

Starting a youth group or a youth night for middle school and high school teens is a challenging process. Most experts say it will take to three years to get well established and moving in the right direction. A youth night or youth group can be a great way of forming community, Christian fellowship and creating a good springboard for larger events, trips, missions, service in the community and parish, etc.

In the Diocese of Peterborough, we are home to a wide variety of demographics, economic situations, and parish cultures. We have both large and small parishes, wealthy and struggling, growing and aging.

The following are some important tips and basics to get started:

Preamble:

Make a daily commitment in your prayer to discern how your youth ministry should develop. Anyone can get a “youth ministry” or “youth group” up and running. Building a youth ministry that is sustainable, solid and can weather changes in pastors, youth ministers and volunteers is much more challenging.

Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell—and great was its fall! —Matthew 7: 24-27

Write out a detailed plan of what your youth ministry will look like. No one builds a house without first having a blueprint of what the house will look like. Too often, parish youth groups or youth ministries are set in motion with a well-intentioned volunteer, a bulletin announcement and a plug during the Sunday Mass announcements. It runs for a few weeks, perhaps until summer time. But then the group breaks for the summer months and then it's back to square one, trying to start something up all over again. For this reason, it's important to plan what should take place over the course of the next few years.

It is advisable to consider the possibility of combing efforts with parishes in one's own deanery (geographical area of the diocese divided into city, south, central, and north; consult one's pastor to know which one you belong to. Some parishes may be able to

handle their own, others will have to rely on a other parish, while others may combine with other parishes in their own deanery.

The list we've provided may sound ambitious, but there are parishes that are accomplishing those goals right now. Those items are attainable.

Perhaps you're thinking something smaller, where your youth receive consistent weekly catechetical formation while enjoying Catholic fellowship and growing firmly and confidently in their Catholic faith.

Regardless if our suggestions resonate with you or not, it is wise to have a longterm plan in place before you begin. What does the house that you want to prepare for your young people look like?

Practicals

Set up parent meetings and survey the youth of the parish. There are a number of ways in which you can survey the parish, have parent information nights and nights for parents to give feedback. It is strongly recommended that a pulpit announcement is made on the desire of the parish to support youth through a youth group/youth night. Develop a vision and pastoral plan – Without a vision the people perish (Proverbs 29: 18). There are many great visions, plans and mission statements that are kept secret or not shouted from the rooftops. It is essential that great care and time is put into both developing the plan, but also communicating it to families within the parish.

Give the entire parish opportunities to support your youth outreach. Through fundraisers, prayer teams, etc.

Create a FACEBOOK or INSTAGRAM group. It's helpful to have some kind of web presence both for the purposes of celebrating what you are doing, but also for evangelization purposes. Be sure to follow Diocesan guidelines with these accounts (should be two unrelated adults involved and the pastor or parish associate should have access as well).

Developing your team. Find adults who love teens and who love the faith. Train them to serve teens like St. John Bosco. Develop a community for these adults so that they come to love spending time with each other.

All adult volunteers should be volunteered screened, including Vulnerable Sector Check.

Make Discipleship and Evangelization your primary goals. At the end of the day, are you creating disciples of Jesus Christ? Are these disciples wanting and willing to spread the Good News of the Gospel through words and actions? This is the core of any good youth ministry program.

Communication. You will need to spend time communicating the vision to both the parish and all the pastoral team. It is essential that the pastor and associates share the same vision and are 100% in support of the youth group/youth night endeavor.

Develop a good youth leadership team. Find great teens in your parish who can be model disciples and evangelists for youth. A common thread with any good youth ministry programs are teens who are welcoming and who bring other youth into the fold.

Develop a good youth space. Spend time putting together a good space for your youth ministry program. Here are some basics:

The space should match the size of the group. Too big, and a group of 20 feels small.

Music! Having good Christian music playing at the beginning of the events is a great way of welcoming people. A song list can easily be provided. Get a good sound system for your program (wireless systems are great if you want to have speakers in multiple locations).

Invest in games and even game tables. Board game recommendations: Connect Four, Checkers, Jenga, Quelf, Battleship, Telestrations, Apples to Apples, Dixit, King of Tokyo, Codenames, Smashup, etc. Games that can easily be taught are best.

Game tables are great to have as well. Foosball, air hockey, ping pong, small pool table, and (if you can find one) a bubble hockey table.

Christmas lights are a great and easy way to decorate a room. Everyone loves Christmas lights!

Posters of saints – particularly modern saints having to do with youth.

Good sized television or LCD projector for videos, presentations, etc.

Couches and other good furniture for sitting (maybe carpets and throw pillows as well).

Get the teens to help decorate and design the room as well.

Programs and how to run a night

Programs such as Edge and LifeTeen are valuable programs for youth ministry, though others exist and can be effective.

Use the Life Teen 'Gather, Proclaim, Break and Send' model for developing youth nights. This is a simple model used for years. Based upon the Mass, it is an easy way of organizing your evenings:

Gather – the time of welcome, gathering. Fun light time, making sure every single person who comes in feels welcome. Introductions to other teens, handshakes, etc.

Proclaim – Some kind of proclamation of the Gospel – beginning with prayer. A lesson for the day.

Break – Like we break the bread, now we break open what we have just heard. This could be small groups, discussion time, personal reflection time, etc.

Send – The Mass is ended, go forth! Like the Mass, the youth nights should send the youth out to live the faith in the world today. They can be challenged to pray more, serve the neighbors, grow in a certain area of virtue, etc.

Keep it fun, but give them solid meat as well. Teens want to have wholesome fun together. Give them opportunities to have fun together. Avoid games where people are eliminated, anyone is humiliated or games where anyone feels uncomfortable.

Provide additional materials for further reflection. I found that a once a week event was challenging with some of the topics we covered. We began setting up a table with articles, etc. for those who wanted to go deeper.

Provide a parent night here and there and definitely a parent night at the beginning of the year. Developing community among parents is key. It is helpful to provide parent speakers and/or social opportunities for the parents to get to know each other.

Pray together. Teens need opportunities to pray together. Use time in the church; provide quiet time; pray the liturgy of the hours together; let them share prayer intentions (very important); etc.

Serve together. It is vitally important for youth groups to give back to the church both in their time, talent and treasure. Make sure you provide opportunities and make sure this is integral to your group.

Mission trips, retreats and other immersive experiences. Consider ways your group can go on longer immersion experiences, particularly those that involve some kind of service. There are many groups out there – Shine Workcamp, Catholic Heart Workcamp, etc.

Connect with other youth groups. It is vitally important for our teens to know they are not alone. Connecting with other local groups has obvious benefits to all teens involved.

Names! Know your teens by name and follow up if they don't return. Let them know you miss them and hope to see them again. A sign in sheet and name tags are important (with large enough groups standard lanyard name tags are a great way of knowing who is there and who didn't show up).

Cell Phones. Cell phones have become an enormous challenge. Having clear rules for the use of cell phones during meetings is likely a good idea. There are various ideas out there but it is something worth considering in a deliberate way.

Relational Ministry. Our teens need to discover what real relationships look like. Jesus spent time just talking, getting to know his apostles, etc. Let Christ be the model for all things, but, in particular, relational ministry. The road to Emmaus is a wonderful illustration of this approach. Listening to the heart and to hurts.

Make it challenging. Teens should never walk away feeling like they haven't been challenged to be more faithful, more virtuous and to become a greater saint.

Smile! We don't need dour saints. Let the joy of the Lord be your strength and be a shining light to the youth that you have been given the privilege to serve.

Youth Minister

While a volunteer could cut it, it is generally advisable to hire a youth minister. The Diocesan Youth Office can discuss with you what to look for in a candidate. Experience is an asset, and even having volunteered in one in the past should count as experience. Those with experience in NET Ministries, HopeStone, or other parish youth ministries are an asset.

The Youth Office is willing and able to train new youth ministers and to provide opportunities for further formation for youth ministers.

A youth minister should be supervised by the pastor, following all diocesan safe environment protocols. At the same time, the youth minister should have the freedom and creativity to do his/her job. Aloofness and micromanagement should be avoided.

Finances

Of course, such an undertaking requires money. Nothing good comes for free, unfortunately. Youth ministry is truly an investment, even when the results are not always apparent. How much is spent is up to each pastor and parish. In all honesty, one should prayerfully consider how much they are willing to spend. Is the next generation of Catholics worth it for you? How stingy should we be?

Fundraising is a wonderful way to raise the needed funds, either for youth ministry in general, for a youth minister's wage, or for specific youth ministry projects. People are really generous in giving towards youth ministry, knowing it's going to a worthy cause.