

## High School Youth Formation in the Diocese of Madison

**The End Goal** - Those who work in the Church know that the goal of our ministry, apostolate, work, and lives is to encounter Jesus Christ and allow that encounter to transform our hearts and motivate us into mission. Pope Benedict eloquently said it in his first encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*, “Being a Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction.”<sup>1</sup> Pope Francis has continued this teaching in his first encyclical, *Evangelii gaudium*, calling us to be “people who have chosen deep down to be with others and for others” in light of this relationship with Jesus Christ.<sup>2</sup>

There is beauty, richness, and happiness to be found in a life lived in relationship with Jesus Christ within the Catholic Church. There is nothing more we should want to work for than to make this reality known to our Catholic teens. We trust that the Holy Spirit is guiding the good work being accomplished in the Diocese of Madison, from our parishes and schools, to Camp Gray, Love Begins Here, and other apostolates working for the sanctification of our young people. However, there is still much work to be done.

**Today’s Situation** - A quick look into our own experience or around the country will tell us the same thing: by and large, our Catholic teens are not practicing the Catholic faith into their adult years. We recognize that a large part of this falling away happens during their childhood years, as families do not experience the fullness of life within the Church. The situation grows increasingly dim as they move through and beyond their high school years. In the book *Forming Intentional Disciples*, Sherry Weddell points out the fact that “*Catholics who leave, leave early...* Nearly half of cradle Catholics who become ‘unaffiliated’ are gone by age eighteen, and 79% have left by age twenty three.”<sup>3</sup>

**The Vision for High School Formation** - To turn the tide around, we must rethink and recommit our energies to intentionally forming families, parents, and high school students, so that we, together as a Diocese, create a generation of missionary disciples in our eleven counties and beyond. In order to raise mature, intentional disciples in the Church, we must provide ample opportunities for evangelization, conversion, catechesis and discipleship formation for teens throughout their high school years. There will not be one standard program or event that fits all parishes and young parishioners, namely because “the work of discipleship is inherently individual and customized.”<sup>4</sup> While there is not a standard that will suit all needs, we are confident that a parish striving to meet the needs of their teens will engage adult volunteers to help create opportunities for evangelization leading to conversion and ongoing catechesis aimed at forming disciples. These efforts should be distinct from providing Confirmation preparation in the parish.

**The Sacramental Life and Confirmation** - On our quest to create missionary disciples among our high school teens, we must think about how the Lord will give them grace and gifts through their sacramental lives. Without a doubt, our teens will grow and change most through their encounters with our Lord in the Eucharist and through his merciful love in Reconciliation. Beyond helping our young people establish regular sacramental lives, many teens will be strengthened by the Holy Spirit through Confirmation. Confirmation does not mark the end of catechetical formation, nor should it be the driving force of high school activity in the parish.

### Who Provides High School Youth Formation

In order to create a holistic formation program, in which we are able to both evangelize teens and foster real growth in holiness, our parishes need to raise up a community to support it. This effort should be seen as part of the larger Go Make Disciples efforts Bishop Hying has called all parishes to embrace.

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<sup>1</sup> *Deus Caritas Est*, Pope Benedict XVI, 1

<sup>2</sup> *Evangelii gaudium*, Pope Francis, 273

<sup>3</sup> *Forming Intentional Disciples*, Sherry Weddell, 33

<sup>4</sup> *Becoming a Parish of Intentional Disciples: Rethinking Youth Ministry*, Jim Beckman, 126

- First and foremost, parents must be invested in their kids' faith journey and deepening relationship with Jesus Christ through the Catholic Church. Parent involvement is essential in helping encourage teens to receive grace in the sacraments, stay involved in the life of their parish and embrace opportunities to grow in faith.<sup>5</sup>
- Second, pastors and the parish staff have to be on board with this vision, along with making decisions to use financial resources to support their teens.
- An essential part of the parish staff team is a dedicated staff member or committed volunteer who leads high school youth formation. While one person is not capable of discipling every teen in the parish, it is important to have one person with the vision to keep the parish united in serving the high school population well.
- The parish community, at large, plays an important role in forming high school teens, as they witness their living relationships with Jesus Christ. Particularly, high school youth are best served by a group of adults giving of their time as volunteers, not limited to but including serving as catechists, small group leaders, and chaperones for retreats or mission trips.

The parish must be invested in this mission of forming their high school youth and aware that the faithful are the parish's greatest resource. The faith is communicated best in a relational, personal way. Investing in the people who are willing to give of their time and talent to discipling high school youth of the parish will yield the best return.

### **Basic Movements of High School Youth Formation**

- **Evangelization**  
We must acknowledge that many of our high school teens (even a good number of those presenting themselves for the sacrament of Confirmation) question their faith or have lost the faith they once received. We must not grow slack in zeal when it comes to inviting them in and proclaiming the good news of the Gospel to them. In addition to establishing relationships with families who have remained present in our parishes, an evangelizing parish also has members present in the broader community where they can meet and build trust with teens beyond the walls of our church buildings.
- **Conversion**  
In the midst of the programming, classes, retreats, and mission trips offered, we must continually invite our teens into an intentional relationship with Jesus Christ. We must teach them, through our words and witness, that this relationship in the Catholic Church means saying no to sin and yes to happiness, according to God's plan. Every time we can bring our teens to the Sacrament of Penance, there is a new opportunity for them to turn away from sin and to Jesus Christ, once again.
- **Catechesis and Ongoing Formation**  
Once our youth have said yes to living in this relationship, they need to be provided an organic, systematic catechesis in the faith, as well intentional formation in prayer, community life, and mission. This ongoing formation must address relevant topics in their lives, especially questions of morals and living as Christians in the world today, while answering their questions and providing hope in the midst of the many anxieties they are experiencing.

While this vision for high school youth formation is exciting and will help create more intentional disciples, it has implications for other areas of parish life. Among them are the formation of middle school youth and the evangelization of adults in a parish.

- In order to successfully build a culture of evangelization and discipleship among the high school youth of a parish, there must be an emphasis on creating an engaging formation of the middle school youth. Dry middle school catechesis experiences in the classroom, lacking in an ardent proclamation of the gospel and/or opportunities to engage in the faith with their peers, will only make this movement towards intentional, holistic high school youth formation more difficult.
- This vision for high school youth formation depends heavily on adult participation, most especially from parents. In order to cultivate an enthusiastic, faithful group of adults to lead the teens, parishes will need to

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<sup>5</sup> "Teens 'mirror' their parents' faith to an astonishing degree. If teens don't like church, it might be because they see one of their parents not liking it, particularly their father." *Becoming a Parish of Intentional Disciples*, Jim Beckman, Chapter 7

consider how they are reaching out and evangelizing the adults of the parish, as well as providing ample opportunities for deepening conversion, study, and discipleship formation.

The following is a suggestion of how to structure regular formation opportunities in a parish:

WHAT SHOULD BE OFFERED	FREQUENCY	WHO COULD / SHOULD COME
<b>“Large” Group Events</b> Emphasis: Evangelization	Monthly	All teens in the parish, especially those who are not regularly attending Mass or have drifted away from regular practice.
<b>“Small” Group Formation</b> Emphasis: Catechesis + Discipleship Formation	Weekly	Teens who are practicing Catholics, at minimum striving to follow the precepts of the Church.

WHAT COULD BE OFFERED	FREQUENCY	WHO COULD / SHOULD COME
<b>Frassati Fest</b> Emphasis: Evangelization + Conversion	Yearly, Superbowl Sunday	All teens in the parish, especially those who are not regularly attending Mass or have drifted away from regular practice.
<b>Love Begins Here</b> Emphasis: Evangelization, Conversion, + Formation	Summer, 1 Week	Teens who are open to practicing the works of mercy, regardless of the current practice of their faith.
<b>Retreats</b> Emphasis: Evangelistic or formative, depending on purpose of retreat.	Yearly or Twice Yearly	Varies depending on purpose of retreat.
<b>Service Opportunities</b> Emphasis: Evangelization	Monthly	Teens who are open to practicing the works of mercy, regardless of the current practice of their faith.

\* While staff and volunteers should be able to take a vacation or some rest throughout the year, ideally high school formation is much more a year round apostolate rather than a program that follows an academic year calendar.

\* Many of the above efforts, in particular the “Large” Group Events, may be well served by regional efforts or combining the time and talent across staff and volunteers from multiple parishes.