

Small Group Launch Guide

*Get off THE PATH TO BURNOUT
and build A WORLD-CHANGING,
HIGH-IMPACT youth ministry.*

from

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01. Introduction

There is a better way

You've seen the statistics and there is no other way to put it. The Catholic Church is in a battle for the souls of our youth and we are losing. In fact, it's a massacre. If you are reading this document, you are probably working with young people, and something about your youth ministry is not working.

MAYBE THIS IS YOU

- You may be a youth minister who is burnt out working non-stop, trying to recruit teens and volunteers to youth groups. You are tired of the constant pressure to come up with more creative ways to teach the faith so that your youth group lessons feel "dynamic." The majority of your teens are still leaving the faith after they receive the sacraments or go off to college, but you are too tired to take a step back and evaluate what is missing in your ministry
- You may be a pastor whose youth minister has resigned to move on to a new opportunity and you are tired of constantly having to find the next charismatic leader to take the reins of the ministry. Every time a youth minister leaves, the ministry falls apart and it is a long process to rehire the position and rebuild the ministry. You can't help but think there has to be an easier and less expensive way to build up the youth ministry.
- You may be a parent whose teenager won't attend youth group because they are tired of the silly games and stale pizza. You want your teenager to become the person that God has called them to be and you are tired of the parish failing to meet the needs of your teenager.

Regardless of who you are, you're probably pretty frustrated but you don't know where to start to change.

The good news is that there is a better way! What you are feeling has actually been confirmed at a high level in the Church, but because institutions and people don't like change, we're relying on the same failed paradigms that yield very little lasting fruit. In the rest of this document we'll go over why our current models aren't working, why discipleship groups provide a better and more simple ministry and how to get these groups started at a parish..... read on faithful reader!

02. The Problem

Catholic Youth Ministry is Failing

In 2019 the Vatican hosted a synod on young people and Pope Francis wrote *Christus Vivit* - a post-synodal exhortation to young people. Coinciding with this synod, the USCCB launched the National Dialogue - a multi-year initiative to survey and more deeply understand the lived experience of youth and young adults in the Church. Both of these initiatives involved years of study, surveying, listening, and a lot of data and recommendations. In short, our young people told the Church that our structures of ministry are not meeting their needs and desires. The proposed solution is that the Catholic Church must change her approach to youth formation and adapt to the needs of today's young people.

“Youth ministry, as traditionally carried out, has been significantly affected by social and cultural changes. Young people frequently fail to find in our usual programs a response to their concerns, their needs, their problems, and issues.”

POPE FRANCIS
Christus Vivit, 202.

Youth ministry in the Catholic Church is set up to fail. The conventional models of ministry cannot meet the needs of today's youth. While the list below is not exhaustive, here are a few reasons why the youth ministry paradigm needs to be overhauled:

Large Youth Groups are no longer a “felt need”

The current youth culture has a large network of peers available to them 24/7 in the palm of their hand. The appeal of joining a large community of peers is not a “felt need” of Generation Z. They lack intimacy and depth in their relationships, but they do not feel as much of a need for a large community. Youth groups and large events do not carry the same appeal that they did for previous generations.

There is no Effective Way to Engage Large Numbers of Teens with One Catechetical Lesson

Teens don't want answers to questions that they aren't asking. Any time a youth minister is giving a lesson to a large number of teens, s/he is guaranteed to miss the mark for the majority of them. A freshman and a senior in high school are on totally different levels, and with one teaching given each week, a youth minister can't possibly speak to the needs of every teen in the room. Some teens need basic evangelization and others want to go deeper. Large group faith formation doesn't allow a catechist or youth minister to meet both needs.

Religious Education Classes are Obsolete

The Confraternity of Christian Doctrine (CCD) was established in 1562 AD. The majority of Catholic youth attend public schools and Catechism classes remain the primary method that parishes use to pass on the faith to our younger generation. A classroom model of catechesis bears virtually no fruit with today's young people. The environment does not allow for encounter, witness, dialogue, intimacy, and transparency.

Parents are Unengaged

Most youth ministries offered in parishes do little to reach out and engage parents in meaningful ways. Parents have more impact on the lived faith of their children than any other influence. Most parents' engagement is limited to drop-off and pick-up duties.

"Successful" Youth Ministries burnout youth ministers and parish leadership

For many parishes, the definition of "success" is a youth ministry that is "activity focused." This results in job descriptions for youth ministers that are long, unrealistic, and require a time commitment of many nights and weekends. Youth ministers who work in these positions don't last long because they cannot sustain a healthy lifestyle (and they are frequently underpaid). Parish leadership loses faith in youth ministry because of the high turnover and constant rebuilding that a youth ministry goes through each time there is a change in leadership. The result is that parish youth ministries never grow and are unsustainable.

THE SOLUTION

Aim for lifelong disciples

What is Discipleship?

Jesus Christ did not simply communicate the message of the Gospel, he also taught us how to pass that message down from generation to generation. The method of formation utilized by Jesus was called, “discipleship.” Discipleship is when a small number of hand-picked students live with a rabbi and learn from his daily example. Discipleship was the most successful public ministry that Christ participated in during his 3 year public ministry. The apostles were the one’s who built the Church and they learned from the daily example given to them by Christ. Jesus focused on a small group of twelve. Even among the twelve he had three and among the three he focused on one in particular. Our Church exists because Jesus saw the potential in Simon Peter and invested in his transformation over the long haul.

If we wish to make young disciples, we should follow in the example of Jesus Christ. A discipleship focused youth ministry is made up of small groups of 4-8 students and 2 adult mentors. Here are three characteristics of discipleship focused youth ministry:

Small groups follow a rabbi

More than anything, young people need the witness and example of adult mentors from whom they can learn the faith through witness and imitation. Every small group should be led by two adult mentors.

Small groups meet needs

The definition of “ministry” is simply “meeting the needs of a person.” By dividing the youth ministry into small groups, every young person has an opportunity to have their individual needs identified and met. In small group ministry, no one is lost in the crowd.

Small groups can be scaled

Whether your community is a large, suburban mega-parish or a small, rural parish, small group discipleship remains the same. A parish can build a youth ministry with 40 small groups and hundreds of teens or they can build a youth ministry of 1 small group. A large budget and lots of resources are not necessary to form young disciples.

03. Process vs Program

Aim for lifelong disciples

Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses.

—POPE PAUL VI

Address to the Members of the Consilium de Laicis

We believe that God's work is most visible in us — not in textbooks or worksheets. Though it can be uncomfortable to pull back the veil on our lives, it is the way of discipleship and true transformation. The way we live gives witness to what we have seen, so we never let our actions give false testimony. We want ministry leaders who know how to minister to the individual needs of a young person. This is a skill that cannot be provided when running a program.

In some instances, youth ministry leaders believe they are providing discipleship groups because they have small groups in the parish. This is not always the case. Discipleship requires intentional relationships. Here are some examples of small groups that are not discipleship groups:

Discipleship is not a program

With a discipleship group, a small number of youth (4-8 is recommended) meet with 2 adult leaders on a regular basis. The purpose of the group is for the youth to have adults who provide mentorship and witness for the teens and for the teens to have virtuous friendships with one another. The group meetings are centered around a shared living of the faith. Some examples of small group meetings are Bible Studies, attending Eucharistic Adoration together, playing ultimate frisbee or doing service together.

Programmed content isn't a bad thing, but programs don't make disciples. No parish leader can take the resources provided by [insert popular program] and automatically make lifelong followers of Jesus Christ by simply running the program. Resources and programs are merely tools that can assist in developing healthy discussions within a mentoring relationship. Too often, youth ministry leaders are expecting the content of a program to provide the transformational experience for a young person. They fail to realize that their witness is what leads a young person to that transformational experience.

Discipleship is not a “youth night” breakout group

Sometimes large youth groups break into smaller groups during a “youth night” to break open a teaching. This is not the same as a discipleship group. The small groups in a youth group are centered exclusively around breaking open and discussing the lesson. A discipleship group is centered exclusively around relationships, witness and imitation. The teens learn from the example of their adult leaders.

Discipleship is not a Bible Study or Catechetical class

While discipleship groups can and should study the faith together, they are not exclusively focused on study. Study is intended for intellectual formation. A person also requires human, spiritual and pastoral formation. Small groups should have fun, serve and pray together.



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04. Getting Started

Starting Discipleship Groups

We have worked in a variety of settings where we have developed youth ministries centered around discipleship groups. There are several pitfalls and obstacles that are important to navigate when setting up these types of ministries. Here are a few key lessons that we have learned about developing discipleship groups.

1. Start small, grow big

Start one small group at a time. It is much easier to find 2 capable adult mentors for 4-8 teenagers than it is to find 20 adult mentors for 80 teenagers. It is very difficult to “program” something that is supposed to happen organically. When you can focus on starting one small group at a time and you can give the attention that is necessary to prepare the small group leaders to minister to the teen’s needs. Once you have one successful group, it is easy to start additional groups.

2. Same Gender Groups

Boys and girls mature at different paces. When transparency is the goal, we have found it is much easier to achieve transparency within a group if boys are with boys and girls are with girls. What’s more, we believe that boys learn to become men from the example of other men and that girls learn to become women from the example of other women. Co-ed groups can work, but we believe that same gendered groups are the ideal setup for a small group.

3. A Comfortable Environment

In order to create an environment where people feel that they can be transparent with one another, a person needs to feel comfortable. A living room, a coffee shop, a fireside room, a public hangout, or the outdoors are all conducive to creating an environment where trust and transparency can be developed. The worst environment for a small group to meet is the parish or a classroom. Parishes are some of the least welcoming environments for teens (or anyone for that matter). I don’t enjoy hanging out in the ugly, all-purpose parish hall nor would I bring my friends there to hang out. Classrooms are an environment that are not associated with sharing - and teenagers won’t be transparent in this environment.

4. Small Groups Meet Consistently Throughout the Week

Today, teens and their parents are over-committed and too busy. There is no day or time in the week that every teen in the parish is going to have available to meet at the parish for a youth group program. By programming youth ministry on one night of the week, we inhibit the growth of the youth ministry because we immediately eliminate the teens who are not available on that day of the week and adult volunteers who cannot volunteer on that particular day. Good youth ministry provides flexibility so that every teen can participate.

In the parishes where we have run small group discipleship, the small groups meet all throughout the week when the teen's schedules allow for it. Some groups meet on weeknights while others may meet after Mass on Sunday mornings. By providing flexibility, we have more teens engaged and more adults willing to volunteer. We do not recommend having all small groups meet at the parish on the same night of the week. This strategy inhibits growth.

5. Invite Teens into Small Groups with their Friends

We believe in pursuing people. The leaders of the group should seek out the teens that they wish to mentor and provide a personal invitation for them. Small groups should be formed with the intention of putting teens in a group with all of their friends. It is difficult to create trust and transparency within a group when they are complete strangers. We shouldn't expect teens to share with one another when they are not comfortable with each other.



05. A Firm Foundation

Engaging Parents

Parents have more access and more influence than a youth minister will ever have. Because of this, no one will have a greater impact on the faith life of a teenager than their parents. Unfortunately, conventional youth ministry models have relegated parents to the role of pick-up and drop-off. An effective youth ministry will engage parents within the process of forming their teenager and provide meaningful opportunities for the parents to contribute. Here are a few suggestions to help mobilize a team of disciple-making parents.

Have one-on-one meetings with parents

Parents are busy. It can be difficult to gain a parent's trust or support when parents are constantly going from one thing to the next. Sometimes the best way to reach a lot of people is to work on gaining the trust of a few. We strongly recommend asking individual parents to go out to coffee. Take the time to sell the ministry of discipleship to these parents and to listen to their struggles and concerns as it relates to their child. Winning over parents in this matter can go a long way towards building a successful youth ministry.

Mobilize parents to reach youth on the fringes

Frequently, parents are more willing to trust the testimony of another parent than they are to trust a Church leader. If you have taken the time to win over a few parents, the next step is to put them to work to recruit for the discipleship groups. Ask these parents for input on who should lead their child's discipleship group and what teens should be a part of the group. Ask the parent to reach out to other parents to help get momentum to get the small groups started.

Communicate with the Parents weekly

Once a small group is started, we encourage the small group leader to email parents on a weekly basis and give them regular updates about what the small group is discussing. These regular communications will go a long way in helping to develop a collaborative relationship between the small group leader and the parents.



Make Smarter Moves

It is simple, but not always easy. We have been helping parishes all over the country get their staff and volunteers on board to create a discipleship movement in their community for the last 15 years. We'd love to help you too.

Andrew Ministries provides coaching packages to make this process simple.

Book a free 30-minute consultation today.

VISIT OUR WEBSITE:

www.andrew-ministries.com/coaching

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