

saint mary's press

Effective Practices for Dynamic Youth Ministry



Thomas East
with
Ann Marie Eckert
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Introduction

The world is filled with patterns. We can learn from these patterns if we stand back, see the connections, and listen to what they can teach us. This was the quest of the research team in the *Effective Youth Ministry Practices in Catholic Parishes* project, which was conducted by the Center for Ministry Development and Saint Mary's Press, in collaboration with the National Federation for Catholic Youth Ministry. These leaders in Catholic youth ministry sought to listen to youth and youth leaders in parishes with effective youth ministry so that youth may be better served in all Catholic parishes.

Catholic youth ministry has experienced tremendous growth through the work of dedicated and resourceful leaders who keep imagining and creating new ways for youth to be served and included in parishes. In 1997, the Catholic bishops of the United States approved *Renewing the Vision: A Framework for Catholic Youth Ministry (RTV)* as their blueprint for the continued development of effective youth ministry. Since then many parishes across the nation have developed dynamic ministry that implements the goals and components of this vision. Many more struggle. They want to know where to start or how to grow and enhance their youth ministry. It was with these communities in mind that the project partners pursued their aim to identify the practices of parishes with effective youth ministry.

Practices of Effective Youth Ministry

This research builds upon and complements other research in Catholic youth ministry by focusing on the practices of effective youth ministry. Practices are actions by an individual or a community in which values and beliefs are embedded. To discover what a family is, we see how they practice being a family—not just what they say they believe or just what they do, but the practices of how they are a family.

In a similar way, this project identified the practices of Catholic parishes that are effective in youth ministry. What are they doing when they are

effective? What are they not doing? What undergirds the activities, involvements, and communities within parishes that are effectively including youth? To discover these practices, the research team employed a qualitative research method. In qualitative research, the main sources of data are people's words and actions, relying upon their stories and descriptions as well as the researcher's observations. A rigorous method is then employed to analyze this data, find the patterns, and describe faithfully the perspectives of those who participate in the conversation. Appendix A describes the research process in greater detail.

For this project, the research team began with group interviews of youth, adult leaders in youth ministry, and parish staffs. These interviews were taped and transcribed so that the research team could analyze the patterns in the conversations and identify common observations or findings about the practices of effective youth ministry. In this process, 400 people representing ninety-six parishes were interviewed in thirteen sites around the United States. The results of this research were then shared and refined at a national leadership symposium with fifty-six leaders from parishes, dioceses, and national organizations and agencies that participate in Catholic youth ministry.

The Overall Finding: It Takes a Willing Parish

In the first interview, the researcher asked a young woman, "What does a parish need to do to have effective youth ministry?" She replied that it wasn't really about doing something; it was what the parish needed to be. The parish needed to be "a willing parish." Some might think just being "willing" is a minimal expectation, but the young person meant something much more. A parish must be willing to experience the change that comes with being a community with active youth members. This insight is very descriptive of the parish communities that were studied in this project. They were willing to let young people in their midst become full members in the community. They were willing to put their energy and resources into developing youth ministry. They were willing to let youth be leaders and share in ministries side by side with adults. Most of all, they were willing to truly be in relationship with the youth in their midst. Through this relationship, the community changed and grew.

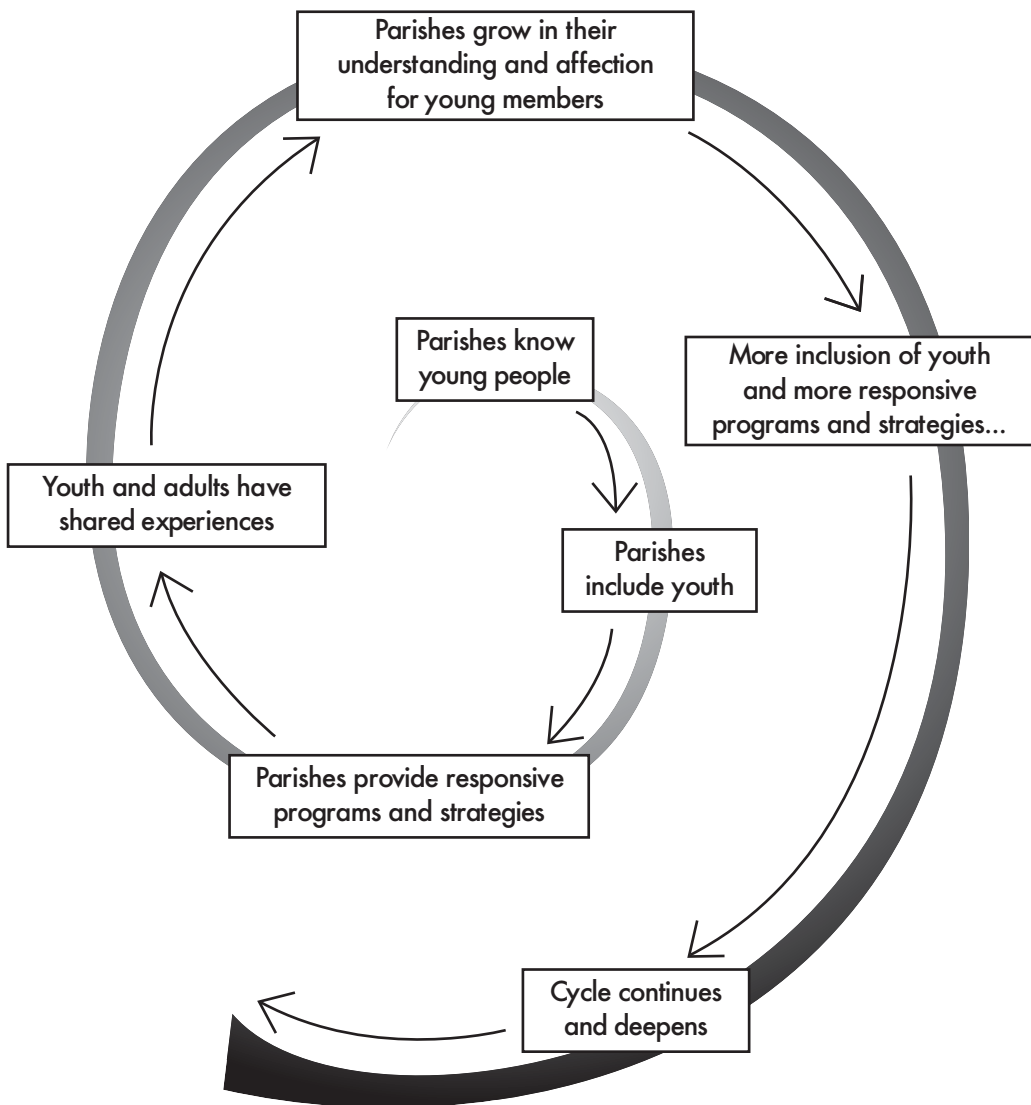
This insight matched the research team's experience of youth ministry. Parishes that are effective in their youth ministry efforts have something intangible. Many communities name youth as a priority, set goals for initiatives with

youth, and assign leaders to lead the ministry. Unfortunately, some of these communities fall short of their hoped-for outcomes. They may want youth ministry to happen because they are worried about youth or because they know the community needs young members. But in the end, they are not willing to let go, move over, and make room for the change and disruption that accompanies a truly effective youth ministry.

As parents of teenagers know, having youth in the house is not a quiet thing. It is not business as usual. Youth bring their new ideas, their opinions, and their way of doing things. A family with children that becomes a family with teenagers renegotiates the ways that they eat, recreate, pray, divide chores, and celebrate their lives together. In a similar way, a parish community that comes to know and treasure the youth in their midst will experience new ways of praying, celebrating, serving, and learning. It is not about always letting youth have their way or about discarding the traditions of a community. But it is about letting youth have *a way to truly belong*. Youth and the community learn together and are transformed in the process.

Many heroic parents, through sheer force of will, protect and provide for their children. These parishes demonstrated that kind of “will.” These parish communities willed youth ministry to happen. It began with the relationship between youth and adults in the community and grew as the parish included young members and provided dynamic programs and strategies for youth. As youth and adults have shared experiences, the community comes to know and understand youth more deeply, which paves the way for greater inclusion of youth and more responsive programs and strategies. (See diagram 1.)

As researchers, we did not find a new model for youth ministry or a single event or strategy that made the difference for parishes with effective youth ministry. What we found was this pattern: from knowing youth, parishes responded to youth’s needs and included their gifts in their community. These parishes knew young people and desired a youth ministry that was infused within the life of the parish. Parish staff and key leaders paved the way and helped the community know and appreciate their young members. Because they knew and cared about their youth, these communities were willing to respond in innovative ways. They tried new ways to involve youth in parish life and provide programs and events for youth to be with their peers. They established an ongoing peer community to help youth get to know each other better, and they opened the leadership, service, and ministry roles to youth. When planning for parish life, they thought about youth not just because they should but because they could not imagine parish life without them.



Outcomes of Effective Youth Ministry

The investment of genuine affection, time, resources, and attention really pays off for parishes that are willing to develop effective youth ministry. In the research findings, youth and adults in these parishes describe the effect that youth ministry has on youth and the parish. The overall finding about the impact of youth ministry is this simple statement: “Youth ministry has a profound impact on young people’s lives and on the parish community.”

This impact is evident from the responses of youth, adult leaders, and parish staff, but each group had a different emphasis. The youth in these parishes described how the parish's youth ministry helped them develop confidence, character, and the ability to share their faith in the world.

I think that our youth ministry in general is about growing and becoming the best person you can be. Whether it's helping the community or just basically just being the best person you can be, setting an example that is good for the community.

Youth Participant

The adult youth ministry leaders discussed how they tried to provide a ministry that challenged young people. They believed that effective youth ministry challenges young people to take risks, develop their talents, learn about faith and morals, and become better people.

One of the things that I think works is having our kids be risk-takers in the sense of challenging them beyond what's comfortable. Somehow our kids are willing to take risks when it comes to faith, whether it's lecturing or cantoring or service.

Adult Leader

Parish staff members described the transforming effect that youth ministry has on youth and the parish. They observed that through youth ministry, young people achieve the following goals:

- They grow as people and as leaders.
- They grow in faith.
- They develop values and a moral compass.
- They become change agents.
- They develop skills to face life's challenges.
- They continue parish involvement as college students and young adults.

They also observed that youth ministry has a tremendous impact on the parish community. The involvement of young people in parish life is energizing and is a source of pride for the community.

I think youth ministry helps . . . the young people have a greater relationship with God. It makes them stronger in their lives as Christians and to just be able to grow to be very mature, healthy people.

Parish Staff

Effective youth ministry unleashes the power of youth faith witness to help young people grow in their own faith and to touch the hearts of peers and the entire faith community. Youth faith witness is vulnerable, bold, eloquent, deep, profound, authentic, vibrant, and moving. It includes, uplifts and invites.

Parish Staff

Across the board, in a number of programs in our parish, the youth are not only involved in leadership roles, but we have young catechists and . . . programs that are virtually run day by day by young people themselves.”

Parish Staff

Research Findings

Common qualities, actions, and attitudes were present in parishes with dynamic youth ministry. These factors worked in concert to promote the transforming outcomes described. In addition to this overall finding about the transforming effect of youth ministry, twenty-three additional findings emerged from analysis of the interviews with youth, adults, and the parish staff members and are outlined in the chapters that follow. The appendices provide more information about the research project: Appendix A describes the process used in identifying the findings; Appendix B includes the twelve key findings for each group—youth, adult leaders, and parish staff members.

Each of the coming chapters identifies key findings; provides quotations from youth, adult youth ministry leaders and parish staff; and provides implications and recommendations that will help parishes take on these practices of effective youth ministry. Chapter 1 has five key findings on parish support for youth ministry. These findings describe the overall relationship of youth within the community, including the community’s affection for youth and understanding of youth ministry. Chapter 2 has five overall findings that describe the qualities of ministry to youth in parishes with effective youth ministry. These findings name the life of youth as the starting point for ministry and describe innovation and responsiveness as the process for dynamic ministry.

Chapter 3 describes five high-impact program elements in effective youth ministry. Chapter 4 has five findings that describe the importance of leadership in effective youth ministry. Chapter 5 summarizes recommendations for parishes and provides additional insights about parishes with effective youth ministry practices.

Reading This Book

Parishes that are willing have effective practices of youth ministry. These communities know youth and because of their care and concern for young people, they include youth and respond to their needs in innovative and dynamic ways. The practice of youth ministry that was described by the parishes that took part in the research is relational and organic. If we know youth, we grow to care for them and desire to respond effectively to their needs and to include their incredible gifts. The practices of simple caring are found in most communities. In the parishes that participated in the research, these caring practices became the community's norms.

Reading this book is a sign that you care about youth and want to enhance youth ministry in a community. No matter what role you have in making youth ministry happen, your involvement and advocacy can help name ways for your community to grow. As you read about these parish communities, you are likely to identify with some practices and feel challenged by others. Look for these affirmations and challenges as you journey with these communities. They will help you name your starting point and, hopefully, lead the way to more dynamic and effective practices.

Parish Support for Youth Ministry

There is something special about the relationship between the overall parish community and the youth in parishes with effective youth ministry. For the adult leaders, parish staff members, and youth interviewed for this project, the parish community is very important in their description of effective youth ministry. Without any prompting, these groups repeatedly describe their parish as a home for youth ministry. In different sites around the country, youth and adults use images like “second home,” “part of the fabric,” and “heart of the parish.” They describe in glowing terms their parish’s feeling about young people and their parish’s support for youth ministry. The leaders in these parish communities have a common vision for youth ministry and work together on behalf of youth.

Five overall findings about the parish community and its relationship to youth ministry emerged from the interviews. These communities care deeply for the youth in their midst, and—as in all healthy relationships—this affection is mutual. Youth also care about the parish and feel connected with adults in the community. One powerful image that leaders used to describe their community is a web of relationships: youth to youth, youth to adults, youth ministry leaders to parents, parents to youth, youth to the parish as a whole. Through this web, youth are served, included, and empowered.

Overall Findings Regarding Parish Support

Let’s turn our attention now to the five overall findings that describe how parishes support effective youth ministry. The first paragraph summarizes the finding, and then the finding will be fleshed out with additional comments and quotes from the interviewees.

Parish Support Finding 1: Support from the Whole Parish

Parish youth ministry thrives when it has the support of the whole parish. Parish support is characterized by these general practices and attitudes.

- Youth feel at home in the parish and are genuinely known and liked by parish members.
- Youth are integrated into the full life of the parish. This involvement of youth in parish ministries and parish activities is planned for, encouraged, and affirmed.
- Youth share in leadership and decision-making in parish committees, ministries, and organizations.
- Youth have opportunities to witness to their faith with peers, children, and adults.
- Parish staff and leadership are supportive of youth ministry and youth involvement.

Parish staff, adult leaders, and youth all concurred that the support of the parish community is crucial to the effectiveness of youth ministry. Youth share that when they experience this support, they feel welcome in the parish. They thrive on meaningful relationships with parish members, both young and old.

We call it youth ministry but sometimes I think that it should be called community ministry . . . it's not always just the youth, although that's what the main part of it is, but we do stuff for the community so, like,

“The parish is where the Church lives. Parishes are communities of faith, of action, and of hope. They are where the Gospel is proclaimed and celebrated, where believers are formed and sent to renew the earth.”
(USCCB, *Communities of Salt and Light*, p. 1)

we're doing community work so it could be just community ministry that we're dealing with.

Youth Participant

Our church is like my second home. It's, like, the best place . . .

Youth Participant

I see a lot of teenagers that really love to be involved in their parishes and youth ministry gives them the opportunity to share their talents with their whole parish and to help build their faith even more. So that when they become adults they'll still want to be involved in their parishes and do even more things because the youth are the future of the church and so starting now we develop an even greater love and want to do the Lord's work.

Youth Participant

Parish staff members describe support for youth as a priority for their community. They identify the support as originating in the affection of adults for the young members of the church. In *Renewing the Vision*, parishes are encouraged to become "youth friendly" (USCCB, RTV, p. 13). It is remarkable that the parishes participating in the research are far beyond just being friendly or tolerant of youth: They cherish the youth in their midst. The parish community has become a second home to youth.

Consider this finding that was identified in the interviews with parish staffs: "Parishes with effective youth ministry genuinely like and know youth and show their affection by welcoming them and their contributions, by affirming them, and by encouraging them. Youth feel at home and safe in these parishes." The following quotations from the parish staff interviews show the relationship between this affection for youth and youth's integration in parish life.

The point is, they feel at home, this is their home and they may not come home as often as you'd like them to, every week, or more often, but they know where home is when they need to drop in.

Parish Staff

One more thing that works (in youth ministry) is if you show these kids love. I love them.

Parish Staff

Support is hard to quantify. Adult leaders in these parishes described support in very practical ways. For example, in these communities youth don't just participate in activities or strategies; they are also encouraged to take part in leadership and decision-making for the parish. They are often involved in leadership groups such as parish councils and worship commissions. In these parishes youth have opportunities to witness to their faith with peers, children, and adults. This involvement of youth is encouraged and supported by the parish leadership and the entire parish community.

“[Parishes] should be a place where [young people] are welcomed, grow in Jesus Christ, and minister side by side with the adults of the community.”

(USCCB Committee on the Laity, A Message to Youth, p. 3)

Here's how some of the adult leaders shared the importance of youth becoming integrated into the parish, which also means that youth have a voice in parish life.

First and foremost, I think it's comprehensive, meaning that it [youth ministry] is infused; young people are infused in every aspect of the faith community life.

Adult Leader

A lot of people are putting energy into helping kids find ways to be involved in the parish. So when you go to a meeting of the lectors it ranges from 14 to 84, and the same thing with the music ministry.

Adult Leader

So I see them involved in part of the fabric of the parish, of inviting us to come together with each other, but also inviting us to reflect.

Parish Staff

Parish Support Finding 2: A Priority on Youth Ministry

In parishes with effective youth ministry, the parish community understands and places a priority on youth ministry. This is demonstrated by the following characteristics:

- Parishioners know that youth ministry is everyone’s responsibility.
- The community desires youth ministry that is infused into parish life.

One thing that marks the communities that participated in this research project is that youth ministry is not separate from parish life. Adult leaders and parish staff members place priority on youth ministry. Many of them described youth ministry as being “at the heart” of their parish: they see ministry to youth as everyone’s responsibility. This understanding of youth ministry is matched by a desire on the part of parishioners that youth be included in all elements of parish life. Older parishioners want to get to know the youth and experience the energy and vitality of faith they bring to the community as a whole.

I think youth ministry in this community is at the heart of what we do as a parish.

Parish Staff

I hope for inclusive community involvement . . . that there is never a thought that says, Oh, what about your youth? It just comes naturally that our youth are invited in, are accepted, and are put to work as vital people in our parish.

Adult Leader

Parish Support Finding 3: Balance Between Serving Youth in a Peer Community and Within the Overall Parish

Some goals of youth ministry are best achieved when youth are involved in overall parish life, praying and working together with adults and children. Other goals are best achieved within a youth peer community where youth are relating primarily to other youth. Balancing both these dimensions is important for creating effective youth ministry.