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Affirmation Sessions

Some good ideas and approaches...

One of the key features of modern Catholic youth work is the use of affirmation sessions.

In a nutshell, this is a brilliant activity in which a group are invited to write nice, positive things to one another, telling them good things about themselves. It helps young people to appreciate the importance of being kind to one another and, more importantly, it shows each person in the group that they are special, they are loved and that they have many gifts and talents.

There are a few different ways this can be done, and there are a few tricks which can help it to work even better. In this resource, we will look at different formats for affirmation sessions, as well as some tips and techniques for making sessions work a little better.

DIFFERENT FORMATS FOR AFFIRMATION SESSIONS

The formats given here are in ascending order of depth. In other words, the latter ideas are for groups who are more mature and bonded and therefore likely to need more scope to express themselves. The earlier ideas, on the other hand are perhaps more suited to younger groups or groups that are less bonded.

Shape affirmations – Take a sheet of paper (A3) and draw some different shapes on the page. Make sure all the shapes are different, but make sure they can be written in. One for each person. During the session, you send each person out of the room in turn so that the group can decide together what to write in that person's *shape*. (this discussion of each person can really help individual members of the group to think about the good qualities in others). Once it's all done, photocopy the sheet (perhaps reduced to A4) and give a copy to each person.

This is probably best for younger groups and for groups of no more than 8 people.

Seed prayers – This can be tricky to actually run, but nonetheless effective. Each person is given an envelope of some kind and enough small slips of paper for each other person in the group. Each person then writes an affirmation note to each other person in the group. Once written, the notes are put into each person's envelope and everyone goes away with an envelope full of notes written to them. Sounds simple, doesn't it? Well, it's not! The advantage of this method is that you can cut the slips of paper to a certain size depending on how much time you have to write and how much you think people are likely to write. Another advantage is that (unlike booklets) people can write their notes to people in any order they like. The disadvantage is that getting the notes into envelopes can be a logistical nightmare: Distracting and time-consuming. So think carefully before you begin about exactly how it's going to work. You might put all of the envelopes in the centre of the circle and allow members of the group to put notes in the envelopes as they go

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along. Alternatively, you might want everybody to keep all of their notes until everybody has finished. That way, you can hand each envelope round the circle to be filled in turn.

I would suggest this option for smaller groups. It should only be used with groups larger than about 10 people if the group is particularly mature.

Affirmation booklets – This is the most common way of doing affirmations. You simply make a set of booklets and then pass them round in turn. How you make them is up to you: you can use clipart, photos, bible verses, or anything else that will make them meaningful. Just make sure there's loads of free space to write. You can start the session by getting everyone to write their names on the front of their booklets. Then the booklets are handed round the circle. It is important that the group facilitator (leader) controls when booklets are handed on, so that they are all handed to the next person in turn at exactly the same time. This avoids the slower writers feeling under pressure by having a few books piled up on their laps!

Once you get to the end, it's a good idea to get the last person who writes in the book to put it in the middle of the circle, rather than handing it back to its owner. Then everybody can pick up their book at the same time and read them all together.

This is the most common way of running an affirmation session and works well with larger groups. It is generally a better option for more mature groups, or for the end of longer programmes.

Affirmation letters – Each person writes a letter to each other person. Fairly simple really. Since the letters are generally longer than other 'notes' this is a good option for groups that know each other extremely well. Retreat teams, for instance, often do this at the end of a year, or at another crucial time.

It can be a good option for the end of retreat programmes if you think the group are likely to respond particularly well. Remember that letters can take a while to write though.

SOME IDEAS TO MAKE SESSIONS WORK A LITTLE BETTER

A good introduction – Introducing the activity properly is perhaps more important in affirmation sessions than in just about any other kind of activity, since certain problems can't be corrected as you go along. It's vital to stress how important the activity is, and how much it means to people to receive nice messages written to them (many people keep affirmation booklets for decades). It is also important too explain clearly how things are going to work. You might also want to tell an appropriate story about how nice it can be for people to hear good things about themselves. You should also stress that affirmation sessions have some very important rules. Such as:

- *Everything you write must be positive. You cannot write anything negative even as a joke.*
- *Everything you write has to be true. You cannot write anything false, no matter how nice!*
- *Nobody is allowed to say "what if I can't think of anything?"... it kills the mood!*
- *Everybody has to sign their message. It's not anonymous.*
- *Don't read what other people have written as the booklets go round the circle.*

Of course, the way in which you chose your rules and put them across is up to you.

When introducing the idea of affirmation it is also important to link it to Christian values. Christ tells us that the most important commandment is to *love one another, as I have loved you*: a key part of this is recognising and affirming what is good, beautiful and special in one another. I often

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introduce affirmation sessions by reading from the letters of St. Paul. Quite often when Paul wrote to a community he would begin by paying them a compliment or telling them something positive about themselves. This shows us how important affirmation has always been for our faith.

A focused but relaxing atmosphere – This isn't a hard-work activity, but it needs to stay focused or it can quickly descend into disarray. After all, it's something that can lead to excitement and emotion; two things which, though lovely, can make completing a task difficult.

It's generally best to stop people from moving around the room too much and it's a good idea to limit the chatting. A few words is okay, but this activity can't be done well in the middle of a general conversation. In reality, though, you will find that this is one of the very few writing-heavy activities that young people will happily stay focused for.

Background music works well, as do dimmed lights (not so much that they can't write though, obviously!). If you have a large group and it's going to be a long session, it's also a good idea to put a short break in the middle.

What to do after writing – This will depend on the logistics of the specific kind of affirmation activity you have chosen. In general terms, though it's good to give people a few moments to read through the things that have been written to them and to respond to them. Expect a few tears and hugs.

It can also be nice to make the affirmation notes form part of a liturgy or prayer of some kind. Not on the end of the session, but maybe a closing liturgy for a retreat, or a night prayer. Since affirmations normally come at the end of a programme, this can work nicely. Getting each person to read one note as part of a reflection on love or gifts, for instance, can be very moving.

You will probably find that affirmation sessions don't need much of a plenary/ evaluation at the end. The point of the session is usually fairly obvious and will be very much tied up with what is happening in the wider programme anyway.

AFFIRMATION OUTSIDE OF A SINGLE SESSION

This document is dealing largely with affirmation *sessions*. Sometimes, though, you might want to do affirmations outside of a single timetabled session. This may involve something ongoing throughout a retreat or over a few weeks or months in the case of a youth group or school-based group, or it may involve some kind of affirmation on a special occasion. Here are some examples:

Poster affirmations – This can work very well on a retreat, or with a youth group. Basically with any group who has a building (or at least a wall) at their disposal over any period of time. You simply put some posters up on the wall - one for each member of the group – and everybody writes on the posters as they go along: during breaks, during reflective times, or when they notice something about a person that impresses them or makes them smile!

At the end of the retreat (or the month, or whatever) everybody can either take their poster home or be presented with it.

It is a good idea for leaders to check the posters regularly, both for inappropriate content and also to make sure that nobody is being ignored in favour of others.

'Guardian Angels' – This is also known as 'angels and mortals' or 'postman'. Another variation on an old theme. A post box (you can make one very easily) is left in a communal area and the young people (and leaders too) are invited to leave notes for one another. Affirming notes, of course. At various points – like maybe after meals or at the end of sessions – one of the leaders can open the box and read through the notes.

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Again, it is a good idea for the leaders to keep an eye on who is getting less notes than others. It might then be a good idea to ask other members of the group to write a note or two for them. Or perhaps you can tell people at the start that they have to write notes to at least every other person. Having a *no anonymous notes* rule can also help with this.

Memorybook affirmations – This is a more complicated and involved option, which involves making an affirmation book for an individual and decorating it with photos and other keep-sakes as well as the usual affirmation notes. It can be very time-consuming to do this for a whole group. That's why this is a good option on a special occasion, such as when somebody is leaving a group.

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