



WE ARE STRONG TOGETHER

A VISION FOR YOUTH MINISTRY

“You are salt for the earth ... You are light for the world.”

Young people share equally with adults in ministry. “Youth must not be regarded merely as objects of the Church’s pastoral concern. In fact, young people ought to be encouraged to be active on behalf of the Church as leading characters in evangelization and participants in the renewal of society.” (*Christifideles Laici*, #46)

Young people have special gifts for service. “Young people’s sensitivity profoundly affects how they perceive values of justice, non-violence and peace. Their hearts are disposed to fellowship, friendship and solidarity. They are greatly moved by causes that relate to the quality of life and the conservation of nature.” This is not meant either to idolize or to romanticize youth. It is to say that young people, by definition, hold out a great hope for the future, even as they “are troubled by anxiety, deceptions, and fears of the world as well as by those temptations that come to them at this time of their lives.” (*Ibid.*)

Many young people find themselves daily at some point between hope and despair. Some are disturbed by their experience of world events. Their sense of fairness and justice puts them at odds with these events - so much so that it leads them to question (he events, to want to transform them or at least to take some kind of action. Other young people, although disturbed by what they experience, are afraid that no effective change will or can take place. These youth are reluctant or unable to make commitments to an uncertain future. Then there are others again who simply accept the status quo and make the best of it.

Our experience of youth ministry

Several models of youth ministry attempt to respond to these experiences of young people. In some, youth are regarded primarily as recipients of the ministry of adults. These models tend to reflect a society in which adults make the rules, and adults teach and enforce them. They may also reflect a need some adults have to perpetuate their own experience of Church ami ministry. In other models, adults try to respond to

the needs and sensitivities of young people as they perceive them. Yet in neither of these models are youth seen necessarily as doers of ministry.

Meanwhile, young people have become bored and uninterested in these adult models. Many who have tried to remain faithful have sooner or later become frustrated or disillusioned. Some have even dismissed the Christian community as dead. Meanwhile, adults lament the absence and lack of interest of the younger generation. While adults moralize about the irresponsibility of youth, young people in turn criticize the hypocrisy and inconsistent values of adults.

Attempts at other styles of ministry have produced mixed results. Peer ministry, whether in the high school environment or in retreat movements and weekends, has sometimes brought about dynamic growth. In some cases, careful needs assessments that have been conducted have led to effective youth ministry. In other situations, sensitive, listening adults successfully involve young people in creating programs that respond to their needs. Some dioceses have created offices of youth ministry and some parishes have hired youth ministers. Yet communities still seem to lack a vision of youth ministry that can enable young people to become full partners in ministry.

When this issue of full partnership is raised, adults often become uncomfortable, even resistant. Could young people really have something credible and prophetic to say? Adults often insist that youth “really do not understand the issues.” But what if these young voices are saying something about our Church in it adults and youth alike need to hear? Can the Christian community afford to shut out young people simply because they critique the world of which all of us, especially the young, are a product? Could this be a critique the adult world really does not want to face?

How can we help young people to speak and to be heard?

We believe that within the Christian community, adults and youth are brothers and sisters. As in a family, some are older, some younger. All are worthy of respect. Each has a unique voice. Each brings indispensable gifts and talents to use in loving service. The Spirit unites us to one another in relationships that enable us to fulfill the Lord’s command to transform the world with the Gospel News of Jesus Christ.

We base the foundation for youth ministry upon the aspect of relationship that exists within the Trinity. In this community of perfect love, persons know and are known, love and are loved, and together generate life. We endorse a similar partnership of reciprocity between adults and young people. Where adults and youth become partners through commitment, mutual trust, respect and care, they participate in what we call reciprocal community ministry.

As reciprocal community ministry, youth ministry must operate in three spheres that are also inter-related: 1) adult to youth, youth to adult; 2) youth to youth; and 3) adult and youth to the world.

1. *Adult to youth, youth to adult*

Young people want to be guided by adults, yet they feel they also have a viewpoint to offer, a right to be heard. Clearly, in this sphere, the emphasis is on the quality of the dialogue. In some instances, this dialogue will be like that between a mentor and apprentice. In other cases, it may resemble that of two friends, or two siblings. In still others, it may look like the healthy dialogue between a parent and almost-adult child. As both parties learn the skills of working together, they come to the sometimes surprising realization that each can minister to the other. The relationship does not remain static. Sometimes it is deep and long-lasting, and becomes an adult-to-adult friendship. But even if it does not deepen, the friendship and comfort that develop encourage young people to come forward, ask their questions and discuss. Adults and youth alike are then able to discover each other's needs and to try to respond appropriately.

Young people's needs include the need for: identity ("you are a uniquely gifted person"), hospitality ("you belong, and your friends are welcome too"), empowerment ("I believe in you; you can do it"), guidance and support ("values count; you are responsible"), understanding when they fail ("we all make mistakes; try again"), and the need to be heard and responded to when they confront us with difficult truths ("I understand What you are saying; let's look at this together"). Challenging as it is to meet these needs, the challenge is even greater when the young people involved are affected by poverty, unemployment, violence, drug or other types of abuse, family disintegration, psychological or social difficulties, rejection or materialism.

For adults, the needs are just as real. These include the need: to be trusted (I believe you), for recognition that their life experience counts ("how did you handle this?"), for acceptance of their own struggle on the journey of faith ("thank you for sharing your story"), to be understood as living a committed Christian life ("I too would like to live a life of positive conviction") and the need to be assured that they are growing and developing in all realms of life.

It should be noted that adults cannot make youth or youth ministry their whole world. They cannot expect young people will or should answer all their needs. The adult's prime experience of reciprocity should still be the adult community.

Another challenge in this adult to youth, youth to adult sphere of ministry is to recognize that young people will eventually pass through the period of adolescence. Youth ministry needs to assist adolescents as they pass through movements of counterdependence and independence to the interdependence of adulthood. In this way the ministry contributes to developing a generation of adults who can continue to engage in reciprocal community.

2. *Youth to youth*

Most of young people's meaningful relationships are with their peers rather than with adults. Youth minister to other young people mainly in ordinary, informal ways in their day by day witnessing to Christ.

Peer counselling, peer tutoring, community service, youth retreats, natural habitat experiences, youth ministry activities and the like can enable young

people to minister to one another. These programs can also help young people develop skills that facilitate reciprocal community ministry. Peer ministry programs are proven to be among the most effective youth ministry programs. Yet the ministry of youth to youth cannot be restricted only to those who have participated in peer ministry programs or who desire to do so. Those with skills in peer ministry can function as "leaven for the loaf." Meanwhile, those who "wouldn't be caught dead" in a peer ministry program can also contribute through their gifts of empathy, selflessness and interest. Some of these young people may be labelled "marginalized," but they also have unique gifts to bring.

Often our parish communities do not have much room for those young people who do not fit into the mainstream. Can they minister if they "don't come to church regularly"? Yet these young people, with their own style of relating, often can reach those who cannot be reached by their other peers. These young people may want nothing to do with institutional structures, but may be faithful to a style of commitment that cares for the other, especially in times of crisis. The Christian community must recognize that these youth are exercising an authentic ministry.

3. *Adult and youth to the world*

A community's experience of God shapes its ministry to its members and to the wider community. This experience of God includes the community's answers to the questions "where is God?" and "how is God at work in our world?" If the community encounters God primarily within the Church structure, then its ministry will probably be focussed on the Church. If, on the other hand, the community experiences God at work in all humanity, especially among the poor and the disadvantaged, then its ministry will respond to all who can be called "neighbour." It will go beyond identifying merely with parish community or denomination. Most communities fall somewhere between these two experiences.

Most young people are not satisfied with a community focus that is exclusively Church-oriented. A community that ministers not only to its own members but also to the broader community is responding to the gospel challenge: "be salt for the earth, light for the world." Ministry that reaches beyond walls and boundaries is particularly appealing. It gives people the opportunity to experience in a tangible way the faith they have heard about, experienced or studied.

Listening to one another, respecting and trusting one another is experienced fully in the joint action adults and youth undertake in the name of the Christian community. This action may take place in soup kitchens or in social analysis. It may happen in a family's concern for another young person in difficulty, or in a parish's commitment to a refugee family. It may take root when a family or group decides on positive action for the environment. Each community has what it takes to respond creatively to the many opportunities for service and involvement that present themselves.

Where do we go from here?

This vision is unfinished. It will never be completely finished. A new generation of young people will always be taking their place among us, challenging a new set of sisters and brothers to take their younger siblings seriously.

The next step is up to you. Each parish, each diocese is unique. This uniqueness demands that the vision of reciprocal community ministry be embodied in each local community according to its shape and potential. As this embodiment takes place, we will truly be able to recognize and affirm each other as "salt for the earth, light for the world." (Matthew 5: 13-14)

Edited by:

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We Are Strong Together: A Vision for Youth Ministry

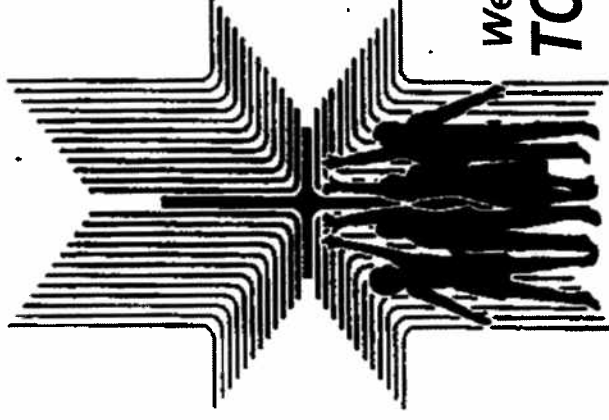
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Reflection questions to guide group study of the vision statement *We Are Strong Together*

- 1) "Young people share equally with adults in ministry."
 - 2) "Young people have special gifts for service."
 - 3) "Young people really have something credible and prophetic to say."
 - 4) "As reciprocal community ministry, youth ministry must operate in three spheres that are also inter-related:
 - a) adult to youth, youth to adult,
 - b) youth in youth, and
 - c) adult and youth to the world."
 - 5) "Adults and youth alike are able to discover each other's needs and try to respond appropriately."
 - 6) "Youth minister to other young people mainly in ordinary, informal ways in their day by day witnessing to Christ."
 - 7) "A community that ministers not only to its own members but also to the broader community is responding to the gospel challenge: 'be salt for the earth, light for the world.'"
- How free have we been in communicating our feelings?**
- Give examples of where you have observed youth ministering to youth.**
- Please comment on this statement.**
- Where have you seen youth putting these gifts into practice?**
- When have the words of young people caused you to pause and reflect?**
- How does your experience speak to (his statement)?**
- How does this statement relate to your vision of Christian ministry?**



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