

YOUTH MINISTRY TOOLBOX

Creating *welcoming* youth groups

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©CREATING WELCOMING YOUTH GROUPS

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Churches can feel like foreign lands for many teenagers. Most teens never return after the Sacrament of Confirmation. The ages between 13 and 18 can be the most dynamic, but also the most intimidating. Most teenagers are looking for a place to connect and people who care. If they do not feel welcomed, accepted, or loved, they leave without hesitation.

If we want a youth ministry to grow stronger and bigger, we must meet teens at the point of their need—not ours. It is rightfully said, *“If you can’t bring them to church, take the Church to them.”* The Church must become organic if we want it to be impactful. Unless we are willing to meet teens where they are, develop healthy relationships with them, and walk with them closer to Christ, we could be setting ourselves up for a long and fruitless labor.

As leaders, we must help teenagers see that their presence matters and that they are an integral part of ministry and the church. One invitation may not give us the results we desire. However, the question is not whether they will come, but how far we are willing to go in pursuing authentic relationships.

Authentic relationships are the bedrock of a solid, fruit-bearing youth ministry. Such a “relational ministry” always points teens to the heart of true conversion, which is genuine love. In order to bring teens to a relationship with Christ, we must be willing to engage in relationships with them. Like any relationship, this demands investment of time, a great deal of effort, and many sacrifices on our part. When we invite teens into a youth group, we are inviting them to look beyond the meeting to the greater picture; we are inviting them to become a part of the ministry’s vision.





In 'Renewing the Vision', the US Catholic Bishops point out that parishes must see young people as resources, recognizing their gifts and empowering them by giving them meaningful roles in the ministry.

How can we do that if we do not know them or invest in them? The essence of any youth ministry lies in these fundamental questions:

- How are we investing in the lives of young people?
- Do we want to see young people raised in the future or does their future begin now?

The answers to these two questions will change the dynamic of a ministry and keep our eyes focused on the vision.

To help young people fall in love with Jesus, love must become the supreme ethic. Teenagers do not fear going deeper in faith. They are hungry for the deep things of God; their desire to know God is genuine. Often, the lack of authenticity and the duplicity of their leaders propel them in the opposite direction.





WARMTH AND *Welcome* AT THE DOOR

What is the most important ministry in a youth group? The most common and emphatic answer is Teaching, Outreach or the Praise and Worship ministry. While these ministries have their rightful place, a rock-solid youth ministry recognizes that the first impression is the last impression. Therefore, the Welcome or Hospitality Ministry plays a critical role in a youth group.

Think about the most common reasons that teenagers attend youth meetings:

- Their friends are there.
- They are seeking new connections and opportunities.
- They want answers to make their faith relevant in the world.
- They desire close friendships.

The common ingredient is always a desire for connection. When a teen walks into the meeting for the first time, how is he/she welcomed? Is there a welcome/hospitality ministry in place? Is there a plan to engage with them beyond a greeting? Remember, welcoming doesn't end at the door. When we send a message to teens that we care and have been waiting for them, we go a long way in breaking the ice and engaging them towards active ministry participation.



THE 3-C *Welcome* PACK

While there are different ways to make an irresistible welcoming environment, these three C's are foundational to establishing a strong first impression.

Connect

Make sure the people you put on the front line are cheerful, informative, and excellent at memorizing names. Encourage them to be warm and welcoming. If the youth ministry comprises teens and young adults, it is good to assign one adult and one teen, respectively, to the welcome ministry. To ensure safe boundaries for those families that have reservations about mixed groups, choosing members from both genders is also wise.

The welcome ministry needs to be trained on how to greet, begin small conversations, and read behavioral cues when a teen is new or uncomfortable. When people are welcomed with a sense of belonging, they will enter with an open mind, be more relational with others, and become more receptive to the youth meeting agenda.

- Introduce yourself;
don't wait for them to initiate the conversation
- Smile and make eye contact
- Ask their name,
note it down and begin small conversation
- Connect them with someone who can show them around
- Reach out to all teens, even the not-so-well-behaved ones.
- Be genuine; be intentional; be yourself.



Communicate

The language of a youth meeting is not academic, but relational. Young people need to be approached with the language of love. Fruitful conversations open the gateway to broader discussions. Learn how to communicate small, perhaps starting with which school they go to and/or other common ground.

John C. Maxwell famously said that “people won’t care how much you know until they know how much you care.” This is doubly true when working with teenagers. Don’t pretend to have all the answers or know it all. Young people are very good at discerning what is genuine and what is fake. There will be a time for teaching, discipling and advice giving. Learn to recognize when that time is. First, make sure they know that you truly care about them.

- Ask good questions
- Engage in topics of common interest
- Step into their world
- Be encouraging
- Be available



Consistent

Even the best outreach strategies fail when there is no consistent follow-up. Have a plan to ensure that teens are kept in touch with and that parents are involved in all plans concerning their teenagers.

Invite them to the ministry's fellowship evenings, discipleship squad nights, or any events where young people gather. Take note of their phone number and send them a thank-you note for attending the meeting. Make a plan to follow up in the ensuing week. Organic, personalized messages go a long way in building authentic relationships.

Blessed Paul VI said, "we need witnesses." No matter what else we do in strategic planning, whether in individual organizations or in our dioceses, our efforts in youth ministry will long outlive us. In the end, young people entrusted to your care and mine will remember YOU far longer than the things they did with you. Through your faithfulness, love, generosity, time, and patience, your work will help ensure an encounter with the person of Christ.



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“It is easy to be consistent for a day or two. It is difficult and important to be consistent for one’s whole life. It is easy to be consistent in the hour of enthusiasm; it is difficult to be so in the hour of tribulation. And only a consistency that lasts throughout the whole of life can be called faithfulness.”

SAINT JOHN PAUL II