

An Organic and Comprehensive Ministry for Youth

Bob Rice provides a picture of how youth ministry can follow God's ways of ministering to us.

The USCCB document, *Renewing the Vision*, listed eight necessary components of youth ministry: advocacy, catechesis, community life, evangelization, justice and service, leadership development, pastoral care, and prayer and worship. But many don't understand how they should connect with each other.

Learning from the Parable

So how can we describe the organic connection that should exist between these components of youth ministry? Jesus told us, 'The kingdom of God is like a mustard seed which a man took and sowed in his field. It is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown becomes the biggest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air can come and shelter in its branches' (Matthew 13:31-32). So let me build on that parable to show how the components of youth ministry can work together.

Before anything can be grown, the **soil** must be tilled. This is the work of *advocacy*. Teenagers need a place where they can grow and be ministered to. They are in crisis, and drastic measures must be put in place to reach them. They need a commitment of the parish's (and diocese's) time, talent, and treasure to fight against the culture that is greedy for their attention and their devotion. You can't hope to stumble across fertile soil for ministry to youth, you have to work at it.

Evangelization is the **root** of the tree. In the famous parable of the sower and the seed, Jesus states the obvious: plants without roots die quickly. In the same way, teens can get excited about what we offer through our youth ministry programs, but if they are not introduced to a deeper relationship with Christ, and if that relationship isn't at the center of the ministry, then they will quickly wither and die. Likewise, you can cut a plant from the ground and put it in a vase. It might look healthy at first, but soon it will be worthless. I've seen a number of youth ministry programs that began with a great evangelistic zeal. But then they cut the root and put the flower on their mantle, only to wonder why their ministry 'died' after everything was going so well.

Catechesis is the **trunk** of the tree. Catechesis is about 'putting people not only in touch with, but in intimacy with, Jesus Christ.' (CT 5) A trunk gives a tree a visible structure. The branches may shoot off in many directions, but the trunk gives them a place to be connected to the life-giving root. So a deep understanding of the Catholic faith 'grounds' the young believer in what is true and what isn't. The trunk is the visible work of the underground root. So with catechesis: understanding how to *pray* the creed, to *celebrate* the sacraments, to *live* as Christ did, and to *commune* with him in the vital and personal relationship called prayer provides structure for their faith and for all they will be and do as Catholics.

**In ministry to
young people there
are no short cuts.**



A seed does not grow on its own. It needs to be **watered** with *prayer and worship*. Prayer is a part of catechesis (sometimes people forget that!) so we've already got some prayer in the 'trunk', and now we must lead them to experience prayer in liturgy, in their community, in their family, and on their own, so that they can 'grow' in Christ. Without prayer, the shoots will never even break through the soil.

There are lots of weeds in the garden that need to be removed so that the tree can **receive the nutrients** it needs. This is the work of *pastoral care*. Depending on what the 'soil' has been exposed to, it can take a lot of work to make it fertile ground for any faith to grow. And even a tree that is healthy can be damaged by exterior forces. Pastoral care builds a fence around the garden and fertilizes the soil to keep it pure and provide the best conditions of growth for a young person's faith.

In chapter 15 of the Gospel of John, Jesus said, 'Every branch that does bear fruit he prunes to make it bear even more.' I would compare the work of **pruning to leadership development**. Without Christ, leadership development can find its 'root' in pride and self-centeredness; with Christ, it is about humility and self-giving. What better picture of leadership is there than Jesus washing the feet of the disciples? 'You call me Master and Lord, and rightly so, for that is who I am. If I then, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet, you must wash each other's feet. I have given you an example so that you may copy what I have done to you' (John 13:13-15). We do not want them to grow wild and without form. We desire to shape them into the image of Christ, the one who 'came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many' (Mark 10:45).

Community life is the **leaves**. Leaves on a tree give a visible unity to the many branches underneath them; they are a sign of life and vibrancy. Leaves are also something genuine. They are alive because they are connected to the trunk and the root. If the root withers, the first things to die are the leaves. So too, the kind of community life we invite teenagers into is not something shallow, based on what they look like or what they like to do— they can find those cliques at high school. Community life invites a teenager to participate in something greater than themselves, in a community of love centered on the Eucharist.

Finally, *justice and service* are the **fruits** of the tree. 'If one of the brothers or sisters is in need of clothes and had not enough food to live on, and one of you says to them, 'I wish you well; keep yourself warm and eat plenty,' without giving them these bare necessities of life, then what good is that? In the same way faith, if good deeds do not go with it, is quite dead.' (James 2:15-17) Jesus said, 'Every tree can be told by its own fruit.' (Luke 6:44) Works of justice and service are the gift of the tree to others, and within the fruit is the very seed by which the plant was created— the work of evangelization. And so we reach out to the physical and spiritual needs of the world around us, and the cycle continues again.

Keeping it Organic

You can't have *fruit* without the *root*. Ministry takes time. I know some young youth ministers who feel pressured to start a program that incorporates everything at once. It's not natural! The only way to grow a garden overnight is to get a bunch of plants at the store that someone else grew (focus our ministry on the 'good' kids), or buy fake plants, stick them in the dirt, and hope our pastor doesn't notice.

It's hard work to minister to young people; there are no short cuts. A farmer can't control the seasons, but he or she can work with what they are given with the wisdom of those who have gone before them. Jesus was fond of agricultural parables because there is a lot about nature that we can see in ourselves.

But parables can only be taken so far. At the end of the day, we are not dealing with plants but *people*, beautiful young people desperately in need of the love that only Jesus can give them. Yes, they are the seed, but they are also called to be the sowers—protagonists in the life of ministry by their baptismal call of being priest, prophet, and king. These components give us a beautiful vision on how to grow teen disciples, but only if we use them guided by the wisdom seen in the pedagogy of God. ☩

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