

saint mary's press

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Strategies for
Nongathered Ministry
with Young People

Christina J. Semmel

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The publishing team included Laurie Delgatto, development editor; Lorraine Kilmar-tin, reviewer; cover image © iStockphoto / ictor; prepress and manufacturing coordi-nated by the production departments of Saint Mary's Press.

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Printed in the United States of America

3826

ISBN 978-0-88489-928-0

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Semmel, Christina J.

No meeting required : strategies for nongathered ministry with young people / Christina J. Semmel.

p. cm.

ISBN 978-0-88489-928-0 (pbk.)

I. Church work with youth—Catholic Church. 2. Church work with youth. 3. Non-church-affiliated people. I. Title.

BX2347.8.Y7S455 2007

259'.23—dc22

2006032455

Dedication

This book is dedicated to John Roberto, who is a constant source of inspiration and motivation to me as well as to thousands of other youth ministers. His influence on the field of youth ministry will be felt for generations to come.

Author Acknowledgments

Thanks to my wonderful husband, Rich, who gave me continuous support throughout the writing of this project; to Laurie Delgatto, my editor, who helped me be more concise and creative; and to the youth and adults of Saint Thomas the Apostle Parish in Crystal Lake, Illinois, with whom I was privileged to journey for over fourteen years.

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Introduction

When a great crowd gathered and people from town after town came to him, he said in a parable: “A sower went out to sow his seed; and as he sowed, some fell on the path and was trampled on, and the birds of the air ate it up. Some fell on the rock; and as it grew up, it withered for lack of moisture. Some fell among thorns, and the thorns grew with it and choked it. Some fell into good soil, and when it grew, it produced a hundredfold.” As he said this, he called out, “Let anyone with ears to hear listen!” (Luke 8:4–8)

Did you ever wonder what kind of farmer this was? It seems he scattered the seeds willy-nilly on rocks as well as dirt, on clay as well as fertile soil, among weeds as well as cleared land. At first glance, you might think he was probably not a very good farmer. He certainly wasn’t a very discriminating sower!

Most of the time when we hear or read commentaries on this parable, the emphasis is on the different ground conditions, and the reflection is on what kind of soil we are. We have also been trained to hear this parable and recognize God as the sower. If we ponder the parable just a bit further, we also recognize the persistence of this sower. He just kept throwing out that seed. God never gives up. God is continually sowing.

In this parable of God’s grace, we hear that some of the seeds don’t grow at all, but some take root and begin to grow in unexpected places. (And with a little follow-up or additional care, they might prosper even in adverse conditions.) Throughout all of salvation history, God has been a sower of seeds. We, made in the image and likeness of God, should do no less.

Nongathered Ministry

Nongathered ministry strategies provide church communities and their leaders opportunities to reach out to young people with the Good News of Jesus Christ through a variety of means that do not require face-to-face contact. Nongathered ministry allows us to reach youth who do not attend programs (or even church). And nongathered strategies allow us an additional form of contact to those who do. Through the use of nongathered ministry strategies, we can scatter the seeds of the Reign of God in a wider area than do traditional gathered youth ministry efforts. When the Evangelists wrote down the stories about Jesus that would be shared with people they would never meet, they were practicing a form of nongathered ministry.

The parable of the Sower and the Seed is a good Scripture reference for those of us attempting to do nongathered youth ministry. Like the seed in the parable, sometimes our efforts produce growth, and other times conditions for growth just aren't right. But, by scattering the seed in a wider area, we are reaching some young people who might never come to a single youth ministry event or even identify themselves as members of a parish. By using as many ways as possible to spread the Good News, we partner with God to make it possible for the seed to grow and prosper in the lives of so many more young people than just those who attend our events.

What You'll Find in This Book

Instead of lamenting about the young people of the parish who rarely (or never) attend youth ministry programs, *No Meeting Required: Strategies for Nongathered Ministry with Young People* offers creative ways to reach all the young people of the parish. Through nongathered ministry efforts, we can let all the young people in our communities know that God's love (and, for that matter, our love) is not contingent on their showing up at an event.

As ministry leaders, we are called to reach out to all the young people of our communities. But let's face it—no matter how good our programs may be, we must acknowledge that not all young people will be attracted to the youth ministry events and gatherings we offer. Does a young person have to attend programs and events in order for the Church and its leaders to effectively reach out and minister to and with him or her? The answer is a resounding no. Through energetic implementation of creative nongathered strategies, youth ministry can effectively reach out to all young people in the community.

No Meeting Required provides ideas for reaching out to young people without gathering them or requiring them to do anything in return. The strategies in this book are organized around the eight components of comprehensive youth ministry as outlined in the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' document *Renewing the Vision: A Framework for Catholic Youth Ministry* (1997). Those components include advocacy, catechesis, community life, evangelization, justice and service, leadership development, pastoral care, and prayer and worship. The ideas can be used as they are presented or can be the springboard for your own creativity and adaptation.

The strategies are not meant to be implemented solely by the parish director or coordinator of youth ministry. Any kind of effective youth ministry effort requires a variety of people. Nongathered strategies are no exception. Each of the strategies in *No Meeting Required* can be implemented by an individual, the whole youth ministry team, other parish staff members, volunteers, or concerned parishioners.

A Word of Caution

Appropriate and healthy relationship boundaries are real concerns when adults interact with young people. Heightened public awareness of child protection issues reminds us that we must ensure that safe and healthy relationships are maintained between adults and young people who interact. In fact, all dioceses have specific guidelines for adults who work with young people. Criminal background checks and references

for those engaged in ministry are some of the tools that ensure the quality of the adults working with young people.

There are several practical guidelines to keep in mind:

- Be cautious about reaching out to young people who have not invited contact. At a minimum, be in touch with parents and obtain permission to contact their young person via e-mail, phone, or other means.
- If a young person (or his or her parents) requests that you refrain from contacting him or her, honor that request.
- Remember that one-on-one meetings with a young person should always be held in a public area.
- It is always a safe practice to have at least two adults in an area where youth are present.

Some Final Thoughts

Saint John Baptist de La Salle reminded us: “Be convinced of what St. Paul says, that you plant and water the seed, but it is God through Jesus Christ who makes it grow, and brings your work to fulfillment” (*Meditations by John Baptist de La Salle*, p. 438). Inherent in nongathered ministry is the uncertainty of what is happening at the other end of the efforts. And, to be honest, sometimes we’ll never know. But one thing is certain: If we don’t even try to scatter the seeds, there is no chance for the possibility of growth. Utilizing nongathered ministry strategies requires trust in the Spirit and grace of God. It means being convinced that God wants and is pursuing all young people and, through the astounding wisdom of God, we are called to be instruments in that courtship even if we never meet some young people face to face.



Chapter 1

Getting Started

This chapter provides the stepping stones needed for parishes to develop and implement an effective nongathered ministry for and with young people. Included are some suggestions for administrative tasks that should be completed before a successful nongathered approach can be launched, as well as some strategies that overarch all eight components of a comprehensive youth ministry.

Create a Database of All Youth in the Parish

Nongathered youth ministry requires you to be aware of and know how to contact all the young people in the parish. To do this, you will need a comprehensive list of all the middle school and high school parishioners. This should include young people who are active in youth ministry programming as well as those who aren't, and young people who do attend liturgy regularly as well as those who don't. Such a list can be compiled from public information or from parish materials to which you have approved access as a parish employee or volunteer. Your list might include such information as a young person's name, address, phone number, school, year of graduation, date of birth, e-mail address, any other contact information (cell phone numbers, fax numbers, Web sites, blogs, and so on), as well as other personal information you can obtain (extra-curricular activities, interests, talents, friends, pastoral concerns, and so on).

Obtain Names from Parish Records

Two of the best sources of information for compiling a comprehensive list of youth are the parish secretary and the parish census. Review

parish records for the names of registered parishioners whose birthdays fall within the parameters of youth ministry constituents (middle school and high school age). If the records don't include this information, make a request that that information be added to make the records more useful to youth ministry. Parish computers should be able to sort parishioners' information this way. Be willing to err in the direction of including some people who may be too young or too old. Their names can be taken off the list later.

Obtain Yearbooks

The yearbooks of the middle schools and high schools in your area are great sources of helpful information. Make arrangements with the local schools to receive these books annually. You may have to pay for them, but the cost is well worth it. Many schools now have their yearbooks on DVD, which makes the information even more accessible. Yearbooks can give you valuable information about the talents and activities of some of the youth of the parish. You can find out who has musical talent (choir, band, orchestra, or musicals), who is active in any of the sports programs, who is interested in social concerns (global awareness clubs, service clubs, or multicultural clubs), and who would be a good speaker (speech, drama, and debate clubs). Don't overlook young people involved in other extracurricular activities whose interests and talents can augment a variety of youth ministry and parish-wide efforts. Because the yearbooks list all the young people in these various activities, you can also get an idea which church-active youth might know which church-inactive youth.

Obtain Names from the Director of Religious Education and the Parish School Principal

Obtain the names and other information about last year's fifth, sixth, seventh, and eighth graders from the director of religious education and the parish school principal. Some of those names will duplicate the ones

you receive from the parish secretary, but you may get additional and more current information on those young people. Both the religious education program and the school may also include young people from families that are not formally registered in the parish.

Keep Current with Parish Records

A comprehensive list is good only if it is kept current. Each month parishes experience families moving out of the area and new families moving into the parish. Make arrangements with the person in the parish who is responsible for keeping parish records up to date to include you on the routing list of people who receive this information. Arrange for a monthly report or for copies of the records to be sent to you so you can add or delete names of young people from your list.

Get Online

Make arrangements for youth ministry to have its own Web page, as a subpage of the parish's main Web site. The Web page name should be easy to find through a search engine. If you are not familiar with how to set up or update a Web page, find someone who will volunteer to be a Webmaster for you. One of the most important things about a Web page is to keep it up to date. Also be sure to include the Web address on parish mailings, in bulletins, and so on. Finally, make sure there is a place on the page where users can e-mail a contact person for further information. Be certain someone is assigned to regularly check and respond to these messages.

Obtain a Bulk Mail Permit

Make sure your parish has a bulk mail permit for those times when you want to send out information via the United States Postal Service. Most churches have these permits, but make sure you are familiar with the regulations and restrictions on their usage and comply with them

when sending out mailings. If you are unfamiliar with the regulations and restrictions, talk to someone at your local post office who can help you understand how bulk mail permits work. Sending flyers, newsletters, and other information by bulk mail is significantly cheaper than first class but usually requires a little additional lead time.

Use an Automated Phone Service for Information Messages

Check the phone system at the parish to see if there is an extension number you can use to provide callers with a prerecorded message on information about youth ministry. Alternatively, if the parish has an unused phone line, it can become the youth ministry information phone number that young people call just to receive information. The idea is to provide a system whereby callers can call the youth ministry office at any time and receive updated information without having to talk to a person. This allows active families to verify times and dates, and it allows youth a nonthreatening opportunity to check out youth ministry opportunities. As with the youth ministry Web address, this phone number or extension number should be widely disseminated.

Distribute Youth Ministry Magnets

Have small magnets (about the size of a business card) imprinted with contact information about youth ministry. Include the parish name, address, phone number, e-mail address, and Web site. Distribute the magnets to young people and their families with a calendar of events or when you mail some information out to all the youth on the comprehensive list. Include the magnets in welcome packets for all new parishioners. Young people are more likely to keep a magnet than a piece of paper, and the magnets work well for holding information on the family refrigerator or in a school locker.

Obtain Business Cards

Have business cards with your name, title, church name, address, phone numbers, e-mail address, and Web site printed. This is the standard way of exchanging information among adults and professional colleagues. Use business cards to network with other professionals, to give to parents, and to send with correspondence to adults.

Answer E-mail Messages in a Timely Manner

Be sure to answer e-mail messages as soon as possible. If you hope to have young people and parents read and respond to your e-mail messages in a timely manner, make sure you do the same.

Get to Know Local and Diocesan Reporters

Get on a first-name basis with a reporter or two at the local newspapers and at your diocesan newspaper. In some large cities, this may mean the neighborhood editor or the religious editor. In some communities, there may be several local publications. Whatever the choices, do some research and determine who the best contacts are for getting your articles published in the paper. Use these contacts not just for publicity on youth ministry events but also to publish informational articles on adolescent issues or items of interest to young people. Once you have established a working relationship with editors and writers, you may find that newspapers are a great way to reach out to young people.

Obtain School Calendars

Make arrangements with local schools to receive school calendars. An initial calendar is usually distributed in August, listing the holidays, institute days, exam days, and other significant events. Most athletic calendars are available before the start of each season, showing home and away games and who the competitors are. Periodically throughout the

year, additional dates, such as dates for Homecoming, Prom, sports banquets, and school plays, are added.

Because the events that happen at school are important parts of young people's lives, it is good ministry to know when they are happening. Use the school calendars to decide which school events you and other ministry leaders will attend. Check school dates before you plan youth ministry events. It just makes sense not to compete for the attendance of young people when at all possible.

Make Your Name Known

As you embark on developing nongathered ministry, it is important that your name be known so that when you reach out to young people, they know who you are. Much of this recognition will come as you implement various nongathered strategies, but it is important to start with the basics. Be sure your name and title are included with those of the rest of the staff in the youth ministry newsletter, in the parish bulletin, in the parish handbook, on the parish Web site, and in any other publication the parish distributes that lists staff members.

Wear an Official Name Tag

Whenever you attend events or programs off campus—at the schools, at community centers, at service agencies, and so on—wear an official name tag that shows your name, title, and church. This will help young people and their families recognize you in non-church situations.

Negotiate for Space in Parish Publications

Negotiate for regular space in the youth ministry newsletter, in the parish bulletin, and on the parish Web site. Submit articles regularly and by deadline. Don't just use the space for publicizing upcoming events or reporting successes; use it for information, reflection, catechesis, pastoral

help, and prayer. If well done, your articles will draw young people and other parishioners to read them regularly.

Build Up Your Resource Library

It is essential for you to stay current on youth issues and revitalize your efforts with creative ideas for comprehensive ministry. Use books and magazines to give you ideas or help you generate ideas of your own. Make resources available to other youth ministry leaders and to parents of young people. Likewise, subscribe to good youth ministry journals and magazines and become familiar with good ministry Web sites.

Get on the Mailing Lists of Ministry Publishers

Receiving mail from reputable publishers is a way of staying current on youth issues. Book publishers and magazine editors devote a lot of time to researching current concerns and trends. Just browsing the topics and the scope of current publications and articles is a quick way to stay current on the field of youth ministry and the issues and concerns of young people and the people who care about them.

Develop a List of Resource People

Develop a list of resource people, such as speakers, counselors, service providers, people with specific talents or connections, and community leaders. Add to the list as you get to know parishioners, the parish, and the wider community. Ask for suggestions from other staff members, other youth ministry leaders, and those with whom you network. Jot down names of community leaders from newspaper articles, research names of service providers, and note the names of coaches and school teachers. Keep the list current. It can help you with a wide variety of administrative strategies, from referrals and planning to recruiting and training.

Join a Ministry Support Group

No ministry strategy, gathered or nongathered, will be effective if you feel burned out or discouraged. Join with other youth ministry leaders in your area to share ideas, brainstorm on problems, collaborate on strategies, and generally support one another. If there is no such group in your area, start one!



Chapter 2

Advocacy

This chapter presents a variety of nongathered strategies for the component of advocacy, including strategies for advocating on behalf of young people and strategies for empowering young people to be their own advocates. Ideas on how to help form a positive image of youth, how to uncover and address specific youth concerns, and how to help foster better parenting of adolescents are explored. There are also suggestions for nongathered strategies for political action and for teaching young people to be advocates.

Write Articles on Adolescence

Many parishioners look to you as the expert on youth issues. Write articles about adolescence for the youth ministry newsletter, the parish bulletin, or the parish Web site. Also, research community organizations that publish regular newsletters and ask if you can occasionally provide an article or column about young people. Besides the local newspapers, try the Chamber of Commerce and community organizations such as the Jaycees, Rotary, Lions Club, Kiwanis, garden clubs, hospital auxiliaries, and single-parent groups. Large businesses and corporations often have in-house newsletters for their employees and customers. Smaller communities often have newsletters from the mayor, the township office, the school district, or other government officials and organizations.

Write articles about adolescent development, facts about today's adolescents, and "good news" stories about young people in the community and submit them to the editors of the newsletters. Such information can foster a better understanding of adolescence and can change the way people in the community view and treat young people.

Create a Brag Bulletin Board

One of the simplest ways to let the parish know about the good things the youth of the community are doing is to create a bulletin board covered with photos, newspaper clippings, and original articles about all the good things young people have accomplished. Include such things as community-based service projects, scholarship awards, sports achievements, extracurricular activities, and Scout awards. Suggest on the board that parishioners congratulate or thank these young people when they see them. When adults stop a young person in the mall or at a fast-food restaurant to say they saw his or her accomplishment on the church bulletin board, it will send a message to the young people that the church knows them and appreciates their efforts and accomplishments.

Write a “Youth You Should Know” Column

Write a regular column that recognizes young people who quietly serve in their school, church, and community through special efforts or volunteer programs. Talk to parents, teachers, coaches, Scout leaders, catechists, and heads of local service organizations in the community to find out which young people are active in making the community a better place and in helping others. You may be surprised to learn how many of the church-inactive youth are living out Christ’s command to be of service to one another through mentoring, tutoring, coaching, and volunteering at hospitals, shelters, food pantries, and other social-service agencies. Remember to ask permission from the young people and their parents before you publish such a column.

Create “Do You Recognize Me?” Fliers

Create “Do You Recognize Me?” fliers to post in various locations in the parish center or education building (similar to missing persons fliers) that challenge community members to see Christ in all young people. Use pictures of teens and short biographies, including their names

and any interesting facts that connect them to the Body of Christ. Be sure to obtain parental permission before publishing information about young people.

Volunteer to Give Presentations About Adolescents

Volunteer to give presentations about youth and youth concerns at staff meetings, parish council meetings, meetings of community organizations, meetings of parenting groups, and so on. Your enthusiasm and love for youth can be contagious. As parents, church leaders, and other adults share with youth what they have gleaned from your presentations, the young people of the community will become aware of you as one of their strongest advocates.

Be Intentional with Inclusive Language and Images

Publicity is essential to youth ministry. Events are advertised before they happen and successes are reported afterward, all in an attempt to attract more young people to the Good News of Jesus Christ. However, the words chosen and the visual statements made with the photographs and other images used to promote or represent youth ministry, the Church, or young people also send a message beyond the information about the event. Ensure that the words and images you use let young people know the Church is interested in them. Be intentional about being inclusive with ethnic, gender, and physical differences in the materials you send out to young people.

Include All Youth in World Youth Day Celebrations

In the United States, World Youth Day is celebrated annually on the Thirtieth Sunday of Ordinary Time (around the end of October). It

presents great opportunities for parishes to demonstrate that they value and appreciate the young Church of today.

Invite the pastor to write a letter to the youth of the parish, stressing the gift that they are and his hopes for them. Copy the letter and send it to every young person in the parish. Alternatively, have the pastoral council write a declaration affirming the Church's belief in young people and expressing appreciation for their gifts and talents. Distribute the letter to the youth.

Initiate an “Everyone Has a Story” Column

Propose to the editor of the parish bulletin the idea of a regular column called “Everyone Has a Story” or something similar. He or she could interview young people each week about their stories—who they are and what is important to them about their faith. Remember to get permission from parents before publishing such information about young people.

Network with Community Youth Advocacy Groups

Get to know the other community organizations and agencies that act as youth advocates. Become familiar with the specific youth issues they address and what their philosophies and strategies are. When appropriate, offer to work with them in advancing a youth concern or addressing a youth issue.

Let parishioners know what agencies are out there working on behalf of young people and what resources are available for young people and their families.

Find out who the leaders of other community youth-serving agencies are and get to know them. Find out their areas of expertise and their strong points. Offer your areas of expertise and suggest you work together and share resources. Learn to share strengths and combine

efforts for more effective community responses to the concerns of the area youth.

Write Letters to Parents About Youth Concerns

When something happens in the local youth community, good or bad, make sure the parish parents know about it. Write periodic letters as issues arise. This is a particularly effective strategy when there is an issue of great concern that all parents should be aware of, or when a crisis or tragedy affects a large number of young people. Be sure to get the facts about the concern, and make sure your letter reflects a Christlike attitude toward the issue. Parents often appreciate accurate information and a Christian perspective when they prepare to help their children deal with a tragedy or concern. Remember, prepared with the facts and reflection tools, parents can offer powerful support and advocacy for young people.

Sponsor a “Things to Do” Column for Young People

One of the universal complaints of young people is that there is nothing to do in their town or neighborhood. It can be difficult for young people to think creatively of entertainment options when they feel mired in the throes of boredom.

Research a variety of options in your area for things young people can do, by themselves and with friends. Work with the local newspaper to write a regular feature on things young people can do in the area. (This might be an especially good feature in the summer.) Research programs at YMCAs, Boys and Girls Clubs, libraries, parks, and craft and hobby stores. Write about area ice cream parlors, movie theaters, unique stores, museums, seasonal festivals, and hobby clubs. Look into local attractions and recreational options like nature centers, arcades, roller rinks, sledding hills, or bowling alleys. Provide suggestions on how young

people may be able to get to these activities—driving directions, public transportation options, carpooling, a short walk or bike ride, and so on. Suggest events they can organize themselves, such as scavenger hunts or theme evenings of movie watching. Be sure to include some options they can do on their own, like journaling, model building, stargazing, or reading.

Support Peer Mediation and Conflict Resolution Programs at Schools

Though some school districts have begun peer mediation or conflict resolution programs, many have not. Show support and interest in having such programs available in the local school district. If the schools do not have these kinds of programs, work with school officials to begin one. Helping to establish or support such programs in the local schools is a great way to advocate for youth and to empower and involve them in socially responsible problem solving.

Include Youth Events and Concerns in Prayers of the Faithful

Invite the entire parish community to pray together for specific youth concerns. Make timely suggestions to the person in the parish who writes the weekly petitions. Don't just write prayers for the youth going on retreat or service mission. Help write prayers for such things as the beginning of school, Homecoming, midterms and finals, Scouts, teams in sectionals, spring break, Prom, and graduation. Be sure to write petitions when a specific tragedy or crisis arises in the youth community, such as the death of a classmate, the arrest of a coach, or violent acts of gangs. Any young person who hears the prayers, or hears about the prayers, will realize that the parish is concerned about the lives of the young people in the community.