

Adolescent Faith Development

Not all young people have the same needs from the Church. And, not all youth programs are suitable for all young people.

Two scenarios:

Faith Formation Leaders have frequently noticed that the young people who attend Confirmation preparation programs tend to be generally disconnected. Jack is a high school sophomore who is forced to be there to fulfill some unexplained expectation. Jack would be perceived to be relatively “un-churched”. He was baptized as an infant and received his First Communion eight years ago. Some Confirmation candidates have been attending Catholic school and others may have been enrolled in a parish Religious Education program, but Jack has been a part of neither for a long time. Jack only attends Mass rarely, and could not name his pastor, or recognize him in a crowd. Jack suffers through Confirmation every class because he doesn’t want to fight with him mom about it anymore. He can’t wait until he gets Confirmed so he can finally be done with the Catholic Church.

On the other hand, we have some youth programs that are bursting with energy and enthusiasm. Diane is a member of a parish that has a weekly youth gathering that attract dozens of teens who choose to be there. Her youth program is able to engage young people in community building, silly games, faith discussions, and some prayer experiences. Diane is asking her Youth Ministry Leader for more opportunities to grow in her faith rather than so much focus on games. She still looks forward to coming back each week because this is her spiritual home. Diane is a little uncomfortable about graduating high school because she is worried about leaving her faith community. She will be making her decision about which college to attend based on how she feels about the Catholic Campus Ministry.

The difference between Jack and Diane is significant. Most of those differences can be attributed to their previous formation. Their family life, the quality of their engagement in the parish as children, the social pressure placed on them by peers and sports, their experience of Sunday Mass, and the attitude of their parents on their Catholic faith are all very significant influences on how they came to where they are.

However, both Jack and Diane are parishioners. They both deserve the best the Church has to offer. Faith Formation Leaders tend to realize that most of the students in Confirmation Prep are more like Jack, but their program is designed to serve kids like Diane. Meanwhile, the optional program available for Diane seems to be designed for teens like Jack. Why?

“One-Size-Fits-All” Fails Most

If both Jack and Diane are your parishioners, what should you do? No one program is going to be able to perfectly meet the needs of *both* Jack and Diane. In the field of youth ministry, one size does NOT fit all.

“If You Reach One” it’s NOT Worthwhile

If you decide to have a program that targets only Jack and his needs, Diane will be underserved. She will be looking for more depth than Jack and will probably look for another alternative program in another church. Sure, you will have reached Jack, but you would have abandoned Diane. Your youth ministry program needs to strive to meet *every* teen in your parish as best as possible.

One Person Can NOT Change the World... alone

We would probably all agree that Jesus was the most influential human being to have walked the Earth. But even Jesus took on disciples and sent them to continue his mission. Without those men and women of the 1st century, we would not have a Church. In fact, we wouldn’t need a Church. Even Jesus is a part of a tri-une community of Love. God doesn’t work alone. You shouldn’t either. In order for your youth ministry to offer a variety of opportunities and reach each teen you need a team of parishioners to take on the mission.

The Theory of Adolescent Faith Development will provide a framework for how you can evaluate, imagine, and implement a youth formation strategy that will be more fruitful. This is a theory that is widely accepted. It is a concept that has persisted in a variety of forms from the Wedge Model of Youth Ministry¹, to the Moments of Evangelization from the Directory for Catechesis², Frank Mercadante’s “Growing Teen Disciples”³, to Sherry Weddell’s “Forming Intentional Disciples”⁴, to the USCCB’s “Living and Missionary Disciples”⁵. The theory states that there is a general flow in the way that people tend to grow in their faith. This growth takes place sequentially, and accounts for various facets of faith, such as how receptive they are to being guided in their faith, how much one’s faith is internalized, how active they are in seeking clarity, and how committed they are to religious practices. While the Church has clearly endorsed this process of growth, it has not been measured scientifically.

While most faith development occurs outside of a formal ecclesial structure (i.e., in the home), our focus will be on how our formal youth ministry programs, services, and opportunities can assist young people in moving toward the next phase in the faith journey.

This faith journey process can be simplified into five phases:

1. Care and Belonging
2. Spiritual Encounters
3. Clarity and Deeper Meaning
4. Accountability
5. Mission

The challenge that Faith Formation Leaders have to address is trying to find out in which phase most of their teens are in. Once you can make that quick assessment, you could shift your

¹ Wedge Model in Thomas Zanzig, “Youth Ministry: Directions and Reflections,” in Readings and Resources in Youth Ministry, ed. Michael Warren (Winona, Minnesota: Saint Mary's Press, 1987).

² Directory for Catechesis, 2020, #32-#36

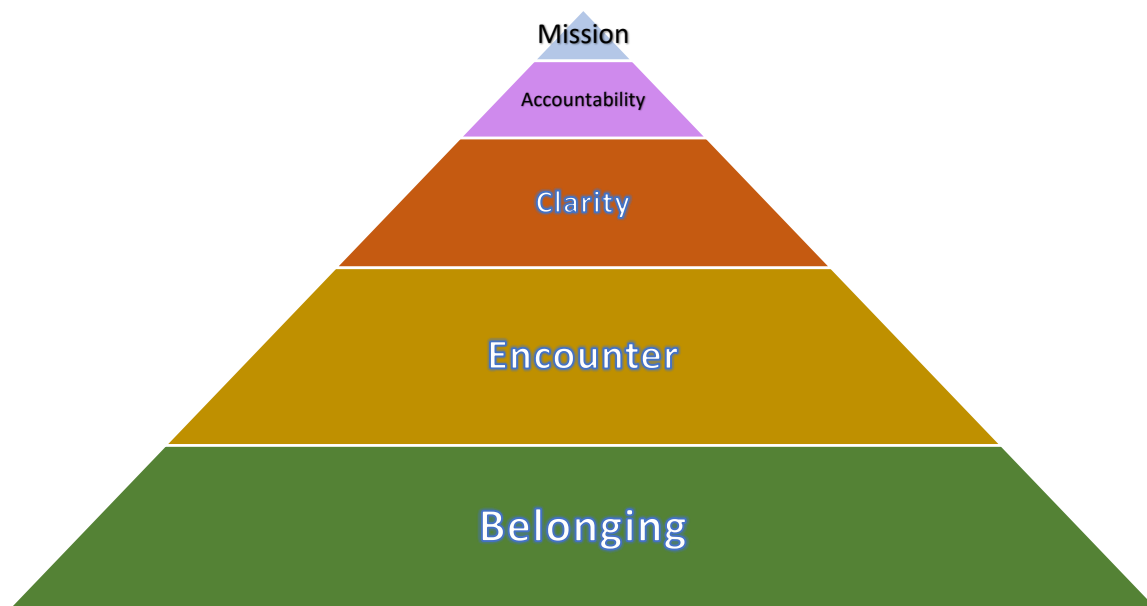
³ 2002, St. Mary's Press

⁴ 2022, Our Sunday Visitor

⁵ USCCB [better citation needed]

programmatic emphasis to meet your teens where they are... and guide them appropriately to their next step.

Generally speaking, if you were to consider all teenagers in a parish, we have found that they are not equally distributed between these phases. In fact, research shows that the majority of teenage parishioners (60%) are in the first or second phase – this means that most teens are not yet open to having Church leaders teach them more about the faith. However, more than half are open to authentic, invitational spiritual encounters.



The goal of a youth ministry program is to determine where each young person is and, then, to guide them appropriate to the next phase in their journey.

We want to move every young person ever closer to God and His Church, at the right pace, and with the appropriate methods.

If we go back to our first two scenarios, we would see that Jack is in the first phase of his journey. He does not feel like he belongs in his Confirmation program and he does not believe that Church leader care about him. Diane is in the third phase of her journey. She is looking for depth and clarity to guide her faith. Our programming, though, is misaligned. We are giving Jack clarity and catechesis which he is rejecting due to his lack of trust in the Church. We are giving Diane a sense of community and acceptance, which she is rejecting due to her need for something of more depth.

By simply re-aligning our programming, we may be surprised to see how much our young people will grow.

Diving deeper into understanding faith development will help you to know what your teens need, know how to deliver it to them, and, most importantly, start to discover some of the hidden obstacles that artificially get in our way.

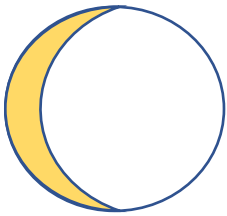
Emphasis

Faith Development happens in a series of **phases** which are revealed to us like phases of the moon, slowly blending from one to another, but always leading and pointing to the next phase. An **emphasis** is a special attention or effort directed toward something. The *em-phase* is the point in time when a *phase* becomes clear and deliberate. Our work with young people will shift like the phases of the moon, but has clearly distinct emphases. What emphasis is needed depends on your observations of the young people who are with you at any given point in time. As a new moon appears as only a sliver in the sky, we know that the full moon is still there, even if only slightly visible. In the same way, all emphases should be present in some way in all youth programs, even if they are only slightly noticeable. No one outgrows the need for belonging or a desire for spiritual encounters. But these desires may not always be what we emphasize.

Youth Ministry programs are not assembly lines or strictly regimented machinery. Our programs need to adapt and follow the flow and the pace that is needed by the phase and growth of our young people. It is not realistic that any program will reach everyone. And, it's not reasonable that every person will flow to all phases of faith development. We do what we can with the ones in front of us.

Faith Development of teenagers tends to follow a pattern. Youth Ministry Programs should follow it, too.

First Emphasis: Care and Belonging



Church leaders (e.g., FFLs) should do what they can so that teenagers feel like they belong in the program, and are cared for and accepted by authentic Christian role models.

This emphasis is primarily important if your program's participants appear disengaged or do not feel like they are accepted or feel a sense of belonging in the program.

It is through this emphasis in forming safe and accepting programs that teenagers will be open to developing a deeper, personal relationship with God.

This emphasis will be most needed in Confirmation Preparation programs and other youth programs in which teens are “required” to participate.

Second Emphasis: Spiritual Encounters



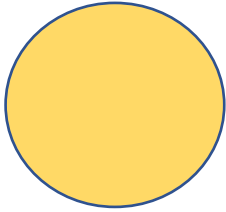
Church leaders should do what they can to ensure that teenagers are invited to engage in a series of significant and ongoing spiritual encounters, after which they may see themselves and their relationship with God differently.

This emphasis is primarily important if your program's participants appear to trust the leaders, and feel safe and accepted in your program, but are not yet personally driven to authentically explore their faith.

It is through this emphasis that teenagers will internalize their faith and opt in to being guided to a deeper understanding and apply the depth of Catholic teaching.

This emphasis will be most needed in optional youth programming like “youth groups”, retreats, or service opportunities.

Third Emphasis: Clarity and Deeper Meaning (Catechesis)



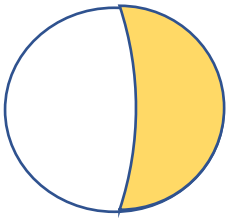
Church leaders should do what they can to ensure that teenagers may opt in to being guided to a deeper understanding of God and His Church and choose to explore an application of Catholic teaching.

This emphasis is primarily important if your program's participants have had a series of spiritual encounters and are open to growing in their understanding of the faith.

It is through this emphasis that teenagers will come to seek accountability from and subscribe to the culture and practices of our faith community.

This emphasis will be most needed for your most engaged teens who have already had a series of significant spiritual encounters and are looking for deeper meaning and clarity in their faith. Programing such as small faith sharing groups, bible studies, or independent study are great at addressing this emphasis.

Fourth Emphasis: Accountability



Church leaders should do what they can to support a culture of accountability and encouragement for teenagers to take responsibility for growing in and living out their faith.

This emphasis is primarily important if your program's participants take their faith more seriously than their peers and open to making significant changes and commitments in their lives.

It is through this emphasis that teenagers will find the faith community of support and accountability that is necessary to live as a life-long follower of Jesus.

This emphasis will be most needed for those self-driven teens who are motivated learners and role models for other teens.

Reasonable progress

Faith development takes time and energy. Some Youth Ministry Leaders find frustration in the ministry because so few of the young people they work with are fully-committed, life-long disciples after graduating high school. It is not reasonable to expect all teens to be fully committed to their faith when they leave your program. It is reasonable to hope that all teens grow at least a little. Maybe that could be the awkward teen who didn't want to come at all signing up for a summer trip. That would be a huge victory.

Our young people have the rest of their lives to continue their faith development. Our role is a small one, for a limited time, with limited influence. That is why it is all that more important that we emphasize what would be most impactful.

	Care/Belonging			Profound Encounter	
	Indicators of Phase 0 (un-churched or disenfranchised) (<5% of teens)	Indicators of Phase 1 (attend programs reluctantly) (15% of teens)	When they're ready for next phase?	Indicators of Phase 2 (40% of teens)	When they're ready for next phase?
Program Participation: Feelings about Catholic Church	Does not think about faith and may reject Catholicism. Only attends if it's required.	Usually attends with a friend or after a personal invitation.	Attend and leave with a smile	Recognizes Catholicism helps them grow in their faith	more relaxed and receptive posture
Faith Sharing Feelings about Exploring Faith	Faith conversations may be offensive or deeply invasive	Timid, resistant to, or afraid of Faith Discussions	Increased comfort in Faith Discussions	Open to hearing the faith stories of other teens and Church leaders	Volunteering to share their faith story, desire to hear the story of others
Caring Adults View of Parish Adults	Parish adults are perceived as out of touch, judgmental, and fake. Does not know the names of parish adults	Unsure if parish adults care about them.	They know the adults care about them	Teens displays trust in at least one or more parish adults.	Teens look up to the adults and value their insights
Church Expectations: Expectations Placed on Them	Does not care about Church expectations.	Doesn't get anything out of participating.	Appear to be more open about expectations	May appear reluctant, but expresses appreciation later.	Teens embrace expectations as a sign of belonging
Prayer How teen relates to God through prayer	Prayer is a foreign experience, Expresses doubt/rejection of God	Appears awkward during prayer occasions, but likely to think God is real	Increased comfort during prayer	Likely prays on their own and are open/respectful during group prayer	Comfortable expressing authentic emotional response

Ideas for Care and Belonging:

- Greet teens by name, be sure they can learn other people's names, too.
- Create an open environment with food and comfortable seating
- Engage in creating and non-threatening games where everyone plays a role
- Utilize adults who authentically care about teens and radiate joy.

Ideas for Spiritual Encounters:

- Invite teens to join in a prayer ritual. Be sure they know how to participate.
- Introduce rote prayers (e.g., the Our Father) by saying, "If you don't know this prayer, that's okay."
- Invite people to a posture of prayer, such as "close your eyes, quiet your heart, take a few moments to prepare yourself. Remember that we are in the Holy Presence of God."
- Invite the teens to talk openly about their faith encounters. Model this for them.

Clarity/Catechesis About 35% of Catholic Teens		Accountability About 5% of Catholic Teens		Disciples Very rare for teens
Indicators of Phase 3	When they're ready for next phase?	Indicators of Phase 4	When they're ready for next phase?	Indicators of Phase 5
Seems to enjoy being guided to deeper understanding	Forming their Conscience in light of Church teaching	Is excited to be a Catholic leader and takes role as disciple seriously.	Consistent Examination of Conscience	Fully surrendered and open to ongoing formation
Starting to develop meaningful questions and doing independent research	Focused on applied Catholic thought	Hungering for more Church wisdom as a significant part of their live.	More global and communal issues, how to evangelize the world	Open to listening to others and discerning wisdom
Coming to adults with ideas to explore or questions	Adults accompany them as sounding boards and resources	Trust adults to lead them and challenge them.	Adults are peers, companions on the journey	Partners in Ministry
Likes to be challenged to learn more and take faith more seriously.	Feel like they have a personal responsibility to know, act, and value	Willing to commit to Catholic "obligations", and live up to adult expectations.	Openness to surrender and vocational discernment	They fully belong to God and His Church Pursuing a Vocation
Prays as a way to learn about God, and unite with Him in a variety of ways.	Personally opting into Mass attendance	Deeply rooted in regular personal and communal prayer	Surrender and listening to God's guidance	Regular and committed part of daily life

Ideas for Clarity & Meaning:

- Answer questions with questions. "What do you mean by that?" or "What do you think?"
- Help them to feel comfortable and affirmed when they share a question.
- Teach them how to find their own answers in the Catechism, Scripture, or online sources.
- Allow them to wrestle with how to articulate faith issues, guiding them to be careful in their word choice.

Ideas for Accountability

- Remind them of your authentic care for them and God's unending love for them. Assure them that any choice they make will not stop either relationship.
- Steer young people toward positive moral behaviors rather than away from negative behaviors. (E.g., instead of saying "You shouldn't lust after girls", perhaps say "Maybe it would be better to look at girls as your sisters in Christ rather than merely sexual objects.")
- Let them own any decision about their behavior. If it's their choice it's more likely to stick when you're not around.

A Process for Program Assessment

Caring and Belonging

1. Do your teens feel safe and accepted?
2. Do your teens feel like they belong and are active contributors to the program?
3. Do your teens trust the adults present, and the other teens around them?
4. Do your adult volunteers/leaders/teachers greet each young person by name?

Spiritual Encounters

5. Does your program allow teens to opt in or out of any vulnerable faith experiences or discussions at their pace and comfort level?
6. Does your program offer various opportunities for personal encounters with God?
7. Does your program help teens to articulate their own personal faith experiences?
8. Does your program help teens come to a deeper awareness and appreciation of ritual and tradition rather than just viewing them as obligations?

Clarity and Deeper Meaning (Catechesis)

9. Does your program allow teens to ask questions without fear of judgment?
10. Does your program provide wisdom and guidance that today's young people are seeking?
11. Does your program allow for those who want to learn more about the Catholic faith the opportunity to be guided deeper into her teachings?
12. Does your program allow young people the freedom to explore their own perspectives on faith issues, even if their expressions are imperfect?

Accountability

13. Does your program encourage peer accountability and youth ownership of your ministries?
14. Does your program help teens who have a deep faith (personal spirituality and knowledge of teaching) to make meaningful life decisions in light of that faith?
15. Do your young people know that you care about them enough to have difficult conversations with them about the way they are living their lives?
16. Does your program work to integrate young people into the full mission of the faith community (liturgical ministries, committees, catechists, etc.)?

Mission

17. Does your program empower and equip young people for a life of ongoing faith beyond high school?