

# Families and Youth Ministry

The vision is clear: the Christian family is holy and sacred, even amid struggle and strife. This is just as true for families with adolescents as it is for families with small children. Families not only belong to the Church, their daily life is a true expression of Church.

The research is clear: families play a key role in the faith journey of their children and teens. When families engage in certain activities and practices, an effective partnership begins to form between the Church of the home and the Church of the parish, leading to effective youth ministry. If the parish offers only age-specific classes for 60 to 90 minutes each week, it is unrealistic to expect much lasting faith formation to occur.

## Families and Faith

In their book *The Search for Common Ground: What Unites and Divides Catholic Americans*, James D. Davidson and his Purdue University colleagues acknowledge that family religious practice is a key predictor of a young person's adult faith practice:

Respondents who were close to their parents or whose parents frequently talked to them about religion are twice as likely to report high levels of traditional beliefs and practices than those who were not close to their parents or whose parents "rarely" or "never" talked about religion. (Pp. 98–99)

The Davidson study is corroborated by a Search Institute study involving mainline Protestant denominations, which found that the three most important factors empowering faith maturity among young people are family based:

- **Family faith conversations.** Hearing their parents' faith stories is one of the most important influences on the faith of children and teenagers. Open-ended discussions on relevant and controversial issues create an atmosphere for dialogue and growth. Though it is important for children to know just how their parents stand on a given issue, it is just as important to allow for a variety of opinions. It is also helpful when parents are willing to share times of doubt and questioning in their own faith journey. Sharing the rough points can create new opportunities for conversation and understanding.
- **Family rituals and devotions.** These activities move from informal conversation to something a bit more structured and intentional. People who regularly have family devotions, prayer, or Bible reading at home tend to have higher faith maturity. Families who take time to reflect on their daily, weekly, and seasonal habits will be likely to discover some opportunities for family ritual.
- **Family outreach and service.** Because they are faced with so many problems of their own, many families are not motivated to serve others. Yet

repeated acts of selfless mercy can transform woes into healing, as well as bring help to those who are in greater need. The most powerful influence on faith and family unity is working together to help others. One sure way to gain a world vision and a desire to serve others is to invite people who represent issues in the world to visit and perhaps share a meal.

(These three factors are adapted from *The Teaching Church: Moving Christian Education to Center Stage*, by Eugene C. Roehlkepartain (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1993), pages 174–175. Copyright © 1993 by Search Institute.)

## Parish and Families in Partnership

When it comes to empowering young people to live as disciples of Jesus Christ in the world today, both the home and the parish have the same tasks:

- to teach and model the Catholic faith in a personal and dialogical manner
- to encourage genuine spiritual growth through exposure to prayer, liturgy, retreats, and other Catholic rituals
- to engage in works of mercy and acts of justice for those who are poor and disenfranchised

When the parish and the family work together on those tasks, even greater good occurs. These practical suggestions will help you facilitate that partnership as a youth ministry leader:

- Use all available communication channels (mail, e-mail, phone, Web site) to keep parents and families informed about the youth ministry program.
- Provide ways for parents to help with special events and activities, such as service trips, retreats, and youth liturgies.
- Provide tips, ideas, and lots of encouragement to parents to help them communicate with their teens about what the teens are learning and discussing in youth ministry. In *Total Catechesis*, all the sessions have a summary handout with talk points, which is designed to stimulate further thinking and conversation.
- In addition, these general tips can be passed on to parents to help them stay connected with their teens as they journey through youth ministry:
  - Show genuine interest in the faith-based activities that your teen is engaged in at the parish.
  - Don't ask just the who, what, and where kinds of questions; try to move beyond the facts into feelings.
  - Share your own beliefs, feelings, stories, and experiences in your conversations.
  - Look for ways to draw connections between the parish and your home life. Encourage your teen to be involved in the liturgical life of your parish. Volunteer to be a reader, an usher, or a Eucharistic minister.
  - Remember the power of prayer. As you pray for your teen, pray also for the parish faith community. Pray that all the teens will journey through their high school years with good friends, an openness to learning, and encounters of genuine spiritual growth.