

This book is just what we need in Catholic youth ministry to put our values and beliefs about family into practice in our parish communities. The stories, humor, and examples in this book make me feel at ease in trying new ways to reach families. The research and resources give me the tools I need to really make the connection. I can't wait to tell people about this practical and enjoyable resource that will improve our ministry with youth and their families.

—Tom East, director for the Center for Ministry Development

Filled with wisdom, real-life stories and practical tips, this book is a must-read for every youth minister. It's also an easy read, due to Leif Kehrwald's conversational style and natural inclination toward encouragement and support. If you are new in ministry, this book will be a career saver. If you're a veteran, you'll be thrilled to have all these insights, references, and bits of information in one place.

Reading this book was like having a conversation with a good friend. I found myself nodding my head in agreement, highlighting quotations, and bookmarking favorite pages. I kept wanting to read just one more chapter, until I finished the book! Leif has made a wonderful contribution to the fields of youth ministry and family ministry.

—Lisa-Marie Calderone-Stewart, EdD, associate director of the Milwaukee Archdiocese Office for Schools, Child, and Youth Ministries and author of eighteen books with Saint Mary's Press

Youth Ministry and Parents

Secrets for a Successful Partnership

Leif Kehrwald

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To the Catholic community of Saint Patrick's, Spokane, Washington.

To the parents of teens at Saint Pat's, who had enough parenting left over to finish raising me.

To all those who remember the Youth House, especially those who lived there, worked there, and shared their lives with teens in Hillyard.

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No book is a solo effort.

I am forever grateful to my editorial colleagues and mentors at Saint Mary's Press for encouraging me to write this book and for offering ideas, suggestions, critique, and affirmation along the way.

A great portion of the "practical" value of this book comes as a result of my interviews with folks on the front lines of youth ministry. I am grateful to the following people for their candid and expert words of insight: Craig Allan, Ann LaBeck, B. J. Levad, Donna McIntosh, Maryelyn Scholz, and Cathy Walz.

A brainstorm hit me one day last winter: "This book needs a foreword." So I e-mailed my friend and colleague Michael Theisen, in Rochester, New York, to ask whether he would write it. He responded by saying he had never written a foreword but would give it a shot. I believe it is the best foreword I have ever read, and it just may be the best part of this book. **Don't skip the foreword!** Thank you, Michael.

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Foreword

by Michael Theisen

One of the first truths acknowledged by those of us involved in faith formation is that learning is a lifelong experience. And the longer our own ministerial life gets, the more *experience* seems to play a part in our own understanding of ministry. I began in youth ministry as a newly married twenty-something in Richmond, Virginia, in the 1980s, when youth ministry was just beginning to find its own identity within the Catholic Church. In those early years, I often found myself wondering why so many of the teens' parents failed to "get it" when raising their adolescents. The teens I ministered to and with would often complain about the parental injustices they had to endure, or they would share how misunderstood they felt by their parents. I listened and, being closer to their age than their parents' age, understood very clearly what the problem was.

Inevitably I grew older and, in the process, gained more experience as both a parent and a youth minister. Soon I approached that magical line that brought me closer to the age of the parents of the teens rather than to the age of the teens themselves. I could see my solid understanding of the problems between parent and teen graying, along with my hair. I began to see more clearly from the perspective of the parent generation and discovered a new reality in my ministry: parents just don't get a fair shake from many youth ministers or youth ministry programs. Many parish programs tend to largely ignore

parents, or at best put up with parents while sponsoring wonderful and exciting programs for the youth. The efforts, often engaging for the young people, actually contribute to the divide in understanding between parent and teen.

It was no mistake that my epiphany occurred simultaneously with my own children's rise into the world of adolescence. After two master's degrees (in social work and in religious education, no less), I thought I had the parenting of teens all figured out. I thought it was as easy as all the parent education talks I had given over the years. But life, like parenting, is puzzling at times, and it certainly does not always follow the patterns and suggestions found in college textbooks. I experienced firsthand my own teens' "rebellion" from parental authority, their cries of "unfair" at our rules, and I was forced to combat their moans and groans about going to church and to religious education classes. How could they? These were *my* children, and I *knew* what teenagers were like; after all, they were *my* job, *my* ministry.

Through the reality-based education in life that I endured, I learned that I don't have all the answers to the questions of life and faith. And neither does any parent, teen, or youth minister, for that matter. I also realized that we all—parents, teens, and youth ministers—can find a greater and more comforting wisdom when, together, we share our experiences, including our failures and frustrations, and work together toward the next step instead of reaching for the elusive fulfillment of the final answer.

The necessity for making this parental journey together was wonderfully illustrated for me during a parish-based program on communication that I sponsored for all the ninth graders and their parents. Ninth grade is one of the key transitional years for parents and teens (as are the first year of junior high and the last year of high school), and getting the two generations together to talk, and more importantly to listen to one another, is usually a gift in and of itself for all involved.

During this particular program, the teens were reporting some of the areas they wanted their parents to re-examine in light of the teens'

growing maturity and independence. One girl had been rather vocal throughout the program about how "unfair" her mother was with rules, especially regarding curfew and dating. When it came time for the teens to share their list of issues along with their specific concerns, the girl could not wait to tell the group of about 200 how restrictive her mother was with allowing her to date. She complained that all her friends were able to go out on dates by themselves and did not have to come home until midnight; she wanted her mom to fall into line with the "rest of the world."

I glanced over at the girl's mom sinking down in her seat. I knew she was a single mother who was struggling to keep up with the lives and needs of her three children. She, like so many parents these days, lacked the support of another parent to help her during those difficult hours of parenting and decision making that often occur after a full day at work and before the dinner table has been cleared and the dishes washed. The mother seemed defeated by her outgoing and adventurous daughter. Her aloneness and helplessness at that moment were easy to sense.

I brought the daughter's concern to the gathered community, because she had already made it fairly public by that time. I asked her whether she would like to see who else in this room was allowed to go out alone on dates. Of course the girl, confident in her stance, couldn't wait for the poll. I asked for a show of hands from all her peers who were living by her desired standard of dating. All hands remained down. In that moment the fallacy of "the rest of the world" was revealed, and the mother discovered, perhaps for the first time in a long time, that she was *not* alone. This communal affirmation had an immediate impact upon the mother. She perked back up in the pew. Renewed by the fact that she wasn't way off base, that she wasn't the only one, as her daughter had convinced her to believe, she discovered that she was indeed on the right parenting path.

It became very clear to me at that moment that effective ministry has more to do with supporting the communal journey of the family

than with solving problems, planning programs, or seeking what might bring the biggest turnout. We need to walk this journey together as parish ministers, parents, and teens because the road is long, with many twists, turns, and divides that force families to choose among competing directions, usually without the proper signage to guide them. Who wants to make that trip alone? Who can? Yet many of us parents and church ministers have tried. And though some early success may be reported, the final tally is usually less than desirable. It is time for those of us in the church to embark on an intentional and direct partnering with parents to effectively minister to our young people.

We *know* that it takes a village to raise a child, and we *know* that it takes a whole church to effectively minister to our youth, but we have yet to fully incarnate those ideals as a church. Youth ministers are likely to say, “I’m here for the youth” or “When I get the time, I’ll hold a parent program.” We start in the wrong place and then end up wondering why parents aren’t helping out more or why they aren’t making the youth-group activities a higher priority in their family’s life. The fact is that we, the youth ministers, are the ones who took the wrong turn early in our efforts and in selecting our own paradigms by thinking that it was *our* job to form teens in faith.

When I was a social-work student in graduate school, I found myself having to write the word *family* quite often, so I developed a shorthand symbol for the word that involved writing a capital *F* and circling it, which helped me keep up with my note-taking. Several years later, after getting into parish ministry, I discovered I was writing the word *faith* a lot. At first I resorted to the (F) technique that had served me so well, until one day I went home to look over my notes and came across the following sentences:

“Every teen’s (F) is dependent upon his (F).”

“The (F) of a teen impacts his (F).”

What statement did I mean to write? Which came first—faith or family? In examining the statements both ways, each had a significant truth to it. I immediately began to see the problem with my shorthand as well as with my paradigm of ministry to young people. It was indeed a moment of (F). I had been going about my ministry to youth as if I were responsible for their faith formation. I had placed the parents in the grandstands—as somewhat involved but ultimately as passive fans cheering on the work of our youth ministry team. It took some adjustments and some increased teamwork, but I gradually discovered the truth that was there all along: *You cannot have (F) without (F)*. Should it be any other way?

I often find myself saying, “If only I knew then what I know now, I would have done such a better job with . . .” I’m sure you can complete the sentence yourself. Who among us would not want to have the insight and experience gleaned from the accumulation of all the mistakes and missteps made over the years? We would all be more effective at parenting, at ministering, and at faith formation. What we’ve needed to move us out of the rut of “my ministry” and toward the embrace of lifelong faith formation is a guide, someone with both the experience and the words to bring parents and youth ministers together in an effective ministerial alliance. As you turn the pages, my guess is you’ll discover what I did—that a guide has arrived.

I hope you feel as affirmed and challenged as I did upon discovering the wisdom that Leif offers all of us in the church village. His insights, gleaned from years of trial and error as a youth and family minister, as a parent, and as a diocesan director, provide the reader with a necessary resource for moving toward shared responsibility for the lifelong faith formation of the entire family system.

It’s not uncommon for people to mistakenly refer to the *foreword* of a book as a *forward*. A *foreword* is an introduction to a book, while *forward* means, among other things, “to advance to the front or toward the future, to move ahead.” I believe both definitions are at

work here. With Leif's stories and insights serving as both model and motivation, it's obvious that the only way to move forward in our ministry with young people is by partnering with parents, which in the end is good news for the whole Church.

Forward, indeed!

Introduction

Back in the Good Ol' Days

I became a youth minister while I was still a youth. In my second year at Gonzaga University, in Spokane, Washington, a local pastor convinced me and three of my buddies to establish a youth group at a suburban church. In his mind we had all the necessary traits: boundless energy, willingness to do nutty things, some musical talent, a love for kids (heck, we were still there ourselves), and an emerging, maturing faith. Apparently we had the right combination of ingredients, for within a few short months, we had teens coming out of the woodwork for the “youth Mass” and weekly youth group meeting.

In the eyes of those kids, the four of us could do no wrong. Their adoring smiles stroked my ego like nothing has since. It was a heady experience for us. We invited the kids to sing, and they sang; we asked them to engage in a crazy icebreaker, and they did it with gusto; we asked them to consider opening their hearts to a relationship with Jesus, and many of them did that as well. God seemed so alive in those kids and in me. I was surely called to youth ministry.

By the time I reached my last year in college, I was working nearly full time for another church in Spokane and living in a parish-owned house dubbed the Youth House. Kids would drop in at all hours, day or night, just to hang out, watch television, play Ping-Pong, or perhaps seek some guidance. From the Youth House we ran the youth ministry and faith formation programs for junior and senior

high kids. I was newly married, and my wife, Rene, and I lived and worked side by side while we finished our degrees. The year was 1979.

Though I found it easy to connect with kids, those creatures called their parents confused and intimidated me. I repeatedly fumbled and stumbled when encountering them. One parent cornered me after a Sunday worship, demanding to know why her son wasn't able to recite the Lord's Prayer. "When are you going to teach the traditional basic prayers to all these teens?" My throat dried up, my mind went blank, and not a single word escaped my lips. All I could do was nod my head. I know now that I was more interested in being popular with the kids (my perceived job security) than I was in teaching them things I didn't think would interest them.

On another day Don, a youth group regular and a junior in high school at the time, popped his head in the door of the Youth House and said, "If my mom calls, tell her I just left here and I'm walking home." Sure enough, an hour later Don's mom called for him. I said, "He just left to walk home." Turns out Don had told his mom he was going to the Youth House to hang out (good thing), but instead he went to the arcade to blow his allowance (bad thing), and he got me to cover for him (stupid thing). Like I said, in those days I was still pretty much a youth myself.

One more story: A girl in the youth group—I'll call her Jennifer—appeared to be hit extra hard by adolescence. She didn't seem happy, wasn't popular, was always seeking attention, and was generally out of sorts most of the time. In my idealism and ministry fervor, I decided Jennifer simply needed Jesus living in her heart. Who better to facilitate that than me? So, amidst all my other responsibilities and relationships, I made Jennifer my personal ministry project. At first I thought I could have her squared away with Jesus by May of her sophomore year, but she proved to be a tougher nut to crack.

I did not give up. Throughout Jennifer's high school years, I made it a point to reach out to her by including her in activities and conversations with others, attending her cross-country races, and

offering spiritual counseling to her when appropriate. Jennifer and I became pretty good friends, and though I was employing all the right ministry tactics—meeting her on her turf, and so on—I always felt like something deeper was going on with Jennifer that she wasn't sharing with me.

Several years after Jennifer graduated from high school, and after Rene and I had moved out of the Youth House and into other ministries, we received a wedding invitation from another girl who had been in the youth group with Jennifer. Her wedding served as a reunion for many of the old youth group gang.

At the reception I found Jennifer and struck up a conversation. I asked her all the usual things: How's college? Do you have a job? Do you have a boyfriend? Then I asked, "How are your folks?" With a sad look in her eyes, she told me that her parents had split right after she graduated. Their separation and divorce were sort of a relief to her because the two of them fought loud and long throughout her high school years. All this was news to me.

For three years I had made a special effort to reach out to Jennifer, to attend to her spiritual needs, to be a friend and adult role model, to connect with her in the places important to her—school, sports, band, and so on. But it hadn't even occurred to me to connect with Jennifer in the key arena of her home life. It never crossed my mind to explore her relationship with and feelings about her parents. It never struck me as strange that she never talked about her folks.

By the time of the wedding reception, it was too late, of course, for me to be of much help to Jennifer. Quite frankly she didn't need help anymore. She had worked through the issues and moved on. All those years when I thought I was helping her, Jennifer was merely tolerating me.

Parents Make a Difference

While I was doing youth ministry in the late '70s and early '80s, kids complained about their parents just as they do today. Back then I

sided with the kids and tried to strategize how to advocate against their parents. Memories of my having similar complaints about my parents were still fresh and clear. Parents were obstacles to maneuver around in order to have the kind of youth program I envisioned. *Get Out of My Life, but First Could You Drive Me and Cheryl to the Mall? A Parent's Guide to the New Teenager* (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2002), by Anthony E. Wolf, is a book for parents of young teenagers. This title fits the attitude we youthful youth ministers had toward parents in the Youth House days. Drive, bake cookies, and write checks when we need money, but otherwise get lost. We know teenagers better than you do.

It never occurred to me that parents could be our partners in fulfilling our vision of evangelization and faith formation for those kids. It's no secret that parents are crucial to the faith formation of their children and teens; therefore I contend that parents are crucial to effective youth ministry efforts. Put quite simply a working partnership with parents will yield a substantially more vibrant and effective youth ministry program.

"Youth Ministry: Attitudes and Opinions" (Winona, MN: CMMS, 2000), a recent study commissioned by Saint Mary's Press, shows that you, the youth ministry leader of today, likely understand this need for partnership far better than I did twenty-some years ago. First, you are probably older than I was then. About 84 percent of youth ministers we surveyed in the study are over thirty, and 56 percent are over forty. This means you are likely a parent yourself. Second, of the youth ministers we surveyed, the top-ranked need for youth ministry resources was on the topic of parents' understanding and being involved in adolescent faith development. The fifth-ranked need for resources was on the topic of exploring family-based youth ministry. The field of youth ministry has evolved into a more collaborative process involving parents, families, and other ministry and community efforts that impact the lives of teens.

About This Book

Some of the questions I failed to ask in my youth ministry days might be in the forefront of your mind:

- How can I connect with parents of teens?
- How do I get more parents involved in our youth ministry program?
- How do I get more involved in the lives of parents and families?
- How do parents impact the faith growth of teens today?
- How do I effectively and *practically* partner with parents to nurture the faith growth of teens?
- How do I assist parents in their role as the primary faith influence in the lives of teens?
- How do I find time to work with parents when I have so many other responsibilities?

If those questions are on your mind, this book is for you. In the chapters that follow, I explore what a working partnership between youth minister and parents looks like. In my recounting of interviews with other youth ministers, I highlight what congregations are doing well in their efforts to connect with parents, and I offer suggestions for replicating those strategies.

I explore the various relational issues, concerns, and myths between parents and teens. From a human development viewpoint, I look at the tasks related to adolescence (teens) and midlife (parents). Those tasks are amazingly similar, making for an interesting, and sometimes tumultuous, adolescent family life. It is vitally important to anchor your understanding of adolescent development in the context of family life-cycle growth. For good or ill, the family nearly always has the most influence on the formation and growth of teenagers.

I also explore how the family impacts the conversion, spirituality, and faith of the teenager—and vice versa. Parents and families tend to resist change—even positive change—because it upsets the balance of roles and relationships. When a young person discovers God’s gracious activity in his or her life, responds to it, and begins to grow into a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, we celebrate this young person’s conversion. But all too often, his or her family, at best, has no idea how to handle this change and, at worst, makes efforts to change the young person back to the way he or she was. If your youth ministry efforts are working, then young people are responding to God’s gracious activity in their lives. If you expect those changes to be lasting, you need to help families embrace the spiritual growth you encourage. I explore several specific strategies for doing just that.

Last, I explore what I call the mutuality of involvement. It’s only one side of the coin when you ask how you can get parents more involved in your youth ministry program. You must also ask how you can be more involved in the lives of parents and families. You must win the right to be heard. Before parents will embrace your agenda, they must know that you understand their agenda. In the same way that effective youth ministry must meet kids on their turf, you must let parents know that you understand the struggles and concerns they have. You must also recognize that parents know their teenage sons and daughters better than anyone, and you can do this by creating an atmosphere for them to share their knowledge and concerns about their kids and by responding with sincerity.

Each chapter concludes with nuts-and-bolts suggestions for youth ministry programming. You will be able to apply these ideas as you learn them.

As a youth minister, you opened this book and read these pages, perhaps seeking answers to a certain set of problems and challenges in your ministry. The goal of this book is not to solve those problems. Rather my goal is to give you a new and better set of challenges in your ministry. I am confident that as you read these pages you will see

the paramount importance of partnering with parents in your ministry with teens. I am also confident that as you incorporate some of the suggestions scattered throughout this book at least some of your original problems and challenges will fade into new and exciting invitations for bringing about the Kingdom of God.