

**Summary of Young Adult Ministry Seminar presented by  
Rev. John Cusick and Dr. Kate DeVries  
hosted by the Association of Chicago Priests, October 23, 2012**

Greetings! On Tuesday, Oct. 23, Fr. John Cusick and I had the privilege of addressing the ACP concerning Young Adults, those in their 20s & 30s, married and single. Below is a quick summary of the flow of the day.

We began by laying out the reality of participation among this age group in our Catholic parishes and organizations. Although Young Adults make up the largest segment of adults in the American population, they are also the least active. According to CARA Data, Catholics make up 23 percent of the U.S. adult population or about 51 million U.S. residents, age 18 and older. Millennials alone, those between ages 18 and 30, number 11.5 million Catholics. Yet, this is the group we see the least frequently.

A strategy we presented to address the lack of participation among those in their 20s and 30s is a 7 stage plan for a parish interested in regenerating its congregation, liturgy and organizational life. If all the various commissions and organizations of the parish will consider regenerating the parish and its leadership a serious goal, major strides can be made.

**Stage 1: Reputation**

What are people saying about your parish or organization? To find out the reputation, don't ask the staff members, and don't ask the parishioners who sit in the first three rows on Sunday. Ask your regular "pew people"; they are your loyal ones, and they also listen. If you're very brave, you can try and tap the people on the margins; seek out and talk to young adults who don't frequent the parish often. How easy is it to get involved? What do people say about the congregation? How easy is it to get married? How easy is it to get your child baptized? What's the gossip of cliques? Is parish governance really interested in caring for the needs of all? You need to begin with what people are thinking and saying about the place. Whether it's true or not does not matter. You need to know how people perceive the parish. Be aware that this can be very threatening to the leadership. You have to work through that. If you do not know what is being said about you, you don't know what issues to address and what components may need to be changed. Often those of us on the inside lose touch with the people on the fringe, and that's who we need to find a way to serve.

This stage of "reputation" asks how others perceive you (whether it is an accurate perception or not). Are you considered "young adult friendly" or do you have the reputation of catering to young families or another element of the population? Is the congregation viewed as young or old? Is the leadership open to trying new things when opportunities present themselves (many parishes have not had the fortune of someone like Elizabeth coming forward)? Once you know how you are perceived, you have a starting point for changing inaccurate perceptions and moving forward based on your strengths.

## **Stage 2: Inventory**

Taking inventory means determining who is involved in all parish activities and organizations. This is not just a body count (“We have 20 catechists, 32 Eucharistic ministers, 15 ushers, and 12 ministers of care.”). You need to know how many people are involved by both age and state in life. For example, how many teens, 20s, 30s, 40s people are involved? How many senior citizens are active? How many of the leaders and participants of parish activities and organizations are single, married, single again? How many are parents, and how many are single parents? *Look for the presence and involvement of young adults at every level of parish life.* Such an inventory will soon reveal who is present and who is absent – both concerning age and state in life. Some inventories will show that the parish is being governed by people all beyond middle age. Other results might reveal that the presence of women and men in their 20s is necessary to give balance to the religious education program. A wonderful mix of various ages and lifestyles can make the parish more inviting and responsive to the needs of its own members.

Look to see where young adults are and are not connected. How many young adults are liturgical ministers? How many are on the parish council? How about the finance committee? These people have incredibly important positions in the workforce, but when it comes to Church, we overlook their gifts. That needs to change.

## **Stage 3: Integration**

Integration is the strategy of adding young adults to the parish organizations and events that lack their presence. Our congregations will be healthier if we can integrate people of all ages and life-styles. The question to be asked at this stage is: Where could young adults be participating, but they aren’t? The challenge then is to make a conscious effort to get young adults involved in those positions.

If on Sunday mornings at your parish, there are no young adult lectors, ushers, greeters, Eucharistic ministers, gift bearers, musicians, or cantors, set a new goal. If one third of the parish members are young adults, strive to have one third of the liturgical ministers be young adults by this time next year. Do the same for your catechists. The way to meet that goal is described in the next stage, invitation.

## **Stage 4: Invitation**

The very best method for integrating young adults into parish life is direct, personal invitation. We call this the *Jesus method of organizing*. Jesus handpicked his apostles. They responded to the invitation, “Follow me.” Many young adults are eager to be involved in their parishes. However, they need to be invited. Since they see few people their age involved, they conclude that they are not needed or welcome to participate in those leadership roles. Putting an announcement in the parish bulletin falls short of the desired goal – it leaves you to the whim

of whoever comes to help. In all likelihood, you will get volunteers, but probably not young adults. If you are looking for women and men in their 20s and 30s, begin by creating an invitation list of the young adults the parish leaders know. Who would they like to see in various positions of leadership? By personally inviting those you want to participate in various activities, you are substantially increasing the possibility that they will become more involved. You will then have a higher degree of assurance of getting the desired intergenerational mix of people for parish life and activities.

### **Stage 5: Separate but Similar**

For various reasons, some parish programs and activities cannot be re-generated with new and younger people. Young adults are not a comfortable fit in parish organizations where everyone is as old as their grandparents, and working on the timetable of retirees. Rather than letting go of the good work being done by such groups as the Holy Name Society and the Altar and Rosary Society, young adults might consider an organization with a new name, a nuanced purpose, and a much younger average age of participants. For example, not everyone needs to be a part of the St. Vincent DePaul Society in order to serve the needs of the poor in the parish and the larger community. A separate organization with a new title and a purpose to help the poor can be very attractive in gathering young adults for engaging in volunteer work and building community.

This concept of separate but similar also can be applied to specific support groups. It makes more sense to create a group for younger Catholics who share an experience than it does to incorporate them into an already existing group. For example, even though the parish has a strong widow/widowers group, it makes sense to create a widow/widowers group for women and men in their 20s and 30s. Young adults who have lost a spouse have very little in common with our seniors who lost their spouses a number of years ago, but enjoy each other's company. Also, a group for married couples is great, but those in their 20s and 30s, who are still trying to discover how marriage works, will have questions and issues very different than those who have been married over a decade. To create a space in which young adults can explore those questions and issues among themselves is a wonderful goal. Again, begin with the needs you hear from people. If three couples express interest in gathering with other young couples, you are off to a good start. Small Christian communities for young adults also make sense. Such groups would allow them to meet their peers within the parish, support one another, and share their faith as they deal with common issues.

### **Stage 6: Occasional Activities**

Recently a woman in her twenties said, "My time has become more precious than gold." Between long work hours, school, relationships and various other commitments, young adults are especially busy people. They will make time for things that are important to them, but they may be reluctant to participate in parish activities that require a large time commitment. Participation in four consecutive nights at a parish mission, or a six week long parish formation

program will be out of the question for many of them. They simply do not have the time. Even if the activity directly responds to a need, if the time commitment is great, their participation is difficult, if not impossible. This is not to say that older adults aren't equally or more busy, but that young adults are reluctant to take on tasks they don't think they can give their all to.

One of the most effective principles in young adult ministry is "less is more." A few opportunities done well have a greater chance of success with young adults than doing many things or doing anything over a long period of time. In the Catholic Church we often "create a new group" in response to a particular need. Creating such a group is a great option, if you have a heavy concentration of young adults, and they have the leadership skills to make it work well. If you do not have the need or resources to create group, consider offering occasional activities. As we will see in the next chapter, a few events done well far outweighs doing many events.

### **Stage 7: New Movements**

At past moments in time, the Legion of Mary and the Holy Name Society were preparing for the first ever meetings of their new and exciting organizations. Interestingly, there is a good chance that the leaders of those new Catholic organizations were young adults. These leaders were excited about working through the church to respond to a need in our society. What about today? What are the needs in our world to which a new Catholic activity might respond? Within the church or parish, what do young adults, married or single, desire to see happen? How about a group of Catholic men joining forces to serve as male role models for fatherless children? The possibilities are endless.

Creating a new movement begins by asking, "What is needed?" Remember that all the tradition bound organizations, like the Knights of Columbus and the Daughters of Isabella at one time were put together to respond to new moments in life. Mainly staffed by younger people, they met human and spiritual needs. What today in your diocese or congregation is needed but isn't there? Where could or should there be a new movement? It is worth some thought. The next step is to gather some people and take the risk – call it a pilot program. With the help of young adults, we can get very creative here. A new movement may be what is needed to stop that group of young adults who seem to be walking further and further away from us.

Now, Consider your own parish or organization. What does an inventory of people involved in various activities and programs in your situation reveal to you? Gather with other leaders, and write out that inventory by age in life, then by state in life. What does that tell you about who is participating, and who is not? Where should young adults be personally invited into greater participation? Who can extend that invitation? Set a realistic goal, and go for it!

After presenting the 7 Stage Process above, time was spent on several programs parishes can consider in gathering those in their 20s and 30s. Complete details about these programs can be

found on the Young Adult Ministry Office website: [www.yamchicago.org](http://www.yamchicago.org). Specifically, we addressed the following four options:

**1. Within These Walls**

Create a brochure for teaching the signs and symbols found within your church building. Invite all who enter your church to gain a deeper understanding of the meaning behind various signs/symbols, and how they work in our lives today. A brochure explaining the project further can be found at: [http://www.yamchicago.org/Within\\_These\\_Walls.pdf](http://www.yamchicago.org/Within_These_Walls.pdf)

**2. The 3rd Moment of a Sacrament**

The 1st moment of any sacrament is preparation; the 2nd is the actual celebration of the sacrament. The 3rd moment is follow-up. Consider this strategy of evangelization for building a relationship with parents who have recently had a child baptized. Details can be found at: [http://www.yamchicago.org/3rd\\_Moment\\_of\\_Sacrament.pdf](http://www.yamchicago.org/3rd_Moment_of_Sacrament.pdf)

**3. Curious Catholics Gatherings**

We partner with parishes to host an evening where Young Adults with questions about their Catholic faith can enter into serious dialogue with Church leaders. After a 10 minute introduction about the Catholic faith, participants are invited to ask a question. The goal is to share Catholic teaching, along with an explanation on the values underlying those teachings. The evenings have been rich and enlightening.

Here is information posted on the Young Adult Ministry Office website, inviting participants:

We all know young adults (people in their 20s and 30s) who are Catholic, but, for a variety of reasons, are not as active in our Church as they might be. Whatever the reason, we ask you to invite them to a special session for "Curious Catholic" young adults.

Parishes around the Young Adult Office, periodically co-host "Curious Catholics" gatherings. These gatherings provide insights, understanding and perhaps a deeper awareness of the Catholic tradition. In some sessions, we present a brief overview of what it means to be Catholic as an adult, and open the floor for questions from participants. At other gatherings, we host the Mass, with an explanation.

If you are a "Curious Catholic" young adult yourself, please join us! There will be a number of people who have come on their own, looking to learn more about our Catholic faith. If you are a young adult who can invite a young adult friend, neighbor or co-worker to come as your guest, we would be sincerely grateful.

**4. Encountering Christ / Encuentro Project**

As you will see from the attached letter by Cardinal George, we are inviting Young Adults from every parish of the Archdiocese of Chicago to join their peers for small faith group work, and to discuss their hopes, dreams, challenges, and concerns. After meeting for 5 or fewer sessions, participants are asked to invite other peers to a parish celebration to continue the conversation. Participants then are invited to a Vicariate-wide celebration to share insights with their local Bishop, prior to meeting with Cardinal George and their peers on Easter Saturday, April 6. What we need from your parish are the names and contact information for two Young Adult who might be able to take the lead on gathering with their peers. We will provide training and materials. Whether the sessions take place before or after April 6, this program is a wonderful opportunity to find and gather the Young Adults at your parish. We are honored to assist your efforts any way we can.

It was a joy addressing the ACP concerning a ministry to Young Adults, those in their 20s or 30s. Please feel free to contact either Fr. Cusick or me with any questions, concerns or insights you might have. We can be reached at 3120466-9473 or [yam@yamchicago.org](mailto:yam@yamchicago.org). Peace.

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