

YOUTH MINISTRY REPORT

In early 2012, the Pastoral Council, in conjunction with Father Jim, determined to examine Youth and Young Adult Ministries at Saint Thomas Parish. As a result, Father Jim formed the Youth and Young Adult Ministry Commission to examine our existing programs, to examine best practices from other youth and young adult ministry programs, and to canvass the Parish to determine how to best meet the needs of the Parish. The Commission membership included Megan Alfaro, Michael Alfaro, David Bevins, Cathy Buehler, Carol Dills, Paul Fahey, Dawn Olney, Martha Rushmore, Matthew Schmitz, Karen Thayer, and Ward Yondo. The Commission began meeting in September 2012 and met at least monthly since that time. The specific tasks of the Commission were to survey the Parish, contact area youth ministry programs, examine and correlate the results of both of those tasks so as to create a vision for youth ministry at Saint Thomas, including assisting with creating a job description for our Director of Youth and Young Adult Ministries. The Commission focused its efforts on youth ministry (6th through 12th grades) and did not address, in detail, young adult ministry.

SURVEY

The parents of all Saint Thomas junior high and senior high students were invited to participate in a survey to ascertain (1) what youth ministry their children have been involved in, (2) how often their children participated, (3) the content of the program (e.g., study, outreach), (4) the perceived benefits, and (5) the perceived strengths and weaknesses of the program. Approximately 25% of the families participated.

The survey results suggest that more than half of our families are not participating in youth ministry, because, among other reasons: (1) parents are not engaged in youth ministry, (2) there is a perception that not enough time exists for participation in youth ministry due to school obligations, sports, extracurricular activities, and (3) Sunday is considered a family day. The survey results also revealed the following repeated trends:

- Faith- Learning and growing in spirituality and faith with peers who share common beliefs helps youth to develop their relationship with Jesus. Respondents recognize the value of faith-based friendships, which can be accomplished through Liturgy, prayer, and retreats.
- Catechesis – Some respondents suggested there is not enough Bible study and catechesis. Others suggest there is too much classroom-style lecture; it's too serious, with too much meditation.
- Service and Justice – Opportunities to serve social justice give our youth an experience of living faith. Suggestions included serving Saint Thomas, the Grand Rapids community (e.g., God's Kitchen, Habitat, Kids Food Basket), as well as the state, national or international communities.
- Community- Building community with friends, peers, and adult role models is a necessary social outlet for youth. Community Building should be dynamic, fun and provide a safe setting to build peer support (and include good food). Some respondents like large groups, while others like small groups.
- Other Youth Ministries – In light of the fact that some of the Saint Thomas youth attend other youth ministry programs, concern was raised that the youth ministry programs are in competition.

In addition, suggestions were made that boys and girls need to have some separate time for in-depth discussions without gender inhibitions. Some recommended collaboration with neighboring youth ministries. Ultimately, we must welcome all youth and reach out to them wherever they are in their relationship with Christ and His Church, affording them an opportunity to grow in love of God and others.

RESEARCH

From the parish survey, the Commission compiled a list of attended local youth ministry programs. These ministries included the following Catholic ministries: Challenge Girls' Club, Conquest Boys' Club, Immaculate Heart of Mary Parish, Saint Robert of Newminster Parish, Saint Stephen Parish, and Verso L'Alto Ministry. The Commission also contacted the following non-Catholic ministries identified in the survey results: Ada Bible Church and Grace Episcopal Church.

Commission members contacted representatives of all these ministries and engaged in a conversation about the overall goals of their youth ministry programs, how they achieved those goals, and how their leadership is structured. The responses were gathered and discussed by the Commission in order for the Commission to identify the best practices of these youth ministries. This research indicated that a successful youth ministry is Christ centered, meets on a regular basis, and strives to develop healthy personal relationships. These results also showed that youth ministry thrives best when supported, prayerfully and financially, by the whole faith community. For example, Saint Roberts has approximately 350 youth and young adults, with one full-time youth minister, up to two part-time youth ministers, and several stipended leaders. Additionally, Ada Bible Church has approximately 500 teenagers regularly participating in their youth ministry programs, and their community has invested in eight full-time staff to lead this ministry.

CONCLUSIONS

Through prayerful reflection and discussion, the Commission considered the information gained through the survey and research (including reviewing the USCCB's document "Renewing the Vision," and the Diocesan Guidelines) and as well as considering the youth ministry experience of several commission members. The Commission also sought out Father Jim's input. The following conclusions were reached:

- 1) The youth ministry should be relational in nature which seeks to go out and meet the youth where they are in order to lead them to Christ.
- 2) The position should continue to be full time with competitive wages/benefits in order to promote stability of the job and prevent a high turn-over rate.
- 3) Support from the pastor, parents, and the parish at large is crucial to the success of the youth ministry. This could be accomplished in part by having at least one adult/parent formation session per year where formation is provided to assist parents in talking with their youth about faith.
- 4) To develop strategies to engage the large population of youth within Saint Thomas (more than 50% of the youth) that do not participate in any youth ministry. One way this could be accomplished is to hold one big event every year whereby we attract youth who would not normally attend a ROC night.
- 5) As Father Jim mentioned during his April 28, 2013 homily, we must change the perception that youth ministry is just "one more thing on the calendar."
- 6) Our youth ministry must be authentically Catholic, vibrant, excellent, and must raise the bar to challenge the youth to be radical disciples of Christ. One way to accomplish this goal is to have at least one session per year where outside presenters talk to the youth about their personal relationship with Christ.
- 7) We must utilize the Core Team concept by recruiting, training and forming adult volunteers who will actively participate in youth ministry.
- 8) We must develop a Faith Formation Advisory Board which will guide, evaluate and act as an advocate for the Director of Youth and Young Adult Ministries and the Director of Religious Education and Formation.

JOB DESCRIPTION

The Commission then took all of the information gathered, the conclusions that were drawn from the data, requested Father Jim's input, and crafted a job description for the full-time position of Director of Youth and Young Adult Ministries. The job description emphasizes Saint Thomas' need for relational youth and young adult ministries. These ministries must foster a personal relationship with Jesus Christ in all of our youth and young adults and integrate them more fully into the life of Saint Thomas Parish through the sacramental life of the Catholic Church.

The Commission is thankful for the opportunity to serve Saint Thomas and requests prayers for the Youth and Young Adult Ministries at Saint Thomas and the search for a new Director of those ministries.