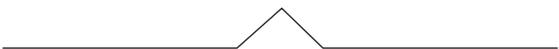


# FOREWORD



Youth ministry is often described as serving the “future Church,” which is sort of right and sort of not right.

The “sort of *not* right” part is the misunderstanding that students are, at best, only the Church in training. In this view the Church is a community of adults, and the only reason we make a current investment in students is because one day they will be part of that adult community. This kind of attitude misses the vital role of youth ministry in the life of our parishes. Students, of course, are an important part of the Church *right now*. God very much desires a growing relationship with them and has granted them gifts and talents to serve him and his family.

The “sort of right” part, on the other hand, recognizes that current students are the future of the Church if the Church is to have a future. As adults we have the responsibility to pass down to the next generation the rich Tradition of our Catholic faith as well as what we have learned on our own faith journey and what God has done in our lives. Calling students the *future* Church reminds us that it is our responsibility to mentor and encourage them into a fully devoted relationship with Jesus Christ so that they in turn can lead the next generation in the future.

Both of us have had the privilege to work with Chris Wesley here at our parish for more than a decade. What we love about our student ministry program under Chris’s direction is that he takes both these aspects of student ministry very seriously. Chris and the incredible team of youth leaders he has built understand the critical role of youth ministry now and for the future of our Church.

What you will find in the following pages is solid direction for effective youth ministry from a parish minister who learned these valuable lessons in the field. This book is not theory or theology; it's a field manual with incredibly practical steps you also can take toward rebuilding or building for the first time a vibrant youth ministry at your parish—one that exists to make disciples who in turn make other disciples.

Leading the next generation of students is not optional; it is fundamental and critical to building healthy parishes and to the work of the New Evangelization. Let Chris Wesley be your guide and companion in this awesome work.

Michael White and Tom Corcoran  
Authors of *Rebuilt*

# PREFACE



As a young teenager, I couldn't wait to plug in to my parish high school youth ministry program. Middle school youth group had been awesome, and the high school group meant new friends, fun activities, and cute high school girls—at least that's what I thought it meant. I watched my sister and my mom, a volunteer with the youth group, come home after Sunday night youth meetings filled with good stories and a lot of energy. I wanted that—wanted to be a part of it—and in the end, youth ministry had a huge impact on my teen years.

I was a struggling teenager who needed love, and I found it in my parish youth group. My parents divorced during those years, and youth ministry was an escape. It was a place where I felt supported and safe. Toward the end of my senior year, though, I was dealt a hard blow that left a decidedly sour taste in my mouth.

I was looking forward to my last retreat with our youth group, assuming I would be a peer leader on the planning team. Shortly before the retreat team was to be announced, our youth minister called me into her office and said, “Chris, we're not going to ask you to be on the team for this retreat.” I was shocked and immediately begged for a reason, but I was definitely not ready for her response: “I don't think you're stable enough right now.”

I was so angry and felt completely defeated. She tried to soften the blow by telling me that I was welcome to come on the retreat as a participant, but it was too late for that—I was heartbroken. I left church that night and cried. There was painful truth in her reasoning—I was not a great role model for my peers—but the experience left me crushed. I was ready to walk away—not only

from youth ministry but also from the Church. I was a hurting teenager who needed the Church, especially my local parish, but all I felt was abandoned.

One would think that after such a negative experience, youth ministry would hold the bottom slot on my list of dream jobs. As a matter of fact, it wasn't on the list at all when I started making career decisions. Throughout college, though, and then during a year-long commitment with the Jesuit Volunteer Corps, God brought many opportunities and individuals into my life that gradually shaped me into a fairly successful youth minister. Although I wasn't aware of it, God was preparing me in those early years for this work. So, here I am—fifteen years after that painful ending of high school—happy and fulfilled, immersed in youth ministry.

As the director of student ministry at Church of the Nativity in Timonium, Maryland, I have lived through lonely nights when it seemed like no one else cared. Even after ten years, I still have bad days when I wonder if youth ministry is really necessary and other days when I see with crystal clear vision why this work is essential to growing God's kingdom. Nearly every day, I meet men and women who feel passionate about investing in and mobilizing our Catholic young people, but in many churches, youth ministry is low on the priority list. That is sad but not surprising. Many (perhaps most) parish leaders don't believe that teens can, let alone will, contribute financially, lead others, and act maturely and responsibly enough to contribute to the community in vital ways. If parish leaders think about young people at all, they usually consider ways to entertain them or to get their help with projects that other people have decided are good ideas. Mostly, I'm afraid the youth in our parishes are not considered much at all.

Even still, we all know that a church with young people is attractive. It has energy, vibrancy, and hope for the future. The

problem is that running a youth ministry is a challenge. It's messy, and that's because adolescence is messy. Young people experience so much physical, emotional, and intellectual change. What's more, for youth ministers and adult volunteers, working around the schedules of teens and their families can be a frustrating, even daunting ordeal in and of itself.

All too often, the approach to growing a youth ministry in Catholic parishes is to hire a young college graduate with a lot of energy who will work long hours—mostly evenings and weekends—for next to nothing. He or she is then charged with creating a program that no one will know about with a group that meets in the dark depths of the church basement. What is the result of this ill-conceived effort? Too often it is nothing but a burned-out, disconnected youth minister ready to leave for some other career, and a handful of disappointed parents with disaffected teens.

Youth ministry is far too often reduced to a caricature of babysitting, a simple matter of offering pizza and Ping-Pong so teens hang out at church rather than somewhere else—but it can and should be so much more. Effective youth ministry is the coming together of the present and future of the Church. It's the movement that takes the Church's relevancy and impact to the next level. Without a vibrant and effective youth ministry that helps grow adult disciples, the Church will perish.

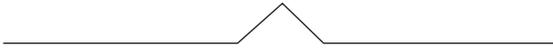
The purpose of this book is to offer insight, encouragement, and hope to anyone in a local parish wanting to create or rebuild youth ministry. It helps equip parishes with strategies, tips, and practical tools for understanding how youth ministry is all about adult disciples apprenticing youth into discipleship. By sharing something of my story from the trenches, I want to help you articulate your parish's particular vision for youth ministry in your locale, face hurdles and obstacles with grace, plan for ongoing growth, and lead your young people as they become disciples

growing other disciples. This takes hard work, patience, and sacrifice. Some people will think you're crazy, and you might want to quit. But you're not, and I hope you don't.

Part I

# ANSWERING THE CALL

# MAKE IT WAY MORE THAN PIZZA



Without a vision the people lose restraint;  
but happy is the one who follows instruction.  
—Proverbs 29:18

My middle school youth group consisted of three teenage friends: Dan, Steve, and me. We were there because our moms were heavily involved in the parish and they wanted us to be likewise involved. At the time I had no complaints. It was a great place for a middle school boy. We met on Friday nights, and most weeks we would hang out in the church gym eating pizza, downing soda, and shooting hoops. We never questioned why more people weren't there. Our youth minister was an incredible person who poured so very much of her attention into us. She would take us to the Salvation Army Thrift Store to pick up kickballs, Frisbees, and basketballs. She kept a stash of Hostess Sno Balls and Twinkies just for us. We were happy. She was our chauffeur, our babysitter, our friend—and we burned her out.

I feel bad now about some of that. In fact, I sometimes wonder if God drew me to parish youth ministry as a sort of payback. I also feel bad because our youth minister, like so many of us, tried to build momentum with teenagers in parish life only to

face obstacle after obstacle. She sacrificed a great deal (including weekends when she stayed up all night with a group of teenagers) for little pay and few other tangible rewards. She had a passion for growing young disciples but no direction, support, or plans to successfully pull it off.

It's not that the parish I attended didn't care about her. Youth ministry is just one of those jobs that has a reputation for being temporary. When I started out in youth ministry, there was one question that drove me nuts: "What do you do *full-time*?" So often, I wanted to shout back, "Where do I start?" and then provide the person asking with my long list of youth ministry tasks. It's difficult to describe a job that many Catholics have never heard of and relatively few have encountered in their local parishes. These conversations were frustrating at times and at others could be quite humorous.

"So are you like a priest?"

"No."

"Are you like a teacher?"

"Well sort of. I do teach but not in a school."

"What else do you do besides pizza parties and field trips?"

"I kind of don't do that."

"So what do you do?"

"I cast vision and help teens grow in their relationship with Christ and the Catholic faith."

"Oh . . ." (awkward pause)

"Does that make sense?"

"Sure." (more awkward silence, followed by new conversation topic)

Looking back, I have a hard time blaming those curious people. I wasn't really sure at first what being a youth minister entailed, and I was one. Over time, I grew into it, learning from veterans and learning what needed to be done. It now makes

sense to me and other youth ministers, but to many of our fellow Catholics, it's still a new and too-often shrouded undertaking.

So what is today's youth ministry supposed to look like? That depends on you, your church, and your community. Your youth ministry needs an identity. It needs to serve a purpose, and that starts by asking this question: "Why do *you* do youth ministry?"

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## CLAIM AN IDENTITY

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If asked, "What's youth ministry?" would you be able to confidently respond? Would you have an answer consistent with the youth minister on the other side of your diocese? If your answer to either question is "probably not," that's a problem. If those working in youth ministry have a hard time defining it, and other people in our parishes do not know what youth ministry is, then few Catholics will care whether or not it exists.

Youth ministry as a distinct ministry in the Catholic Church is still quite new. In the early part of the last century, Bishop Bernard Sheil of Chicago started the Catholic Youth Organization (CYO). It was a ministry that sought to reach out to street kids during the difficult years of the Great Depression. In a 1955 article in *Harper's Magazine*, the CYO was described as "a well-coordinated agency meeting capably the problems of youth through child guidance, psychiatric counseling, remedial speech and reading programs, recreational activities, and group work."<sup>1</sup>

Slowly but surely, CYO became the center of youth activity in the American Catholic Church. Everything from dances to basketball leagues were created to bring youth to (or keep them in) church. It worked, but it didn't change much over many years, even as American culture shifted and the needs of youth grew. Because things didn't change, youth ministry or the parish CYO

group became just another program vying for attention in the lives of American teens.

Today, if you look at the calendar of most youth ministers, Friday and Saturday nights are booked with event after event. While that worked in a lot of parishes eighty years ago, it doesn't work today. Teens are not event-driven; they are relationally driven. The last thing they need is another *program*.

When I took my first job as a youth minister, I saw it as a temporary position. It was something that would pay the bills and give me free time to figure out what I wanted to do with the rest of my life. When I decided that it was more than a job, my family questioned my decision. They wanted to know if I had thought it through. While they admired my decision to work for the Church, they wanted to make sure I had a backup plan or next step. They were asking, "What are you going to do next?" In other words, "What's your career going to be?" So many youth ministers leave because they don't know where they are going. They see the work they do as something to fill the time as they figure out life. It's like running on a treadmill with no fitness or weight loss goals in mind. You will likely grow bored and wear yourself out. A race with no clear end in sight is a race with no hope.

To run a successful youth ministry you need to have a picture of the end result, even if you never achieve it. Youth ministry should be focused on the development of the adolescents with whom you work into men and women, and what kind of men and women the Church calls them to become. Your ministry is meant to help and empower the next generation to grow in relationship with Christ.

The vision and mission you paint for your ministry are going to answer the questions, "Where are we going?" "How are we going to get there?" and, "Why are we doing what we do?" If you don't answer those questions, you're going to be stuck on a

youth ministry treadmill. With no goals, no mile markers, and no end point, you're simply wasting the time and resources of your teens, their parents, and the parish. Whether you are a full-time employee or a volunteer, it's important to cast a vision to those you serve, as well as to yourself. Times will come when you hit obstacles, when ministry gets hard, dark, and hopeless. Knowing what you need to do and why you are doing it not only will help you but also will define you.

## ARTICULATE YOUR VISION AND MISSION

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A *vision statement* is a picture of what your organization or youth ministry could and should be. It answers the questions, "Where are you going?" and, "What do you hope to accomplish?" Put another way, it asks, "What is your end goal?" People involved or simply interested in your ministry want to know where you are going because it inspires them, gives them hope, and helps them to feel some sense of ownership of your efforts. As a runner, I try to picture the end of every race. Just seeing that finish line is a natural motivation. Whenever I see the finish line, my heart lightens, my pace quickens, and I push forward. Likewise, when you have a clear vision of where you're going, you, your volunteers, parents, youth, and the rest of your parish get motivated. You've given them hope and identified the finish line. You've painted a picture that's going to move them forward.

A *mission statement* answers the question, "How will you reach your end goal?" Put another way, it answers, "Why do you do what you do?" A mission statement fuels your purpose and identifies your strategy for reaching the vision you have for your ministry program. You need to know why you exist, or what you