Will you respond to journal entries, and if so, in what way? What will you do if a young person reveals in a journal concerns or issues that demand a response beyond your ability or your authority as a teacher? For helpful information on these and other issues related to journal keeping, consult your program coordinator.

Using Music

Some of the activities in *Senior Year* suggest using music. No activities in this course require music or suggest specific pieces of music, because cultural preferences and individual tastes differ and specific tapes, CDs, or needed equipment may not be available. But music is a central part of the world of most adolescents, and you are thus encouraged to use it in the suggested places as well as in other activities where you think that it might be appropriate. Circumstances in which music can be used effectively include the following:

Popular music for prayer. In the closing exercise for session 2, it is suggested that you ask several young people to bring in recordings of popular music for part of session 3. You might also choose to use popular music for other activities in the course. Different types of music will be popular among the young people. If you are not sure about what might work in activities for your group, ask a few young people for their advice; ask them well in advance of the session, so that they can listen for songs that will be useful. Besides helping you, this experience can be affirming for young people, who are usually thought of as learners and are not usually consulted for their expertise.

You might even consider forming a music advisory group of class participants, whose job is to listen to popular music and point out some things that

pertain to your topic. Each week this group of young people can suggest to the rest of the participants selections that can be used for prayer—and also for reflection or as a starting point for journal writing.

Background music for reflection. Some groups are easily distracted by the sounds around them. If your group has a hard time concentrating in silence, consider using background music to help the participants focus. Even for those who do not have trouble concentrating, music can alter the mood and contribute to a sense of peace and inner silence. For background music use slow, soothing instrumental selections, preferably something that is unrecognizable to the group. Labels such as Windham Hill and Narada, which are known for their alternative adult-contemporary recordings, are particularly useful for this purpose. Some classical music can also help to create the type of environment you need. Or use recordings of natural sounds, such as those produced by an ocean surf, rain forests, or running streams.

Contemporary Christian music for discussion starter or prayer. Contemporary Christian music is produced by Christian artists and comes in styles for all tastes: rock, hard rock, country, alternative, rap, and easy listening. By using contemporary Christian music, you expose the young people to an inspirational spiritual message in a form to which they may easily relate.

If you are familiar with contemporary Christian music, you probably can think of songs to introduce a discussion or to enhance a prayer service. If you are not familiar with contemporary Christian music, ask the young people in your group to help choose appropriate songs. Or visit a Christian bookstore. Many of them have an extensive music collection and a previewing area. Often their sales staff can point you in the right direction if you tell them what you are looking for.

Keeping in Touch

Young people who attend a religious education class in their final year of high school are probably attending voluntarily. They continue to come because the program and the people address some of their hungers for meaning and community. For these people, leaving the program and the parish community may be just as painful as leaving their school friends and family.

In turn, you and other teachers in the program may find yourself growing close to these young people. You may decide that you want to continue to be a support figure and a connection to the faith community. Doing so would be an affirmation of the young people and of your relationship with them. The following are some suggestions for maintaining that relationship:

- Attend graduation ceremonies.
- Send each senior a graduation card signed by all the teachers in the program, the coordinator, the pastor, and whoever else has played a significant role in the young person’s connection to the parish community.
- Around the time of an important event for each senior during the year—such as final exams, senior awards day, acceptance from a college, notification of a military assignment, or a search for a full-time job after graduation—send a card or note assuring her or him of your thoughts and prayers.
- After graduation call, write, or e-mail the young people occasionally to let them know that you are thinking of them.
- Continually acknowledge each young person’s birthday, or other special events and anniversaries.

A Note About the Optional Parent Session

An optional parent session is a special feature of this course. This session gives parents an opportunity to share some of the joys and frustrations that families experience during the senior year and to discuss some of the separation issues that arise. It also provides an opportunity to minister to families who are facing a similar transition. Ideally, the parent session is to be offered after session 2 because it uses some of the input generated by the participants in that session. However, it can be offered before or concurrently with session 2. If you choose to offer the sessions concurrently, you must recruit someone else to lead the parent session.

The parent session is supplemental to the course, and the experience of the course will not be diminished for the young people if you choose not to offer it. However, the participants’ parents will undoubtedly be interested in the content and discussion topics of this course. Therefore, if you do not gather the parents for this session, you may want to

send them a course outline and the handouts and other information offered in the session. If you do hold the session, consider sending those materials to any parents who are unable to attend it.

Using This Course as a Retreat

The content of this course lends itself easily to a two-day retreat format. In general, retreats are wonderful community-building events for any group of young people, and with this course in particular, a weekend retreat is likely to be a profoundly affirming way for parish seniors to spend some time together, perhaps for the last time.

If you want to consider using *Senior Year* as a retreat, weigh the following advantages and disadvantages:

Advantages

- Seniors are usually quite busy. However, discussions on the future, moving on, letting go, saying good-bye, and celebrating the moment are generally of high interest to them. Their interest in the topics of this course might motivate them to clear their schedule for a weekend to attend a retreat.
- This course contains some effective components of retreats—such as community-building activities, reflective prayer, journal writing, faith sharing, intense discussion, and so on.
- A retreat format can provide more time for extended formal discussions, and also informal discussions, on the topics presented in the course.
- A retreat format might allow time for using a feature-length film to illustrate some of the course content and to introduce a more in-depth discussion of the issues. For example, *Dead Poets Society*, *How to Make an American Quilt*, and *A River Runs Through It* are good films that trace the lives of young people through adolescence and young adulthood. All three films follow the growth of the characters, their pursuit of dreams, and the relationships that sustain them. (See the Suggested Resources section at the end of this course introduction for details on the films.)

Disadvantages

- An overnight retreat is a big commitment for seniors, who are generally involved in a variety of activities both in and out of school. Before scheduling one carefully check school schedules and confer with the young people about their available time. Know that if you decide to do this course as a retreat, some interested seniors may not be able to clear their schedule to attend.
- With a weekend retreat, it may be difficult to schedule the course's optional parent session.

If you choose to adapt the course as a retreat, you will need to design the retreat so that it covers the three sessions in their designated order. Its format might look like this:

Day 1

Gathering, opening prayer, and community-building activities
 Session 1: "Leaving the Nest"
 Meal break
 Session 2: "Family Ties"
 Extended journal time (using one of the journal options from sessions 1 and 2)
 Meal or snack break, and recreation
 Feature-length film (optional)
 Bedtime prayer (a combination of the closing prayers from sessions 1 and 2)
 Lights-out

Day 2

Morning prayer
 Breakfast break
 Icebreakers
 Session 3: "A Circle of Friends," steps A to E
 Extended journal time (using one of the journal options from session 3)
 Lunch break
 Memory Lights exercise, from session 3, step F, or another craft activity
 Celebration of the Eucharist or closing prayer, including the blessing ritual from session 3, step H
 Cleanup and departure

The success of a retreat depends on the availability of adult leaders. You will need to recruit help in order to manage a retreat on this course. Also check with your parish religious education coordinator before making final plans to do this course as a retreat.

Special Preparation Needs

- Before the course begins, send each participant a postcard inviting her or him to the first session. In the postcard ask each person to bring a snack or beverage to share, as well as a pillar candle at least 6 inches tall and 3 inches in diameter, with the participant's name marked on the bottom. Also procure such a candle for yourself and mark it with your name.
- Session 1 has an unusual beginning. You will need to prepare for this event, called a gathering exercise, by arranging the room a certain way, making a recording, gathering supplies, and so forth. A description of the session opening and complete instructions for preparation are provided at the beginning of session 1, under procedure step A. Be sure to allow plenty of time to organize this unique exercise.
- Session 3 includes a panel discussion with young adults who have graduated from high school within the past few years. Ideally, these should be people whom the course participants know. Contact these young adults well ahead of time to check on their availability and willingness to be a part of the panel. For details on arranging the discussion, see the section that follows this list.
- The Memory Lights candle-making project in session 3 needs preparation, including gathering materials that may not be readily available in your area. Also, it would be helpful for you to make a sample candle. Doing so will help you anticipate some of the difficulties you may encounter. The instructions for this project are listed in step F of session 3.
- Many activities in this course lend themselves to journal writing. Decide if you want to use the journal options as an integral part of the course. If you do, decide what you will use for journals. They can be anything from blank books to a few sheets of paper in folders.
- If you choose to offer the optional parent session, decide the time and location. Let the parents know about the session as soon as their sons and daughters sign up for the course. You might also want to send a reminder to the parents a few days before the session is to take place. If you cannot conduct the parent session yourself, recruit someone who can do so. If you choose not to offer the parent session, decide whether you will convey to the parents the information presented in that session and if so, how.

Session 3 Panel Discussion

The panel of high school graduates for step C of session 3 should consist of no more than four people. Try to recruit people who represent a variety of post-graduate lifestyles: maybe one or two college students, a person who stayed home and has a full-time job, and a person who is serving in the military. You may want to contact alternate panelists who can step in if those you recruit are ultimately unable to attend the session.

If you contact people who would like to be panelists but cannot be present during the session, consider these options:

- Arrange a conference call with them. You will need a speakerphone so that all the participants can hear the dialog.
- Arrange an Internet conference with them. This option will require special computer hardware and software. If you do not have the equipment or expertise to set up such a conference, ask for help from someone who does.

When you recruit the panelists, inform them that they should plan to be present for the entire session, which will last approximately 2 hours. (If you have chosen the conference call or Internet conference option for including one or more panelists, those panelists need be available only during the 30 minutes allotted for the discussion itself.) Also inform them that the participants will write questions for them during session 1 of the course. Assure them that you will send a list of those questions, along with some background information and other questions for their reference, as soon after session 1 as possible.

As soon after session 1 as possible, send the following information to the volunteers:

- a copy of resource 3–C, "Background for Panelists"
- a copy of the list compiled of the questions submitted by the participants in step F of session 1

If the panel discussion is not possible or you choose not to include it, see the alternative approaches at the end of session 3 for suggestions to replace it.

This Course and Total Youth Ministry

Additional Youth Ministry Program Suggestions

The Horizons Program includes a manual entitled *Youth Ministry Strategies: Creative Activities to Complement the Horizons Curriculum*. It contains a variety of activities and strategies organized into thematic categories and cross-referenced according to the courses in the curriculum. It includes suggestions for shortened and extended programs, off-site events, intergenerational gatherings, parish involvement, and prayer and liturgical celebrations.

This valuable resource can enhance the young people's experience of the Horizons Program and help your parish fulfill a commitment to total youth ministry. Contact your program coordinator about the availability of the manual.

Parish Program Connections

A religious education curriculum is, ideally, just one component of a total parish program in which all those responsible for the formation of young people work together with the entire parish to meet the holistic needs of its youth. *Senior Year* can be a springboard for connections with other youth ministry experiences. You might develop these connections by doing the following:

- Post photographs of the seniors in the vestibule of the church or some other prominent spot in the parish, and invite parishioners to pray for the young people and their parents.
- Together with the worship committee in your parish, plan a special recognition for the seniors and their families at a parish liturgy around graduation time. You might also plan a breakfast or lunch to follow the liturgy, hosted by the juniors.
- Announce in the parish bulletin the names of the seniors and request prayers for them and their families.
- Arrange a meeting between the parish's seniors and juniors, where the young people can share experiences and ask and answer questions.

- Encourage the seniors to serve on parish committees and to take part in liturgical ministries. This is a good way for them to give witness to the importance of stewardship of time and talents to younger members of the parish and to the parish as a whole.
- Ask some of the seniors to address the parish and share their thoughts on the effect that the parish has had on their spiritual development. This would be a good forum for seniors to express gratitude to individuals who have been instrumental in their faith growth.
- Invite the seniors to prepare a photo collage of parish activities that have been key moments in their life. For example, they might include photos of their first Eucharist, confirmation, special trips, retreats, parish celebrations, and so forth. Hang the finished collage in a prominent place where the parish gathers.

Family Connections

Each session in this course includes activities for families in an Alternative Approaches section. Also, the preceding Parish Program Connections section contains many suggestions that could involve parents. Before the course begins, you might want to send the participants' parents descriptions of these activities.

Goals and Objectives in This Course

Why Use Goals and Objectives?

Curriculums take on greater clarity, direction, and purpose if they are described in terms of their goals and objectives. This observation is based on a commonsense principle: We have a difficult time getting somewhere if we do not know where we are going. Educators who design learning experiences must identify their destination as a first step in determining how to get there. The statement of goals and objectives is a practical way to identify the desired outcomes for a program.

In the Horizons Program, goals and objectives are used in the following ways:

Goals. Goals are broad statements of what we wish to accomplish—learning outcomes we hope to achieve. The coordinator's manual of the Horizons Program provides the goals for the entire curriculum. Each course within the total program also includes a statement of its goals. The goals often have an idealistic quality, inviting the teacher to reflect on how the course relates to the personal and faith development of the young people. At the same time, the course goals are realistic, measurable, and attainable. As a teacher, at the end of the course, you should be able to look back and determine if you have in fact achieved the course goals.

Objectives. Objectives are statements that define how to get to the goals. They name the specific tasks that must be accomplished if the goals are to be achieved. Each course supplies a clear statement of objectives for each session in the course.

The Goals and Objectives of Senior Year: Last Things and Lasting Things

Goals

This course has six goals:

- That the young people explore their feelings about the "last things" of senior year and recognize the "lasting things" that they take with them into the next stage of their life
- That they recognize how family, friends, and community have supported their growth and realize the need to renegotiate some of their relationships with these advocates
- That they understand the need to be intentional about coping with the changes and stresses that affect their relationships as they prepare to move on
- That they further develop the skills necessary for making healthy transitions
- That they have the opportunity to discuss and prayerfully celebrate their achievements and challenges within the context of faith
- That their parents understand the goals and objectives of the course, and have a chance to explore the developmental tasks of young adults and share their own feelings about this transition time in the life of their family

Objectives

Each session has its own objectives, which help realize the six course goals:

Session 1

"Leaving the Nest"

- To give the young people a chance to articulate some of the feelings and experiences that are part of the last year of high school
- To help them name the nests that they are leaving
- To invite them to consider which events of this year will happen for the last time
- To help them identify the lasting things that they will carry with them in life
- To assure them of God's continuous presence and never-ending love

Session 2

"Family Ties"

- To invite the young people to explore the changes that may take place in their family as a result of the transition from high school
- To help them understand how their family relationships might be affected by the challenges of the transition
- To present twelve tasks of transition and help the young people identify the skills needed to accomplish these tasks

Session 3

"A Circle of Friends"

- To provide an opportunity for the young people to think about the positive and negative roles friends have played in their life
- To give them a chance to dialog with young adults who have made the transition from high school
- To lead them through a process of gathering memories and creating a concrete symbol of these lasting things
- To bring the course to a prayerful close

Optional Parent Session

"The End of High School: Tough Stuff for Parents"

- To help parents understand some of the dynamics of the transition from high school
- To explore the effects the transition may have on family life
- To present an outline of the course, along with its goals and objectives
- To engage parents in a prayer of thanksgiving for their children



Suggested Resources

Books for Young People

- Davis, Ken. *I Don't Remember Dropping the Skunk, but I Do Remember Trying to Breathe: Survival Skills for Teenagers*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing, 1990.
- Kimball, Don. *Who's Gonna Love Me?* Valencia, CA: Tabor Publishing, 1988.
- Neary, Donal. *The Calm Beneath the Storm: Reflections and Prayers for Young People*. Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1984.
- O'Connor, Joey. *Whadd'ya Gonna Do? Twenty-five Secrets for Getting a Life*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, Baker Books, 1995.

Books for Teachers

- Coles, Robert. *The Spiritual Life of Children*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1990.
- DiGiacomo, James. *Morality and Youth: Fostering Christian Identity*. Kansas City, MO: Sheed and Ward, 1993.
- Elkind, David. *All Grown Up and No Place to Go: Teenagers in Crisis*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1984.
- Shelton, Charles M. *Adolescent Spirituality: Pastoral Ministry for High School and College Youth*. Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1983.

Films

- Dead Poets Society*. Prod. Steven Haft, Paul Junger Witt, and Tony Thomas. Dir. Peter Weir. 1989. 129 minutes.
- How to Make an American Quilt*. Prod. Midge Sanford and Sara Pillsbury. Dir. Jocelyn Moorehouse. 1995. 117 minutes.
- A River Runs Through It*. Prod. Robert Redford and Patrick Markey. Dir. Robert Redford. 1992. 123 minutes.

SESSION 1

Leaving the Nest



Objectives

- To give the young people a chance to articulate some of the feelings and experiences that are part of the last year of high school
- To help them name the nests that they are leaving
- To invite them to consider which events of this year will happen for the last time
- To help them identify the lasting things that they will carry with them in life
- To assure them of God's continuous presence and never-ending love

Session Steps

- A. a gathering exercise and course introduction (45 minutes)
- B. an opening prayer (10 minutes)
- C. a break (10 minutes)
- D. a narrative, discussion, and exercise on memories at graduation (30 minutes)
- E. a reflection exercise (10 minutes)
- F. a closing prayer and sessions 2 and 3 preparation (15 minutes)

Background for the Teacher

Even though the young people in your group are probably excited about being seniors and looking forward to graduation, they may also be apprehensive as they approach this milestone. The opening activity in this session is a gathering exercise designed to simulate the multitude of feelings seniors have, by giving them an experience of the messy confusion, uncertainty, and chaos that they might face in the future in the work world or at college.

The young people are expected to complete the first part of this gathering exercise without your presence or leadership. They may be hesitant about how to proceed and may want to wait for adult direction. They may argue about who is in charge. On the other hand, they may negotiate this part of the exercise with ease. Whatever happens here is used in a subsequent discussion of the similarities between the exercise and life after high school.

Even though the gathering exercise requires a lot of preparation and planning, it is not difficult to set up. If at first it seems intimidating, please read it through to the end. You will likely find it a delightful and engaging way to begin this course. More important, the young people will probably love it! If it is impossible for you to complete the gathering exercise as it is described, check the alternatives at the end of the session plan for some adaptations.

Following the gathering exercise comes an opening prayer and a short break. Then comes the first installment of an ongoing narrative, with a related discussion and exercise. The story and discussion offer a way to unpack some important information about things that happen during the senior year; the exercise focuses on last things and lasting things. In this set of activities, some of the seniors may for the first time actually realize that graduation marks the beginning of final experiences and that they are facing many good-byes. During the discussion and exercise, the participants also identify the nests they are leaving and reflect on how those nests have sustained and nurtured them to this point in their life and provided them with lasting gifts. It is important not to let this set of activities focus on the sadness of the leavings but to keep it centered on the excitement of moving on.

The narrative, discussion, and exercise are followed by a period of quiet reflection on last things and lasting things. Not every senior will be excited to talk about the future. Some may want to listen

quietly to their peers' ideas about how to handle the changes they face. This reflection time gives those who prefer listening and writing a chance to articulate their own thoughts in their own way. The participants' thoughts and related memories are brought to prayer as the session concludes.

Be sure to save 5 minutes at the end of the closing prayer so that the participants can prepare questions for the panel discussion that is part of session 3, and so that you can describe the photographs they should bring to session 2.

Preparation

Materials Needed

- poster board
- markers in at least ten colors
- a class roster
- pens or pencils
- one copy of resource 1–A, “Directions for the Leader”
- a scissors
- masking tape
- two recordings of dissonant classical music
- two tape or CD players
- one portable tape player
- one blank audiotape
- a bell (or a chime or alarm clock)
- three tables for displays
- shoe boxes (or similar-size boxes), with a lid, one for each participant
- mystery items, one for each box
- small pieces of paper, about 3-by-4 inches
- paper towels, baby wipes, or moist towelettes
- newsprint
- items associated with graduation from high school
- candles brought by the participants
- a candle for the leader
- extra candles as needed
- a nest
- one copy of resource 1–B, “Opening and Closing Prayers, Session 1”
- a small table for the prayer space
- a colored cloth
- a tall pillar candle
- matches
- a box of sand (or kitty litter)
- a taper

- a Bible with markers
- snacks and drinks brought by the participants
- a graduation cap (optional)
- one copy of resource 1–C, “Memories at Graduation, Part 1”
- high school yearbooks, one for every two or three participants
- a pad of small self-stick notes
- a camera and film (optional)
- copies of handout 1–A, “Last Things and Lasting Things,” one for each participant
- a backpack
- blank envelopes, one for each participant
- index cards, five for each participant

Other Necessary Preparations

Prepare to lead this session by doing the following things and checking them off as you accomplish them:

- For step A.* Set up the gathering exercise as instructed in step A.
- For step B.* Set up a prayer space as described in step B.
- For step B.* Recruit two readers for the opening prayer as suggested in step B.
- For step D.* Recruit a reader for the narrative as discussed in step D.
- For step D.* Prepare a newsprint list of statements as directed in step D.
- For step D.* Consider preparing a humorous story from your own senior year, to use in part 2 of step D if appropriate.
- For step F.* Recruit three readers for the closing prayer as suggested in step F.
- Determine if you wish to change this session by using one or more of the alternative approaches described at the end of the session plan.

Opening Teacher Prayer

Preparation. Light a candle. While doing so proclaim the following verse: “It is you who light my lamp; / the LORD, my God, lights up my darkness” (Ps. 18:28).

Reading. Read the following passage slowly and prayerfully:

Do you not know? Have you not heard?
The Lord is the everlasting God, who created
every part of the earth, who does not
faint or grow weary.
God’s understanding is beyond fathoming.
God gives power to the faint and strengthens
the weary.
Even young people will faint and be weary,
and will fall exhausted;
but those who wait for the Lord shall renew
their strength,
they shall soar as on eagles’ wings,
they shall walk and not faint,
they shall run and not be weary.
(Adapted from Isa. 40:28–31)

Reflection. Close your eyes and picture any phrase of the passage that is echoing in your mind. Consider this message to be your gift from God today.

Prayer. Close with the following prayer. After you finish pause for a moment of silence and then extinguish your candle.

O God, I ask your guidance on my time with these young people. May I be open to loving and supporting them as they grow through their senior year. May the year be filled with excitement, and may they remain safe in your care. May the parish community be a witness of faith to them in this important time of their life. I pray also that they are open to your gift of wisdom so that they follow your will.

In the name of Jesus, whom I call Teacher, that I may always mirror his ways of teaching, I pray. Amen.

Procedure

Gathering Exercise: Mystery Walk into the Unknown, and Course Introduction (45 minutes)

If your meeting space for this course is small, consider moving to a larger space for this session. If you meet in a small room at the parish, you might move to the cafeteria or the gym. If you meet in the dining room of a home, you could move to the basement.

This exercise takes a considerable amount of preparation time but is highly effective in setting

the tone for the rest of the course. If some of the resources are not available to you, check the Alternative Approaches section at the end of this session plan for suggestions.

Before the session. Set up the gathering exercise that opens this session, by carefully following the directions below and checking off each item as you complete it. Be sure to leave yourself an adequate amount of time to gather and prepare the necessary materials.

- On poster board make a sign that reads something like this: “Attention, seniors! Something has come up, and I will be late. Please go to the room, check off your name on the class roster on the door, and follow the instructions you find there. Thanks!” Add your signature.
- On poster board make a sign that says, “Leave your pillar candle and refreshments on the floor.”
- On poster board make a poster entitled “Mystery Walk into the Unknown.” Write the following directions on the poster: “Do not enter this room until everyone has arrived. The first person to arrive is the leader of the group. If you are that person, please remove and read the directions addressed to you and attached to this poster.” Attach to the poster the directions from resource 1–A, “Directions for the Leader,” prepared as instructed on the bottom half of the resource.
- Find two recordings of dissonant classical music, each about 20 minutes in length. Some well-known composers of such music are John Cage, Arnold Schoenberg, Karlheinz Stockhausen, Edgar Varèse, and Anton von Webern. You could ask a friend who is a classical music lover for help. Or you could ask a librarian; public libraries usually carry a wide variety of recordings. Set up each recording in a separate tape or CD player.
- On the floor of the room for this session, make a path with masking tape. The path should be as mazelike as possible, leading from the door of the room to the two tape or CD players with recordings of dissonant classical music and then to the following items, in the order listed:
 - a portable tape player with a recording of instructions for the group
 - a table of mystery boxes and a poster of color nouns
 - a table with a display related to the young people’s junior high years
 - a table holding items associated with graduation from high school
 Instructions for setting up the listed items follow.

- Make a recording of yourself reading the directions from the presentation notes at the end of this session plan. Set up this recording in a portable tape player.
- Set up a table with one mystery box for each participant. For each mystery box, cut a hand-size hole in the side of a shoe box and put in the box one item that may not be immediately recognizable by touch. Depending on the item you choose, you might want to line the box with plastic. Some options for mystery items are wet macaroni, a bird’s nest, Jell-O, mud, vegetable shortening, pudding, icing, a graduation tassel, Green Slime, partly shredded steel wool, peanut butter, cotton candy, cooked rice, coffee grounds, dried flowers, and pieces of shredded wheat. Near each box place a small piece of paper, about 3-by-4 inches, and a pen or pencil. Somewhere on the table place paper towels, baby wipes, or moist towelettes.
- On poster board make a poster listing ten nouns for colors, printing the nouns in corresponding colors. For example, print the word *red* with a red marker, the word *blue* with a blue marker, and so forth. Label this side of the poster “Side 1.” On the back of the poster, list ten nouns for colors, printing them in noncorresponding colors. For example, print the word *red* with a green marker, the word *blue* with an orange marker, and so forth. Label this side of the poster “Side 2.” Place the poster behind the table containing the mystery boxes.
- Set up a second table. On newsprint make a list of movies, television shows, video and computer games, and songs that were all popular five years ago. Your public library probably carries almanacs and other resources that provide this type of information. On a piece of poster board, make a sign that says, “The sights and sounds of your junior high years.” On another piece of poster board, make a sign that says, “What will be on this display five years from now?” Place the list and both signs on the second table.
- Set up a third table. Place on it a cap and gown, a graduation announcement, pictures of someone’s high school graduation, and anything else associated with graduation from high school.
- List on newsprint the following headline phrases:
 - Chaos and confusion
 - Messy unknowns
 - New ways of seeing
 - Fleeting popularity
 - Rapid changes

1. Well before the participants are scheduled to arrive, post the “Attention” sign at or near the entrance to the building in which you are to meet for this session, and post a class roster with a pen or pencil, the sign about the participants’ candles, and the “Mystery Walk” poster on the door to the room for this session.

About 5 minutes before the participants are scheduled to arrive, begin playing two recordings of dissonant classical music simultaneously in the room for this session. Then leave the room and allow the young people to go through the gathering exercise without your presence, as outlined on resource 1–A and in the presentation notes at the end of this session plan. You may want to set up the prayer space for step B during this time. However, be sure that you can hear the cheers and applause that are elicited at the end of the tape of instructions you made for this gathering exercise. When you hear the cheers and applause, enter the room, bow, and acknowledge them. If the young people do not know you, introduce yourself.

2. Engage the participants in a discussion around the following questions:

- How did the gathering exercise go?
- What problems occurred as the group moved through the process? Why did these problems occur?
- What was easy to accomplish? Why?
- What was difficult to accomplish? Why?
- What are some feelings or thoughts that you shared with your team?

3. Display the newsprint list of headline phrases that you made before the session. Comment that the headlines reflect what happened in the gathering exercise, and also perhaps how the young people are feeling about their senior year and even the future. Ask the participants to use the headline phrases as a guide and to share their thoughts about how the gathering exercise connects with their senior year and the future.

4. Use the following ideas to summarize this exercise and to introduce the course material:

- Point out that even though high school graduation is a time of joy, it can also be a time of concern. For more than twelve years, the young people have generally known what they were supposed to be doing with their life and what to expect from school. As graduation nears they are approaching a time when they will make their

own decisions and will probably be doing things that are unfamiliar to them.

- State that the young people are approaching a time of life when they may experience mixed messages about the future, a lack of direction, confusion, and frustration, as well as joy and excitement. Point out that it is normal to have a mixture of experiences going on at once. Explain that *Senior Year* gives them a chance to talk about their feelings, look at changes in their important relationships, and develop skills that may help them in the next few years.
- Encourage the participants to be open with their concerns. Assure them that when they voice a concern or a question, they are probably expressing someone else’s thoughts in addition to their own.
- Finally, note that this course also helps put the experiences of the senior year within the context of faith, by inviting the participants to bring their questions, fears, and joys to prayer.

5. Instruct the participants to move into the prayer space, picking up their candle from outside the room and taking it with them.

B Opening Prayer (10 minutes)

Before the session or during step A. Set up a prayer space that is separate from the room where the gathering exercise takes place, perhaps in the church or a wide hallway. Just inside the entryway to this prayer space, set out a pillar candle for yourself and several extra pillar candles for participants who did not bring one. Put a nest in a spot where it will be handy to you in part 1 of this step. Place a small table in the center of the prayer space and cover it with a colored cloth. On the table set a tall pillar candle in a shallow box of sand (or kitty litter) that is large enough to hold all the candles. Also place on the table a taper and a Bible with markers.

Recruit two young people to be readers. Give the first reader the opening prayer from resource 1–B, “Opening and Closing Prayers, Session 1.” Mark the Bible from the prayer table at Eccles. 3:1–8 for the second reader.

Note: You can purchase an inexpensive nest in a craft store. Or you can make a nest out of a square piece of cloth, such as burlap, or even a washcloth. Roll the edges of the cloth toward one another to form the nest. Secure the edges by using safety pins on the underside of the cloth.

1. As the participants enter the prayer space, tell them to take a candle from those you have provided, if they do not have one. While they are doing this, pick up your own candle. Then direct the young people to form a circle around the prayer table, sit down, and set their candle in front of them. Lead them by taking your own place and setting your candle in front of you.

When everyone is settled, call the group to silence and ask the young people to think about all that has gone on in the session thus far. After 15 seconds or so, give the first volunteer the nest you put in the prayer space earlier and tell him or her to proceed as directed in the opening prayer from resource 1–B.

2. After the tall pillar candle is lit and the volunteer is back at her or his place, tell the young people to pick up their candle and hold it in front of them. Ask them to think of words that describe how they are feeling about their senior year. After a few seconds of silence, invite the young people to bring their candle to the table; take a taper and light their candle from the tall pillar candle—the symbol of God’s presence; and place their candle in the box filled with sand. If the participants know one another well, you may want to ask them to share one of the feelings that came to mind during the silence.

3. After everyone has placed their candle in the box, invite the second volunteer to read Eccles. 3:1–8 from the Bible on the prayer table.

4. Close the prayer time by making the following comments in your own words and adding your own thoughts:

- Recognize that most young people experience a number of feelings during their final year of high school. These emotions range from enthusiasm and excitement to fear and grief. The reading from Ecclesiastes assures us that God provides a time for everything—every feeling, every experience, every change. Suggest that the participants think of the prayer that they just experienced as a symbol of their confidence that God is ever present and available to them, lighting the path along the way.

Allow a moment for reflection, and then direct the participants to extinguish their candle. Also extinguish your own candle and the tall pillar candle.

C Break (10 minutes)

During the break serve the snacks and drinks brought by the participants.

D Narrative, Discussion, and Exercise: Memories at Graduation, Part 1 (30 minutes)

Before the session. Recruit a volunteer to read aloud the story from resource 1–C, “Memories at Graduation, Part 1.” This person should be someone who can read the story in an engaging manner. Consider asking a young adult from the parish to perform this task. If possible, send the narrative to the volunteer a week or so before the session so that he or she has an adequate amount of time to prepare.

List on newsprint the following statements:

- There are some things people will miss when they leave high school, and some things they will not miss.
- Many seniors will be sorry to see their last year of high school end; others will be glad when it is over.
- It is scary to think about the unknowns ahead.
- The last year of high school is one of the most exciting times in a person’s life.
- When a person graduates from high school, he or she leaves behind many “nests.”
- Many “last things” happen during the senior year. So do many “lasting things.”

1. Gather the participants in the meeting space. Tell them that throughout the course they will be hearing about a group of seniors much like themselves. The story of this group will be told in the form of reflections by members of the group at graduation time. Ask them to listen carefully to hear how the characters’ experiences match their own.

Consider asking the person who prepared the reading to put on a graduation cap before beginning the narrative. When everyone is ready, direct the reader to begin the story from resource 1–C.

2. Display the newsprint list you prepared before the session. Comment that the statements on the newsprint are generally true about the senior year. Ask the participants to point out some ways in which each statement was dealt with in the narrative. You may need to read certain passages again to jog people’s memory. You may also have to explain

some of the statements, such as what it means to leave a nest. Keep the focus of this discussion on the excitement of the future, not the sadness of leaving things behind. You may want to interject a humorous personal story from your senior year to help keep the session light. Allow about 10 minutes for discussion.

3. After discussing the final statement from the list, about last things and lasting things, display a collection of high school yearbooks. Comment that high school is a time filled with memories that are captured forever in the pages of yearbooks. Most people keep their high school yearbooks well into adulthood, in an attempt to preserve the memories.

Ask the young people to think about the kinds of things that are published in yearbooks or written in them by friends. These written statements include some of the seniors’ last things—that is, experiences they will have for the last time. They also include some of the seniors’ lasting things—that is, people, events, and experiences that they will carry with them forever.

Divide the group into teams of two or three. Give each team a yearbook and six small self-stick notes. Direct the teams each to find three examples of last things that are documented in their yearbook and to mark each one with a self-stick note. They should do the same with three examples of lasting things. Allow 5 minutes for this process. After time is up, invite the teams to share their findings with the rest of the group.

Note: You may want to take photographs of individual people while they are working. These photographs can be used in the Memory Lights exercise in the final session of the course.

4. Close by commenting that in this narrative, discussion, and exercise, the young people focused on the people, events, and experiences of other people’s senior year of high school. During the closing prayer for this session and throughout the rest of the course, they will have opportunities to focus on the last things and lasting things in their own life.

E Reflection Exercise (10 minutes)

Distribute a copy of handout 1–A, “Last Things and Lasting Things,” to each participant. Suggest that the young people move to a place in the room where they can be alone with their thoughts for a few min-

utes. Tell them that as they think about the questions on the handout, they should consider all aspects of their life right now. Their list does not have to be restricted to school. It can include family, parish, work, and outside activities.

While the young people are writing, ready the prayer space for the closing prayer. Place a backpack on the prayer table, and make sure that the Bible, the nest, and the tall pillar candle are nearby.

F Closing Prayer, and Sessions 2 and 3 Preparation (15 minutes)

Before the session. Recruit three volunteers. Ask one to read John 14:18–20. Give the other two each a part of the closing prayer from resource 1–B.

1. When you are ready to begin the closing prayer, gather everyone in the prayer space around the prayer table. Tell the participants to bring their handout with them. As they gather give each person a blank envelope. Direct the young people to put their handout in the envelope and address the envelope to themselves. The envelope should not be sealed. Give the Bible, the nest, and the tall pillar candle each to the appropriate reader. Light the candle.

Make the following comments in your own words, and add your own thoughts as they seem appropriate:

- Direct the young people’s attention to the backpack. Remind them how people use backpacks every day to carry things they need, like books, clothing, food, and even laptop computers. When someone cleans out their backpack, it is not unusual to find things that have been “lost” in there for a while. Sometimes such a discovery brings a smile of satisfaction or relief. Sometimes it brings a memory of a time of sadness or frustration.
- Note that the backpack in the prayer space is a special one because it will store their memories. These will be recollections of the kind that are fun to retrieve in the future. They will be reminders of the people, experiences, and events that are important to the participants. All these memories have been part of God’s gift to them, signs of God’s activity and presence in their life.

2. Ask the person who volunteered to read John 14:18–20 to do so at this time. After the reading the Bible should be placed on the prayer table. Ask the other two volunteers each to read their part of the

closing prayer as directed on resource 1–B, beginning with part 1 of the prayer.

3. Invite the young people to come forward one by one and place their unsealed envelope in the backpack. Note that their willingness to place their envelope in the backpack is a sign that they are willing to let God be in charge of their life during this time of transition. Ask them to extend their right arm, palm facing down, over the backpack in a sign of blessing after they place the envelope in the backpack.

When everyone has put their envelope in the backpack, say a simple prayer, or ask the young people to pray silently for God’s grace in their journey.

4. Close by repeating the final statements that were spoken by the two readers and inviting the young people to respond “Amen” to each statement, as follows:

- *Leader.* Remember: God is a nest that you never have to leave.
All. Amen.

Leader. Remember: God’s light will always shine for you.

All. Amen.

After the final response, extinguish the tall pillar candle.

5. Before dismissing the young people, take care of two organizational details:

- Give each person five index cards. Tell the participants that at the final session of *Senior Year*, they will have a chance to talk with people who have made the transition from high school. Tell them to think of five questions they would like to ask someone who has made that transition and to write each question on a separate index card. When they are finished, collect the questions.
- Ask the young people to bring to the next session one or more photographs of their family, including photos of grandparents and other relatives. Note that they will also be asked to bring photographs for session 3, and that in session 3 they will use one or more of their photographs for a project. They should keep this in mind and bring at least one photograph that does not need to be returned in its original condition.

After the session. Complete the following tasks:

- Collect the participants’ and your candles and store them for use in sessions 2 and 3.
- Compile a list of the questions submitted by the participants in step F, and prepare a copy for each panel member for session 3.
- You may want to call the young people or send them a postcard reminding them to bring family photos to the next session.
- If you took photographs during this session, get the film developed before the final session.

Alternative Approaches

After reading the session plan, you may choose to do some things differently or to make additions to an activity. Consider your time limitations first and then these alternative approaches:

For step A. If you can find only one tape or CD player to use for dissonant music, play just one recording at a high volume. Or, if you cannot find two recordings of dissonant classical music, choose any two recordings in contrasting musical styles. For example, you might use one opera recording and one bluegrass recording. Try to avoid using music that is popular with the participants in your group, because it might distract them.

For step A. Instead of making and posting the “Mystery Walk” poster and recording the instructions for the gathering activity, recruit another adult to play the role of a robot who leads the exercise and gives all the instructions. From a half piece of poster board, make a sign identifying this person as a robot, attach a string to the sign, and ask the person to wear it around the neck. Prepare a sheet of instructions for leading the activity—adapted from resource 1–A and from the presentation notes at the end of this session plan—and give it to the robot on a clipboard. Five minutes before the participants are scheduled to arrive, station the robot at the door of the room where the gathering exercise takes place. Explain that when the young people have gathered, the robot—using a robot voice, of course—is to instruct the group to complete the tasks that are posted on the door. As soon as these tasks are completed, the robot should follow and read through the directions on the clipboard.



Journal Options

Within the Session

Step E can be done as a journal exercise. Simply write the first six questions from handout 1–A on a sheet of newsprint, omitting the seventh one. Then, instead of distributing copies of the handout, post the newsprint list of questions. During the reflection time, ask the participants to write in their journal their answers to the questions. In part 1 of step F, distribute an index card to each person, along with an envelope. Ask the participants to list on their index card three or four helpful things they learned during the session. Then continue step F as outlined in the session plan, telling the young people to enclose in the envelope their card rather than the handout.

Before or Between Sessions

- Encourage the participants to spend some time thinking about the people who have meant a lot to them over the years. Suggest that in their journal they list the name of each person and assign that person a fictitious award, such as Most Important Teacher, Outstanding Secret Sharer, or Most Fun to Goof Off With. For each person they should also write a short presentation speech outlining why that person deserves that particular award.
- Suggest that the young people list in their journal the nests they are leaving. They should note specific instances of how each nest has provided support or a challenge during their senior year.
- Propose that in their journal the young people write about the God moments that have been part of their senior year. They might do this in simple prose or poetry. Or they could do it in the form of a yearbook that is documented with pictures; details of events; listings of hopes, dreams, and memories; and anything else that might go into a yearbook.

For step A. If you do not wish to construct a mystery box for every member of the group, construct just one or two boxes for the whole group. For each box provide a small slip of paper for every participant. Also provide a blindfold for every person. Place all these items on a table. Alter the instructions recorded for the group to reflect this change. When the group gets to the mystery box table, the leader distributes the blindfolds, and the participants secure them around their head. The participants are to be silent throughout the following procedure. The leader guides each group member to a box and allows him or her to feel the contents. After everyone has had a turn, the leader tells the participants to remove their blindfold, write on a slip of paper what they guess is in the box, and leave the slip of paper on the table. If you constructed two boxes, the leader then guides the group to the second box and repeats this procedure.

For step D. Ask a volunteer to record the narrative from resource 1–C before the session. This person should have a voice that is clear and smooth and should be able to hold the interest of the young people.



Family Connections

- Suggest that families share favorite stories and memories as follows:
 - All family members might share stories of an older relative or family friend who has had a positive effect on the life of the family.
 - Grandparents, parents, and older siblings might talk about their own experiences as seniors in high school.
 - Family members might talk about transitions they have experienced and what they learned from them.
- Reviewing old family yearbooks is a good way to find out more about the high school experience of grandparents, parents, and older siblings. Encourage the participants to try to locate old family yearbooks and go through them.

DIRECTIONS FOR THE LEADER

Congratulations! Because you are the first person to arrive, you are the leader of the group until I come. Your job is to organize the group and complete the following tasks. Do not allow anyone to enter the room until everyone has arrived and checked their name off the class roster. However, do not wait any longer than 5 minutes after the scheduled start time for the class. When all the group members have checked in or 5 minutes after the scheduled start time—whichever comes first—open the door to the room and begin the **Mystery Walk into the Unknown**.

- ✘ Enter the room together.
- ✘ Find the masking tape path on the floor. Organize the group as a train, and turn around and follow the path backward.
- ✘ When you reach the two tape or CD players that are playing music, turn them off. Move to the portable tape player.
- ✘ When you get to the portable tape player, turn it on and tell the group to follow the directions on it. Occasionally the directions will tell you to do something for the group, such as hold up a poster. Take this tape player with you as you continue along the path.

Make one copy of this resource. Cut apart the copy along the broken line and discard this part of it. Fold the remaining directions for the leader in half with the blank side of the paper on the outside. Write, "First person to arrive," on one blank side of the folded directions (or put the folded directions in an envelope so marked) and tape the directions to the poster entitled "Mystery Walk into the Unknown."



Opening and Closing Prayers

Session 1

Copy this resource and cut apart the copy along the broken lines.

Opening Prayer

Carry the nest you have been given to the prayer table and gently place it on the colored cloth.

After you do so, read aloud the following words:

O God, most holy one, creator of all that is good. You have provided many nests in our life. These nests have offered us safety, security, and a place to learn. Be with us as we prepare to leave these nests and move on toward adulthood.

Light the tall pillar candle in the box of sand.

Then return to your place in the circle.

Closing Prayer, Part 2

Hold up the tall pillar candle that you were given at the beginning of the prayer time. Then read aloud the following words:

The Scriptures tell us that God will light our lamp and with God there is no darkness. Let this candle be a reminder that we are never alone. God has promised always to be with us, guiding us and lighting our path. Let us remember that even when we feel we are surrounded by darkness—now or in the future—our God will be there, as bright and as illuminating as one candle in a darkened room.

Remember: God's light will always shine for you.

Place the candle on the prayer table beside the backpack and return to your place.

Closing Prayer, Part 1

Hold up the nest that you were given at the beginning of the prayer time. Then read aloud the following words:

We will leave our comfortable nests after graduation. We will leave our school and our friends. We may leave our family and our parish community. Those nests have provided us with security and safety for our entire life. But there is one nest we will never have to leave: that is the nest that God can become for us. As the Scriptures tell us, God will never abandon us and will be with us wherever we go.

Remember: God is a nest that you never have to leave.

Place the nest on the prayer table beside the backpack and return to your place.

Jason was tall enough to look down the line of people and see his twin brother, Jerod, at the opposite end of the stadium. Even though they were marching in from different sides of the field, they would end up sitting side-by-side. It did not seem possible that they were actually graduating from high school. Jason gave Jerod their special winking nod, and Jerod grinned back at greeting. Jason looked down at the small girl behind him. Carmen went to Saint Joseph's Church too. In fact, amazingly, five seniors from Saint Joe's youth group would end up sitting by one another: Jason, Jerod, Carmen, Linda, and Anthony. Thirty-two seniors who attended Saint Joe's were graduating tonight, and they had all been pretty active in church. Father Kevin had even said during last Sunday's homily that they were a group that had certainly made a name for itself, not just at the parish but also in their schools!

As the first strains of *Pomp and Circumstance* began, Jason found himself thinking back over the year. Gosh, it seemed like it had just flown! He would never forget the last home football game. He and Jerod had played defensive end. The coach had called

them his bookend brothers! After the game all the seniors had gathered in the middle of the field, and the entire crowd had stood and serenaded them with the school anthem. All he had had to do was look at Jerod, and they both had started tearing up. They had found each other in the crush and enveloped each other in a big hug. Soon all the senior players had joined them. "I sure wish Dad was here," Jason had whispered. Jerod had just nodded. What a night, that last game! And what a night, now! You would be proud of us, Dad, he thought as he looked up into the sky.

As the line of graduating seniors moved to the twenty-yard marker and marched toward the bleachers, he remembered how the standing ovation the crowd had given the football team at the end of that last game had brought all the senior players to tears. It's funny, he thought, how something as exciting as senior year and graduation can be sad too. He leaned down toward Carmen and said, "I sure will miss this place, won't you, Carmen?"

"I won't," said Linda, who was marching behind Carmen. "I've had enough of tests and homework and teachers telling

you what to do. I can't wait to get out of here!" Linda was glad to be graduating. A year ago she had thought about dropping out and starting to work full-time. Her grandparents had talked her into staying in high school, but she really had not been into school. She had studied just enough to get by. In fact, she had hardly been able to wait each day for the sixth-period bell so that she could get to work. She wanted to be on her own, and she needed her job to help her do that. She felt lucky, actually. The manager of the Rest Your Soles downtown store had told her she had a good chance of being hired as assistant manager when the mall branch opened. She liked selling shoes, and she was a good organizer. If she were made assistant manager, she thought, she'd be able to get her own apartment and move out. "I can't wait!" she said. "I am so happy to be finally graduating!"

Jason shrugged and looked down at Carmen again. She smiled and nodded as if they had shared a private joke. She sure has the prettiest brown eyes, he thought. He leaned against Carmen's shoulder briefly and wondered what she was thinking.

Memories at Graduation, Part 1, page 2

Carmen smiled at Jason's brief touch, and thought about the time on the church retreat when he had shared his struggle with dealing with the death of his dad. She had begun to like him a lot after that. He is really such a big jock, she thought, and I'm a little nervous around him, but he sure is fun to be with, and he certainly isn't afraid to share his feelings. Most guys don't do that easily.

She glanced at the long line of seniors and thought, It's going to be real hard to get to know people in college as closely as you do in high school, especially because here you are with each other every day. Because she'd be staying home and attending classes at the local community college, things would really change for her. I won't get a chance to know people like this at all, she thought. She looked up at Jason and responded, "Yes, Jason, I am really going to miss this place."

The line stopped in front of the stands, and the seniors turned toward the crowd. Carmen and Linda bumped shoulders and laughed quietly at the barrage of flashes

that strobed at them from hundreds of cameras. It was really an exciting night!

"Gosh," said Jason, "I feel as famous as Anthony!" The three laughed and looked over at Anthony, who was standing beside Linda. He just shook his head and laughed back at them. Anthony had gotten a lot of local notoriety ever since he had played for the governor's inauguration. The town paper had even stated that he was the Top High School Trumpet Player in the Nation! Everyone still wondered how it had come up with that title. He was good, but . . . the nation? "I might be famous, but I hope I don't mess up my solo tonight," he whispered back to the others. "It's my last solo in high school," he continued, "and it will be really important to do good on it and to get through it."

Anthony thought about the first time he had been asked to play a solo. It had been at church. He had been twelve years old, and no one, including himself, had known how good he was going to be. Between playing at church and school, he had had that trumpet to his mouth almost

every day for the last six years. Yes, it's going to be hard to get through that solo tonight, he thought as he gripped his horn more tightly, but I can't wait to get on with life and really see how far I can go on this thing. He often wondered if he would ever be good enough to play a solo with a well-known symphony orchestra. It's scary to think about the future, he thought. It's so safe here in this school and this community, and we are considered important and special here. But I'm ready!

The line began to move again, and the four friends made their way up the stadium steps, turned, and entered their assigned row. As Jason came to his seat, he quickly shook hands with his twin, who was now beside him, and the whole row of seniors sat down and turned their attention to the podium in front of them. The principal began her welcomes, and the five friends each realized that it was indeed the last time that they would ever sit together at this high school!

LAST THINGS and LASTING THINGS

Which of the characters in the story most reminds you of yourself? Why?

What are some of the “last things” you will face as you move out of high school?

What are some of the things you will miss the most?

What are some of the things you will not miss?

What are some of the “nests” you will be leaving?

What are some of the “lasting things” you will take with you?

What are three or four things you learned in this session that will be helpful for you to remember?