

# Task Force Report on Young Adult Ministry

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become intimately involved with another person, the relationship of intimacy and sexual expression of love, how to form enduring interpersonal relationships. The statement "pre-marital sex is wrong" ignores these other related issues. Young adults also need to reconcile their values with the pressures that may arise in their careers. For the first time in their lives they may be working in situations where unethical actions are common and encouraged.

In the minds of many young adults, the Church merely states what is right and what is wrong. They need to learn how to make moral decisions, but, outside of ethics classes, the Church says little about how one should arrive at a decision.

On both a parish and regional or diocesan level, there need to be opportunities for open, frank discussions among young adults and professional ministers on the topic of morality. Young adults need to understand the complexity of Church moral teaching. Ministers need to learn how these teachings mesh or do not mesh with the lived experience of young adults. Although programs on the subject of sexuality and intimacy have been developed for couples planning to marry, similar programs are not always available to single persons, yet these people too must learn what it means to be intimate and must explore their sexuality.

## 3. Women in the Church

Both women and men frequently mentioned the position of women in the Catholic Church as an area of concern. When asked "What don't you like about the Roman Catholic Church," these responses were typical: "the failure to ordain women and their overall treatment as secondary persons;" "[the failure] to recognize women as being equal to men;" "hierarchical sluggishness" in reform — especially in increased roles and responsibilities for women and laity." Both women and men who considered themselves to be faithful members of the Church expressed the feeling that, while the Church recognizes the value and uniqueness of each person, its treatment of women is a counter-sign to the world. Women in particular also mentioned the difference between society's efforts to open more jobs and opportunities to women and the Church's refusal to open ministries, especially ordained ministries, to women. The young professional woman is especially caught in the dilemma of how to reconcile her professional life with the position she must necessarily assume in the Church. In response to the question "What are some things the Church could do to meet your needs better?" one woman wrote, "By accepting women as equals. Unfortunately I feel it is the Church which has held women down as second class citizens."

The participation of women in Church ministries, already determined to be appropriate, should be promoted to the fullest on a local level. There also needs to be continued discussion at all levels regarding women's roles in the Church.

Single women — and most female young adults are single — face an additional problem. In the Church women are honored primarily as their roles as mother and wife. Yet all women are not housewives; the family and mother role is not the most relevant one for young adults. The Church rarely addresses the questions "What are other women here for?" and "What is the value of women as persons apart from their family roles?" Homilies are not commonly directed to all women. Most often, homilists talk about motherhood or Mary's example as a mother when they address the specific subject of women.

## 4. Linguistic Difficulties

Communication between young adults and Church leaders is sometimes poor because of linguistic differences. Words such as "obedience" and "authority" have negative connotations for many young adults. The Church's understanding of these words is not their understanding. When the terms are used by Church leaders without a clarification of their meaning, young adults are likely to misinterpret what is being said.

Young adults also recognize that there is a discrepancy between how the Church defines these words and the pragmatic use of them. For instance, although many homilies characterize authority as service, in everyday situations Church leaders are not always perceived as serving their communities.

Traditional Christian terms expressing the reality of faith and religious experience are not especially meaningful to young adults. Words like "grace," "sin," and "salvation" need to be defined and clearly related to daily life to have significance for many persons. As mentioned in an earlier section, even when young adults have religious experiences, they typically do not describe them in Christian terms and categories.

## 5. Desire for Personalism

Young adults want there to be a personal aspect to their Church lives. They do not want to be part of a large anonymous crowd of people who gather once a week for Mass and then hurry away in their cars only to gather again a week later. They want to be recognized by others, to be missed when they are absent, to be needed by the Church community.

Of course young adults are not the only people who feel this way. The words in Isaiah, "I have called you by your name, you are mine" strike a chord in the hearts of both Jews and Christians. However, while all people need to be recognized as individuals, young adults today have a particular craving to be treated as unique, valuable persons and to belong to a caring community. Many young adults live alone or with others their own age. They may be alienated from their family or visit them infrequently because of physical distance. Typically, they live in large, anonymous apartment complexes where neighbors' names are not usually known. A married couple may enter an unfamiliar church for Mass and, even if they do not feel welcomed, at least feel they have each other. A single young adult who is not greeted hospitably will more likely drift away and not come back. There needs to be a stronger effort by parish staffs and congregations to reach out to young adults in a personal manner. Coffee hours, a greeting before or after Mass, and the simple statement, "I haven't met you before. What's your name?" all make a difference.

## 6. Parish Participation

Closely related to the desire for personalism is the wish to be a part of parish life. Young adults, particularly single young adults, often feel ignored by their parishes. One person wrote, "I feel I have little place in the Church — it centers around the young and married and divorced but never... single adults." Another responded similarly: "I've been in my church for six years. I keep trying to meet people, but no luck — is it because

I'm young and single? The Church seems to be for families only." Church activities do appear to center around families and married couples. Parish life often revolves around the activities of children, especially in parishes with parochial schools. Adults meet through their involvement in school and CCD programs. Homilies deal with the responsibilities of parents and children. From listening to them, one could get the impression that all Catholics are part of nuclear families. There is not so much an intent to exclude young adults and single persons as a lack of recognition of their existence.

Adult programs in parishes similarly are often designed for the married. Dances and dinners are for couples or their fees are reduced for couples. Adult education programs and prayer groups also may exclude young adults and single persons through their focus on family-related topics. One person spoke of going to a prayer group, seeing that everyone there was part of a couple, and never returning. Others said that although invitations to social gatherings were specifically extended to young adults in their parish, they never felt comfortably enough to accept and attend. At the parish level, there needs to be a real examination of programs and activities — for whom they are designed and who, in actuality, participates in them.

Young adults may need some programs specially designed for them. However, "young adult groups" are not the sole answer. There is more to Christian living and community than social clubs of like-aged persons. Young adults need common experiences among themselves but they also want to be an integral part of the parish community. Because they are so often segregated from both children and older adults by their housing choices and lifestyles, they particularly need to form relationships with persons of a wide variety of ages. Young adults need to be accepted and encouraged to participate in parish committees and to accept roles in the liturgy. Parishes should examine the membership of their committees and the participation of parishioners as lectors and Eucharistic ministers to determine exactly where young adults are, and are not presently represented.

## 7. Using One's Gifts

For the most part, young adults do not feel encouraged to use their talents and gifts in the Church. Nor do they often know where or how to use them. Young adults share the frustrations of other laypersons in becoming involved in the Church. For example, in response to the question "In what ways can the Church best make use of your talents and gifts?" one person wrote, "The Church must develop a new attitude toward laypeople — many more opportunities are open to us than there were perhaps 20 years ago, but an attitude of openness and encouragement from clergy, bishops and other laypeople yet needs to be developed." Another responded: "As a woman — by opening more ministries to women. By letting myself and others get up in Church and give personal testimonies as to what God is doing and has done in our lives. You may be surprised at the impact it has on others." A third person stated very simply and succinctly, "just [by] allowing all opportunities to be open to everyone."

Many parish roles are typically filled by families, older adults, or youth and teenagers. In many places a family always brings the gifts to the altar during Mass. Choirs and folk groups are usually composed of older adults or teenagers. Liturgy committees, parish councils, finance committees, etc., often only solicit older adults to join. There are, indeed, some parishes in the diocese where this situation is not the case. In particular, some large parishes with substantial young adult populations have succeeded in making their young adults feel they are a part of parish life and that their talents can be used on behalf of the community.

In other places older adults may not feel comfortable around young adults or know what to say to them. Pastors may feel that, since younger people move frequently, it is not worthwhile to try to get them involved in parish life. Unless asked directly, many young adults will not volunteer their services. Some may want to do so but feel they will be rebuffed. Others may think of the Church as a place to go when one needs help, but are not interested in anything more than Sunday Mass. Still others have no idea that they can actually use their talents in relation to the Church.

By ignoring the potential involvement of young adults in the life of the Church, parishes are losing a precious resource. Many young adults have expertise which the Church needs. More importantly, in the years ahead it is today's young adults who will need to assume the leadership of the Church. If these people have left the Church or learned that their talents and gifts are not valued, it is the Church itself that will suffer.

A unique situation is that of young adults who have been involved in some way with campus ministry during their college years. Many of these people have been responsible for decision-making through parish council involvement and have participated in various committees or projects at their campus parishes. When they finish college and go to another parish, they frequently are not invited, encouraged, or allowed to take any roles of responsibility. Parish staffs sometimes seem to view campus ministry as a special ministry which is atypical and avant-garde. They consider its products — college-educated young adults — radicals, even though there is as wide a spectrum of differences on college campuses as in other parishes. On the one hand, parish staffs may react defensively when approached by these young adults offering their service or suggestions for change. On the other hand, young adults may not take the time to experience the unique character of the parish they are entering or to learn why things are being done in certain ways. One thing is clear — young adults who have been involved in campus ministry are a valuable resource which parishes should not disregard.

## 8. Spiritually-oriented Programs

Young adults do not just want social activities arranged through the Church. It is certainly important for young adults to meet one another and to share social times together. But young adults are asking more of the Church. Many young adults recognize the yearning for the spiritual or God in their own lives. Although they may not always agree with the Church's teachings or its living out of these teachings, young adults do sometimes recognize that the Church possesses certain insights regarding God and spirituality. Churched young adults want to develop their spiritual lives through retreats, lectures, and prayer experiences. Similar programs might similarly attract

unchurched or alienated young adults who currently exploring TM or Eastern religions.

The Church of Rochester should continue to offer and promote the young adult retreats and renewal programs that already exist. Other options and alternatives which would attract different persons should also be explored. Sometimes general parish retreats will draw young adults who are already participating in the parish. Other times the needs of young adults might better be met by retreats designed primarily around their questions and concerns. Since most parishes in the diocese do not presently have large numbers of young adults as members, these specialized retreats might be organized at a regional or area level.

## 9. Education

Today's young adults can, in most instances, be described as "religious illiterates." Those now in their 30s went through Baltimore Catechism religious education. In most cases, they never were educated about the reasoning and theology behind the reforms of Vatican II. They have not been exposed to biblical research and scholarship; nor have they often developed a mature understanding of their faith. A large portion of today's young adults were in elementary school and high school during the 1960s. During that time religious education trends seemed to change yearly. In general, the emphasis was on discussion among peers, none of whom knew much more about their religion than the others. CCD classes studied the poetry and songs of Simon and Garfunkel. As one person put it, "We were collaged to death." These young adults, mostly in their 20s now, never did learn the tradition and central doctrines of the Church. They need instruction and educational experiences if they are ever to be mature Catholics.

The current emphasis on adult education in the local and universal Church is welcome. Young adults, through the questionnaires and regional meetings, continually asked for more educational programs. They expressed a desire to study the Bible and learn more about the teachings of the Church. There seems to be a need for ongoing programs, not just for Advent and Lenten series, at both the parish and regional levels. One-time programs or short, two-to-three-week series seem to be most attractive to young adults who often cannot or do not plan long-term commitments of their time. Although the majority of young adults knows little about their faith, there are others who have had theological training or have gained expertise in some particular area. The talent of these persons can be used in developing both parish and regional programs.

## 10. Mobility

Although modern American society is generally characterized by its high mobility, young adults seem to move even more than other segments of the population. Because of this, they frequently hesitate to settle into any particular parish. Even when they do, parish staffs are reluctant to involve them in parish life for fear they will move again shortly.

There needs to be a more welcoming atmosphere in parish congregations, even for those persons expected to remain for only a brief time. Instead of informing and welcoming new people to the parish on a once yearly basis, there should be a more frequent, continual effort to reach out to newcomers. Unfortunately, even those parishes which have formal welcoming plans frequently miss the new young adults in their midst. While many places rely on new parishioners to register and then have a parish member contact them, young adults most often do not register. Many feel that registration only brings them envelopes for offerings in the mail. Others are reluctant to establish any official connection.

As was mentioned in the last section, short-term programs are most likely to appeal to young adults. Persons should be asked to make commitments to projects and committees of less than several years. Emphasis should be placed on the quality, not the quantity, of participation. Campus ministry offers an example which can perhaps be implemented elsewhere. Few people coming to campus parishes expect to stay more than four years and some may stay only a few months or a year. Yet all are invited to participate in the activities of the community to whatever degree they can. Campus ministry does seem to depend on some relatively permanent group of people who give continuity to the parish, but it is largely the welcoming atmosphere which attracts new people to invest in the life of the community.

## Notes

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4. John C. Cusick, "Breaking the Bread," *New Catholic World*, pp. 219-220.
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23. Krump, p. 28.
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26. Krump, pp. 29-30.
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28. *The Unchurched American*, pp. 8, 13-14.
29. U.S.C.C., p. 12.
30. Position Papers, pp. 25, 29-30.
31. *Emerging Trends*, Vol. 2 No. 3 (March, 1980), p. 3.
32. U.S.C.C., pp. 14-16.
33. Position Papers, p. 30.
34. U.S.C.C., pp. 17-18.