

AFFIRMING THEIR

FAITH

DISPELLING OLD

MYTHS

Affirming Their Faith, Dispelling Old Myths: Ministry with Young Adolescents is dedicated to the young adolescents learning their faith in Roman Catholic parishes now and in the future, and to the young adolescents who may discover or deepen their faith because a parish embraced its ministry with youth.

Author Acknowledgments

When I was a young adolescent, I went on a retreat that focused on helping the other youth and me discern our work in life and in the Church. I made a commitment to work with religious education. From that point, the path seemed quite straight and logical, but life does not permit a straightforward road map. Luckily, my path included a number of wonderful guides along the way. I want to thank the various priests who helped me grow as a leader in Catholic and religious education: Fr. James Kramer, Fr. Edward Erbe, and Fr. Bill Connell. I also had tremendous help in learning how to be a part of the teaching community of faith from the Sinsinawa Dominican Sisters.

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Ministry with
Young Adolescents

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Introduction

The Purpose for Parish Ministry with Young Adolescents

The involvement and participation of parish members of every age signal a vital and alive parish. From Baptisms to funerals, every sacrament and liturgy connects parish members from their evolving stages of life to their passage to eternal life. Each parishioner, confirmed or not, moves along this spiritual journey through study, service, and prayer. Although every individual wrestles with different issues through each phase of his or her growth and spiritual development, the early phases of adolescence offer the most dramatic physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual changes and challenges they will encounter in life. Young adolescents need to experience every aspect of their faith journey with the firm guidance of adult leadership and mentoring and through study, service, and prayer. Parishes must include multidimensional programs for young people to help them learn, guide their social responsibilities, and create strong personal and deepening relationships with God.

Throughout this book, the terms *early adolescence* and *young adolescent* mean the period of growth between childhood and the years often referred to as high school. *Early adolescence* refers

to the stage of life, while *young adolescent* refers to the individual going through the stage. Both terms refer to young people ranging in age from about ten to thirteen.

For each young person, the early adolescence phase of life begins and ends uniquely. For most girls, this phase may begin with physical changes to their bodies at age eleven but possibly a year or more earlier or later. For young adolescent boys, physical changes might not occur until age thirteen or fourteen, give or take a few years. In the United States and in many other westernized nations, cultural influences, such as fashion, music, and the media, may encourage young people to encounter adolescence well before any physical changes to their bodies begin.

Recent research on brain development shows changes in the adolescent brain that are more rapid and extensive than at any other phase of life except early childhood. In other words, although many people recognize the importance of careful education from birth through age six, few realize that the next best time for brain development and learning is adolescence.

The combined information on adolescent growth and on development informs and supports any parish's attention and efforts toward building young adolescents' spirituality.

A Focus on Youth Equals a Focus on the Future

Traditionally, parishes have invested in a school or a religious education program to ensure that children learned their faith. However, parish literature, Catholic magazines, and catechists' meetings are filled with stories of young people drifting away from the parish and the faith once they complete the sacrament of Confirmation.

Young people complain that the liturgy is boring and that beyond religious education, their parishes offer little for them to do. Many parishes offer a youth Mass, and although such liturgies are popular, some fail to provide what young adolescents seek. Generally, early adolescence is a period of searching for meaning. Young teens want to be a part of something larger than them, but they also want to understand how they fit into the world. They want to know whether what they know and what they are able to do matters. Further analysis of those poorly done or failed youth Masses might reveal mistakes in achieving a balance between adult and youth leadership. For example, some youth Masses fail to include young people in the various

responsibilities necessary for Eucharistic liturgy. Adults may dominate every part of the Mass, from the choir or instrumentals to ministries of hospitality or lecturing. Other youth Masses founder because the young people are overwhelmed in assuming adult responsibilities for leading and coordinating liturgies with little guidance, training, and support.

These examples illustrate the delicate equilibrium the parish must achieve in ministry with young adolescents. It is important for parishes to allow its young people to lead and follow, as well as succeed and fail, as they mature. Each parish must find ways to attract young adolescents and at the same time lead them toward shouldering responsibility and developing more self-control and less self-indulgence. Parishes have to provide some of what young people want, but give more of what they need.

What do young adolescents really want? Is it anything a parish can offer? The happy answer is yes. For most young adolescents, the biggest issues involve their identity and their need for belonging. The happy coincidence is that parishes need people to belong, and more importantly, that parishes offer a variety of ways to explore one's identity. Parishes and young adolescents are a match made in heaven, and like any relationship, this match needs some work and adjustments from both parties.

As your parish evaluates its programs with the youth, you may find that your approach is lopsided in the type of programming offered. In the hopes of forming young people who grasp the truths of their faith, your parish may be providing too much study and not enough service and prayer. Or, because of a desire to channel youthful energy, your parish may be centering most youth experiences in service activities. The development of a young person's spirituality requires opportunities for service and intellectual study, and a fruitful prayer life.

Your parish may discover that well-meaning adult mentors are not sufficient for guiding young people. Well-meaning adults might be sympathetic to the challenges of early adolescence, but they may not be ready or able to handle the emotional, intellectual, social, and spiritual needs of those in their early teens. Your parish must help young people by providing well-prepared adults. Well-prepared adults have the knowledge and skills to address young adolescents' emotional, intellectual, social, and spiritual needs. Well-prepared adults provide more than an empathetic ear to the turmoil of adolescence. Well-prepared adults guide young adolescents on their spiritual journeys.

Workbook Format

Affirming Their Faith, Dispelling Old Myths addresses ministry with young adolescents through an interactive format. This interactive style provides you with information and then requires you to think immediately about the ways the information affects your lives. The workbook format asks you to respond to the information presented and then apply it to your unique situations on two levels:

- in your own life surrounded by young people
- in your parishes as they focus on the community's younger adolescents

Readers' Awareness

Chapter 1 provides good news about the developmental needs of young teens and preteens and highlights their readiness to learn about their religion and to develop a relationship with God. Each subsequent chapter addresses a myth about young adolescence and offers ways to ward off the occasional unpleasant and unexpected moments that a child in the midst of the turmoil of new growth might create. The information about young adolescent development may require you to rethink your assumptions about being a teen and perhaps relive some memories from your own youth. However, the information should push you further into thinking about how members of your parish might feel about young adolescents as well as how your parish's adolescents might feel.

Parish Awareness

Parish life is a series of negotiations involving, at least, the adult members of the parish as to what kind of liturgies, services, and social events should occur. Every parish provides a combination of events and programs that comply with diocesan rules and regulations. In addition, every parish develops events and programs that allow parishioners to feel unique among the other parishes in the area, that is, parishes hold fall festivals or offer perpetual adoration or host diocesan events in ways that reflect their own culture. Parishes might also develop distinct events to fill a gap among other parishes' offerings. All these parish events, gatherings, and programs involve people exchanging ideas, opinions, and preferences. Sometimes the processes will reveal internal and external differences and their resulting conflicts. It can

happen that while the adults are earnestly engaged in the parish events and programs, they might also be excluding the young people. The adult leadership may be overlooking young people who could help plan and brainstorm ideas for a fresh perspective on parish programs and events. It is important that every parish regularly assesses its community for how inclusive it is to every age-group, particularly young adolescents, in all its programs and services.

Evaluation of Parish Services, Activities, Events

People turn to organized religion for various individual and collective needs. Spirituality is multidimensional and includes an individual relationship with God, as well as a communal relationship with God and other people. Parishes often provide programs, events, services, retreats, liturgies, and ministries to address both personal and communal needs. Each chapter in this book offers those interested in their parish's early-adolescence ministry a chance to evaluate their parish's opportunities for serving the personal and communal needs of this age-group.

Do Young Adolescents Enjoy a Role in Parish Life?

For various reasons that later chapters introduce, young people need to feel they are a part of a larger group. Parishes must provide opportunities for young adolescents to be recognized by the community as vital and important members. Although every parishioner needs to answer a call to service, young adolescents should be provided with deeper and more meaningful service roles than moving furniture, stuffing bulletins, or babysitting young children. Parishes need to recognize the giftedness of their young people and give them opportunities to be visible to the larger parish community and to share roles with adults who guide and mentor them. For some parishes, the thought of including young adolescents in more visible leadership roles seems risky; adolescence *is* a risky proposition. But, just think, each adult in the parish was once an adolescent. They seem all right now!

From Toleration to Celebration

Frequently, parishioners' fears about working with young adolescents stem from painful memories of their own dreadful teen years. Adult parishioners will find in this book various tips for working past their own painful memories and moments to focus on and look to the bright future of today's young adolescents. Good news abounds about preteens and early teens and their readiness for developing their spirituality and rightful place in their faith communities. After all, religion is a countercultural activity, and who is more ready for countercultural movements than young adolescents?

Chapter I

Good News About Early Adolescence

Prime Time for Spiritual Growth

Early adolescence sets up fertile ground for developing young people's spirituality. Young people in this age-group can begin to relate the values, attitudes, and behaviors they've been taught to their relationship with God. They can start to critically assess what it means to be a person of faith, hope, service, and love. Each young person struggles with two basic questions: Who am I? Where do I fit in? The Church can help young people answer both questions in light of their understanding of God. If parishes fail to reach young adolescents, then they miss reaching them at the most opportune time for spiritual growth in a person's life.

At its core, spiritual development is the work of the Holy Spirit, and what better place for the Spirit to work than in the local parish! Elementary, middle, and high schools focus on intellectual and academic education. Schools, as well as recreational clubs, guide children's physical education. They also promote social and

even psychological development. But churches have the primary role in developing young people's spirituality.

Spiritual development is multidimensional work. For most parishes, addressing adolescents' communal needs comes easily. Parishes need to be intentional about meeting young teens' needs for personal insights and spiritual growth through study, service, and prayer.

Coming to Consciousness

At this phase of life, the young adolescent's brain develops physically and intellectually to address abstract ideas. That is, in early adolescence, young people are more thoughtful about the world around them. Instead of merely responding in concrete ways to their world, young people analyze more deeply what is happening to them. The young child may clearly state: "I don't like that girl. She hit me." The young adolescent asks, "Why did she hit me? What did I do to make her dislike me?" or even, "What's wrong with her that she acts violently?"

The downside to this deeper analysis is that young teens can overanalyze every event. Some of their endless phone calling, e-mailing and instant-messaging stems from their tendency to scrutinize, retell, and embellish their daily interactions into high drama, exciting storytelling, and surprising rumors. The danger in their becoming more abstract thinkers is that young adolescents create and live in a fantasy world. Their tendency to fantasize is why young people need caring adults to help them face their world more realistically.

Another danger in this developmental phase is the problem of self-involvement. That is, because young adolescents constantly wrestle with the questions of who they are and are not, as well as how they fit in, they walk a precarious line between sorting out their future constructively and developing self-indulgent reactions to everything. This risky aspect of adolescence also requires adult intervention.

Caring adults have the ability to help young people put events into perspective, not only for the individual preteen or teen but also for the family members, friends, schoolmates, and teachers around them. Parish life, which can answer young people's needs, is also ideally suited for instructing young people on valuing the needs and feelings of others. In addition, young teens long for some deeper answers to how they fit into God's world and God's

plans for them. Parish activities for young people can satisfy young people's requirement for belonging by revealing God's love explicitly and by going beyond attending to their psychological and social development and moving toward attention to their spiritual development. In short, young adolescents need to "get over themselves," and churches potentially have a variety of educational, social, and service activities to help young people see past the here and now to eternity. It is important to remember, however, that each young person develops the ability to see the bigger picture in different and unique ways. Parishes can set the pace and provide the space to help young people think, live, and pray beyond themselves.

On the bright side, because young people are able to talk about and explore their world creatively and abstractly as well as concretely, they are ready to talk about the issues of religion in terms of mystery. They are ready to consider the question, who is God? at the same time they are asking themselves, "Who am I?"

Connecting to Community

For adolescents, part of answering the question of identity is finding out where they belong. Some of the journey of discovering self involves contrasting self with others. In other words, to know yourself, you also need to know who you are not.

To find out more about their identities, young teens' participation in groups helps them understand their own strengths and weaknesses. Group members tell one another directly and indirectly what each offers and does not offer to whatever the group does. In some cases, belonging to one group closes off membership in another group. The power of the group to define its membership also creates a lot of adolescent conflicts.

Clique membership ebbs and flows from fifth grade through ninth or tenth grade. A young person's movement from one group to another is based on ways that people recognize their commonalities and their differences. Trying to fit into a group is an all-consuming goal for most young adolescents, but they are bombarded by implicit and explicit media and cultural messages that tell them they do not measure up to the ideal. Young people desperately need to belong, but our culture rejects them in many ways.

Among the messages of rejection young people see and hear are advertisements, media reports, and gossip that criticize them for not having the

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