



[Version 1 – January 2010]

## YOUTH GROUPS: Starting a Youth Group

It's not as hard or scary as you might think!

Parishioners will often say with heartfelt concern what a shame it is that nothing is happening for young people in their parishes. But, suggest to them that *they* do something themselves, however, and they are gripped with fear!

One of the hardest tasks for youth co-ordinators and officers - be they at deanery, diocesan or national level – is breaking down this fear, and helping ordinary parishioners to realise that setting up and running good youth groups isn't beyond their capability.

In this document we are going to guide you through the steps necessary to start up a youth group and give you some pointers. This document isn't complete and comprehensive. We are assuming that you already have some ideas. We are also – crucially – assuming that when it comes to matters of safeguarding, health and safety and other important issues, there is somebody local to guide and assist you. (If you are unsure of where to turn for help, you might start with your parish priest, diocesan youth office or diocesan safeguarding office depending on the issue at hand). Hopefully, though, this will give you a lot of information and ideas and will give you the confidence you need to continue.

### THE BASIC STEPS FOR SETTING UP A YOUTH GROUP ARE THESE

1. Figure out if there's a need
2. Get permission from the parish
3. Put a team together to run the youth group
4. Figure out a time and a location
5. Figure out what you're going to do in the group
6. Work out the legal, practical and administrative stuff
7. Advertise the group
8. Start the group up and see how it goes

### AND NOW... A BIT MORE DETAIL

That's the basic structure of how you do things. Now let's try to unpack each of those steps. Don't forget that at every step there are (or really should be) people around you who you can approach for help. You can also come to CatholicYouthWork.com if you have any specific questions or problems.

## 1. Figure out if there's a need

It may be that you want to set up a youth group, but there isn't actually a need. Perhaps there is a good Catholic group nearby which would cater well for young people in your parish. Or perhaps the young people in your parish are happy enough with parish life in general and wouldn't benefit from a specific group of their own. Okay, neither of these things are that likely, but it's a question you need to ask: is there a need?

When you are trying to figure out if there's any demand for a youth group there is a fair chance that you'll run into somebody who tells you that there are no young people in the parish. Please, please, please don't accept this as a reason to give up. Firstly because once you look for young people, you'll probably find them, and secondly because if it is true that there are too few young people to sustain a group, then maybe a group could be a way to attract them to the parish. It might have to be run in a slightly different way, but... anyway... that's a bit of a tangent. Back to the story...

To set up a youth group, you first need to establish that there are a group of young people who want a youth group, who would come to a youth group, and who would benefit from a youth group.

At this point it may be worth doing two specific things. Firstly, talk to the young people. Secondly, figure out an age range for the group. A group with a wider age spread can cater to more people, but it's work is less effective with each individual. This is a trade-off that should be considered.

## 2. Get permission from the parish

Unfortunately, you can't ever just start a youth group up entirely by yourself. Unless your first name happens to be 'Father' you will need to work through, with, and with the permission of other people around you. In fact, even if you are the parish priest, it's still a good idea to consult and involve other people as widely as possible.

Consultation is very important. Yes, it can be a hassle and yes, we all hate those long drawn-out meetings where every point is debated in mind-numbing detail, but sadly this is a part of youth work. And though the process of consultation has its frustrations, it also has its fruits. Indeed, it is a key part of the work that we do, and rightly so.

The first thing that you will probably need to do is to get permission from the parish priest. Tell him that you have discerned a need and tell him what you have learned. Don't appear to be campaigning or trying to twist his arm though. It's about *how you can help and serve the parish*. If your priest thinks that you are trying to do something which you feel he doesn't have the desire or ability to do (true though that *may* be) then he is likely to send you packing. One of the golden rules of Catholic youth ministry is that we have to keep the priests on side. Without them, there's not a lot that we can do.

You will need to talk to your parish priest early on and keep him informed throughout. But getting permission from *the parish* is about more than just the priest. Parishes can be complex places with lots of different interests and sensitivities. For that reason, it's a good idea to talk to as many people as possible. Below is a list of some of the people you might want to talk to (assuming that

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these people/ groups exist in your parish). Remember that you are working *with them* and that they will be far more likely to give you support and encouragement in the future if you have kept them informed from the start:

- Your Parish Priest
- Your parish council
- Your parish office/ secretary (will need information and details, since for many people, the parish office will be the first point of contact.)
- Any other relevant bodies in the parish
- Parents
- Young people themselves
- Parents of young people
- Anybody who has done youth work in the parish in the past

### **3. Put a team together to run the youth group**

You can't run a youth group by yourself. You need a team of youth leaders. In fact, it's best to have a team of about 6-10 who you can use in rotation. That way there is strength-in-depth: nobody is overworked and there is a variety of skills to draw on.

A sensible ratio for running a youth group session when you are starting out might be **1 to 8** i.e. one leader for every eight young people, or part thereof. Safeguarding procedures (and common sense) will probably dictate that you will need at least two leaders no matter how many young people you have. Preferably one leader of each gender.

As you get more confident you can relax this ratio slightly, but 1 to 8 is probably a good starting point. You might even want to have a few more leaders than this present. It's up to you. Just make sure that you don't swamp the young people with adults though. Everything should be geared toward helping the young people to bond with each other and to engage with the issues the group is tackling each session.

In practice, let's say that you have twenty-five young people when the youth group starts. This is a high estimate for a fledgling group, but it works for the purpose of explaining how your team might work. You will need three or four leaders per session. If you have a rota of ten people and you meet every two weeks (see section four below) this would mean that you can have one or two ever-present senior leaders (the person or people who are ultimately in charge – see below) and then you can rotate the other leaders. This means that if leaders are free to work with the group for every session then they are able to. If they're not though, then they won't have to. People with other commitments might find it a bit less daunting not to have to commit to every single session.

#### Who's In Charge?

Once you start working with a team of people it is important that a clear structure of leadership and responsibility is established. The person whose drive is establishing the youth group will normally want to take charge. He/she should do so unless he/ she can find somebody who is clearly more qualified and who is willing to take the lead. It must be clear to members of your team, as well as to the wider parish, who is running the youth group. This isn't about going on a power trip, but about being accountable. Running a youth group is a big responsibility and people

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need to know where that responsibility lies. They also need to know who is ultimately responsible for making the decisions and seeing them through.

### Recruiting People to be Youth Group Leaders

Putting a team together can be tricky. The simple – yet awkward – fact is that not everybody is suitable to work with young people. If you openly advertise for leaders then you might be faced with awkward conversations further down the line. A far better strategy is to work with key members of the parish to identify key individuals and to approach them personally.

Potential youth leaders should be:

- willing to undergo an enhanced CRB check (or equivalent) which must come back clear.
- sufficiently committed to their faith to minister it to others.
- able to interact with others in a personable and friendly way.
- likely to be available on a regular basis for at least the immediate future

Regarding the second and third points on this list above, please don't worry too much if people you're looking at aren't quite *the finished article*, so to speak. Many potential youth leaders won't have strong catechetical skills and they won't be that confident around young people. Youth ministry is something which changes us all. It's something that we get better and better at as we go along. Obviously people have to show some potential to be considered, but remember that there is always room to grow.

Here are some suggested people you might like to consider as potential youth leaders:

- young adults (whose close age might make them more able to connect)
- those with past experience working with children and young people
- those who have children in the parish themselves
- those who have interesting skills and life experiences
- those who have worked on Confirmation in the parish
- those who have been involved with Catholic youth projects on a diocesan or national level. (It might be worth asking your diocesan youth officer if he/ she knows anyone who might be interested and useful)

### Ongoing Training and Dialogue

Once you have recruited a team, they shouldn't just be seen as workers. It is important to remember their views and their ongoing development.

When people agree to work with you, you should brief them thoroughly about what's going on. Tell them why you want to set up a youth group and tell them about any plans or arrangements that you have made. Ask for their opinions and continue to do so as things progress. Make sure you are aware of any support that your team members need and any concerns that they might have.

## **4. Figure out a time and a location for the youth group to meet**

### When and How Often?

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As your youth group begins, we would suggest that meeting every fortnight is about right. Any more than that and you might bite off more than you can chew. Any less than that and the group may not develop much of an identity or atmosphere. You can always change this further down the line.

Two hours is a good length for a youth group session. Sessions normally take place on a weekday evening, or a Sunday evening if appropriate. In selecting a day to meet, you will need to figure out when your location is available and you'll also need to figure out if there is anything on specific days that is likely to draw young people away. Check what other local youth groups are operating and find out when they meet. Remember too that most secondary schools will have a regular weekday (often Thursday) for holding all of their out-of-hours activities such as parents' evenings and open evenings. Check with young people and their parents what night this is, and avoid this night for your meetings. You should also check with your team of volunteers too to see which nights are best for them.

The only other consideration is not to start too early or end too late. A two-hour session should start at 7pm or 7.30pm. That way, people don't have to rush in straight from work/ school and everyone gets to bed at a reasonable hour!

### Where?

The parish hall is the obvious place for a parish youth group to meet, but for many reasons this may not be available or appropriate. If not, consider:

- using rooms in the presbytery
- using appropriate areas of the Church itself
- using local school halls/ rooms/ conference areas
- using a local community centre (which may charge you)
- asking around to see if anybody in the parish has any ideas (never under-estimate the resourcefulness of local people)

### **5. Figure out what you're going to do in the group**

There is a very popular resource on our downloads page at CatholicYouthWork.com called *YOUTH GROUPS: What to do in your sessions*. This is a very comprehensive (and growing) resource giving a detailed syllabus for a Catholic youth group. Downloading and working with this file (it's free) is a good place to start. Here are some other considerations:

- Talk to the young people about what they would like to do at a youth group. (But be sure to be discerning in listening to their answers!)
- Talk to your parish priest to see if he has any ideas.
- Liaise with the Confirmation team in the parish/ deanery/ schools to see if your syllabus and theirs can enrich (i.e. help out) one another.

It might be an idea to give the group a name too. Calling it *St. Michael's Senior Youth Group* may be literal and descriptive, but coming up with a catchy, relevant name might generate more of a buzz. Just a thought.

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## 6. Work out the legal, practical and administrative stuff

### Safeguarding

One area that you absolutely have to get right is safeguarding. Safeguarding – which used to be referred to as ‘*Child Protection*’ – is a system which ensures that young people are safe in our care and that we are looking after them as we should. It is probably not appropriate for CatholicYouthWork.com to lead you through this step by step. Rather what we suggest is this... talk to your diocesan youth officer or your diocesan safeguarding co-ordinator or your parish safeguarding co-ordinator. Ask them what you need to do where safeguarding is concerned. They will help you to get your volunteers CRB checked, they will help you to embed sensible skills and procedures, and they will help you with things such as consent forms. It is essential that you get somebody in a position of responsibility to affirm (**in writing**) that you are doing the right thing. That way, you have an added sense of security and you have the weight of your parish and/ or diocese behind you (as long as you stick to the procedures laid down, of course).

Don't worry too much about safeguarding. Everybody who works with young people has got themselves seriously worried at one time or another about making a mistake in this regard. The simple fact is that if you have good procedures and if you *follow those procedures*, your chances of getting into hot water are very remote indeed.

### Practicalities

Think about:

- **Money.** Does the group have a budget or does it have to cover its own costs? You might have to introduce ‘subs’ i.e. a small charge for attending each session. In any case, who is going to look after doing the sums and taking the money in?
- **Equipment.** Does the youth group need any equipment? If so, is there somewhere it can be stored? Who is going to look after it?
- **Food and drink.** A session will inevitably need drinks and snacks. How is this going to be paid for, bought, set up and cleaned up afterwards?
- **Keys and locations.** Does the location you are using need unlocking? If so, where do you get the key from? Is there an alarm to worry about?
- **Stationary.** Everyone forgets this... but pens and paper are almost always necessary!

## 7. Advertise the group

Once you have a team, an idea of what you're doing, a location and a time, it's probably a good idea to actually invite some young people along. Here's how... Any (or all) of the following might work for you...

- Talk to young people after Mass
- Talk to the parents of young people
- Approach young people who are in the Confirmation programme, or who have been confirmed recently
- Put something catchy in the parish newsletter
- Speak after communion, if your priest will allow you to

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- Work with the Chaplain or RE department in the local secondary school, and ask them if they will give the group a plug for you
- Put something on the parish website
- Put something on the diocesan youth service website
- Ask your diocesan youth officer for help in reaching local young people (especially through diocesan events or projects)
- Put together a website for the group

## 8. Start the group up and see how it goes

Once you have done all the preparation the only thing left to do is just jump right in. This is quite an exciting and rewarding thing to do, but it can be a little bit deflating too. Don't worry if things don't start strongly though, and don't be too complacent if they do.

Starting off a group is a huge thing, but it's not the end of the hard work and it's not the end of having to think things through. As the youth group goes along you have to constantly think and re-think just about all of the things mentioned in this document. For instance...

- Are there any young people in the parish/ area who might be interested but don't know about the group? If so, how are you going to get the message to them?
- How well do you communicate with young people and with their parents?
- How are the group's finances working out?
- Have safeguarding rules and procedures changed since you started out?
- Do any of your volunteers have any training needs?
- Do you need any more volunteers? If so, how are you going to recruit them?
- Are there any new people or new groups in the parish who you should talk to about the youth group?
- Do you need any new equipment?
- Is the time that you meet working for everybody? (You will get a lot of requests to change the time. Be careful about this. Changing the time of an established group is quite a big deal. In addition, the people who are quite happy with the time are unlikely to say so.)
- Are you doing enjoyable, challenging and growthful activities during your sessions?

## IN SUMMARY

Okay, hopefully that's all useful to you. What we've given you here is brief, but hopefully comprehensive. We have pointed you toward things and given you broad strokes rather than gone into lots of detail. If you want more detail then why not by a copy of *revealed?* (see the link on CatholicYouthWork.com). Alternatively, if you have a specific question or issue, you can log in to CatholicYouthWork.com and ask the community. And, as we've said, you should also be able to call on your parish priest, diocesan youth officer and diocesan child protection officer for assistance too.

Good luck...

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