

YOUTH MINISTRY TRANSITION PLANNING IN A PANDEMIC

Developing effective youth ministry experiences for youth during this time of transition in a Pandemic

Pandemic Reality

The Coronavirus has affected everyone around the world. Many have experienced social isolation, anxiety, stress, economic difficulties, mental illness and death. All of us have experienced change. In order to reduce the spread of COVID-19, we saw the cancellation of public gatherings and the closing of churches. These efforts distanced people from receiving the sacraments and from their faith communities.



Within this reality, some youth ministry programs in the Archdiocese of Kingston were able to offer virtual or other opportunities or reach out to young people and their families, preventing young people from being completely cut off from their parish friends and mentors.

Each parish has their own youth ministry needs. While responding to the pandemic, this time is an opportunity to critically analyze our approach to youth ministry, realizing what is good and should continue and ways that we may not be meeting essential youth ministry components, needs or issues at the parish. With prayer, planning and creativity, youth ministry and evangelization as a whole could see many positive changes.

What Has Been Done?

Before the pandemic, some parishes in the Archdiocese of Kingston facilitated youth ministry activities on church property. These were regular opportunities for youth to come together in prayer and fellowship, generally led by a volunteer or paid member of the parish community. These youth ministry leaders organized events, programs and other opportunities in response to the needs of the youth. Some went into Catholic schools to visit young people or to run collaborative programs, such as the Youth Alpha series. In general, the internet and social media were used to communicate programs and events and to connect with youth outside of their regular programs.



The Coronavirus pandemic forced us to change our approach in youth ministry. When churches experienced closures, participation capacity, etc. ministry moved online or through other means of communication (phone calls, mail, distanced visits, etc.). This required creative strategies and the use of newly developed resources in order to continue to provide programs or maintain relationships with the young people we serve.



June Youth Ministry Virtual Commission

At the same time, many wonderful resources were put together to assist with online ministry. The Archdiocesan Youth Office shared resources which offered virtual programming from Lifeteen, Project YM, Steubenville Youth Conferences, engaging videos from Ascension Presents and others, website recommendations, liturgical activities, sacramental preparation suggestions, activities for youth to do at home, reflections, virtual masses, music, and more! In summer 2020, our Totus Tuus Summer Camp went virtual for the entire month of July with daily activities, faith content, prayer, and fun! Visit www.romancatholic.kingston.on.ca/youth for all these virtual resources.

This shift to online ministry represents a paradigm shift moving forward. No longer is parish ministry focused almost exclusively around the church building. Instead, it must find ways to reach youth where they are, call them into a deeper love of God and the Church and accompany them on the path of discipleship. Although this has been part of youth ministry in the past, our new reality has insisted we shift our focus from inward to going out.

What Could Be Done?

The Archdiocese of Kingston works with public health and government officials to establish procedures that ensure the health and safety of all the faithful. As such, parishes and all parish programs (including youth ministry) must continue to follow guidelines & restrictions from the Archdiocese. This means that gathered events are permitted if they follow the social distancing and safety protocols established by Diocesan Administration with the realization tighter protocols could come into effect if the need arises. Programming and scheduling will need to be fluid and adaptable to the new reality we will find ourselves in as we transition from the COVID-19 pandemic to whatever things will look like in its wake. Restrictions and past and potential closures should not lead us to despair but rather to action. We don't need to cancel everything and just wait the Pandemic out. Instead, we need to align ourselves and what we do to what is most important. As Christians, we bring the hope and light of Christ into a darkened world. Our youth need the Church more than ever.

Developing A Plan for Youth Ministry

Fluidity

- Whatever plan you design, it must have the ability to be altered quickly due to the ever changing circumstances.
- It is better to begin with less and add to it
- Avoid creating a plan that is fully dependent on gathered events.
- When possible host events outdoors
- It is important to realize that even if a program is the minimum that you can offer, this does not take away from how important the ministry can be. It can remain relational, faith based, interactive and all the other components that you need.
- Discuss with young people their needs and interests to help shape your plan



What is most important?

- When creating a transition plan, a good starting point is the *Amazing Parish's* three building blocks of successful ministry: **a culture of prayer, a culture of teamwork and a culture of discipleship.**
- Pray for direction and discernment, brainstorm with your youth, volunteers, parish leadership and stakeholders, and keep in mind that discipleship is at the heart of what we do as Church.
- The next step in creating your new plan for ministry is to identify the essential components of youth ministry in your parish. Ask yourself and your team what are the needs of the youth in the parish and what components could be offered to respond to these.
- Determine if the program needs to be in-person gathered, virtual gathered, non-gathered or some combination of the three.

In-person gathered - This setting requires that the youth be gathered at a location, whether it be on church property or elsewhere.

Virtual gathered - This setting differs from in-person gathered in that it can be offered online through some sort of video platform such as Zoom, Google Hangouts, etc. Ensure that you are following Archdiocesan safety guidelines for virtual gatherings with young people.

Non-gathered - Not all youth ministry programs have to be gathered. Some can be very effective programs in which resources are developed for a youth to reflect upon on their own. There can be interaction but it is not in a gathered structure.

- Keep in mind that sometimes a component to your program might seem like it could only work in a gathered setting but it may be possible to find a non-gathered way. Some young people may not feel comfortable gathering in person or are limited because of illness, so how could you include them? When hosting an event or meeting in person could you live stream it or virtually link in those who can't physically join in?

Practical Suggestions for Youth Ministry Activities

In Person - Gathered

(Social Distancing & Masks required indoors)

- Outdoor social - picnic, hangout
- Hike or walk
- Biking
- Fishing
- Fitness class
- Low contact sports
- Prayer experiences
- Visit a cemetery and pray for the deceased
- Clean up a local park or area around the church
- Porch / Driveway visits to elderly parishioners
- Holy Hour
- Watch a film and discuss afterwards
- Game (Mentimeter and other online game apps allow youth to send their answers in from their phone)
- Outdoor Scavenger Hunt
- Outdoor Escape Room
- Guest Presenter
- Small group discussions



Virtual Gathered

- Game Night
- Paint Night
- Check-in
- Prayer Experiences
- Guest Presenter
- Small Group Discussions
- Bible Study
- Virtual Cafe / Virtual Coffee House
- Programs (Ascension Presents Series, The Search, YM Resources, etc)
- Improv / Skits



Non - Gathered

- Resources youth and their families can check out!
- Prayer experiences
- Scripture Study
- Blogs, articles, vlogs, videos, etc
- Seasonal activities
- Media Activities (Instagram Challenge, Tik Tok, etc)
- Faith in Action activities / ideas
- Letter writing to check in
- Music links / virtual praise & worship



Components to Consider ...

1. Youth ministry is **relational** - Does your program prioritize accompaniment?
2. Youth ministry is **catechetical** - Is it essential that your program have components which help the participants learn more about God and the Church?
3. Youth ministry is **prayerful** - Should your program have opportunities for the youth to enter into prayer?
4. Youth ministry **forms disciples** - Is forming youth disciples a key priority to your youth ministry program? Is there a way to form youth disciples virtually?
5. Youth ministry **evangelizes** - Some programs are very focused upon providing opportunities for youth to know Jesus. Is this central or important to your program?
6. Youth ministry is **family focused** - Do you look at your ministry as just reaching out to the youth or is there a larger focus upon the family?
7. Youth ministry **responds to those in need** - To what extent is your program designed to respond to the needs of the youth or to youth in need? Has the new reality changed your perspective?

Reflect on these components before envisioning what form your ministry will take. Rank the importance of the components from highest to lowest. Then, examine the programs you are currently offering and evaluate if you are responding well to your top components. Are there additional ways that you can grow your ministry by adding a new creative method whether gathered (in-person or virtual) or non-gathered? Ultimately, this process is meant to help you compare your current approach to youth ministry with the current needs of your parish and requirements due to the pandemic and to envision a program that responds to all the needs of the youth.

Communication

- Communication is so important! Frequent and clear communication should inform youth, leaders and parents of logistical details such as time, location, login info, etc. but it must also include a description of the steps taken in response to the pandemic (ie. health care concerns).
- Youth and parents alike are faced with anxiety over COVID-19. Communication must do its best to outline the ways in which the youth activity ensures the safety of all participants.

Final Thoughts

The success of any programming that you design will depend on four critical factors:

1. **Is it designed to respond to the real needs of the participants?**
2. **Has there been input from your pastor, volunteer team, youth, and parents?**
3. **Is it able to be adapted to the changing restrictions due to the pandemic?**
4. **Has the program structure and safety precautions been effectively communicated?**

A parish youth ministry can consist of multiple programs / activities being offered. Remember to be flexible enough to review the youth ministry opportunities often and adapt them if they are not meeting the needs.

If you have any questions or are looking for suggestions, resources and/or encouragement please contact Nadia Gundert, Coordinator of Youth Ministry at the Youth Office at youth@romancatholic.kingston.on.ca or 613-484-2446