

Is Your Teen Questioning Their Faith? Why Small Groups Might be the Answer

By **Nina Koziuk**, Director of Youth Ministry, St. Theresa Catholic Church

This summer marked the event of my ten-year high school reunion, which has driven me to reminisce about my experiences in high school a decade ago. I was an honors student, ran cross country, played some recreational volleyball, and was very active in theater and show choir, but my biggest passion was my Church youth group and other parish ministries. Leading up to the reunion, my former classmates and I have been reconnecting, and I was somewhat taken aback when many of my closer friends shared that certain hardships in their lives have led them to apathy, even hatred, toward the faith in which they were raised. Perhaps even more shocking to me was that these were the friends who had walked the faith journey alongside me in those parish ministries as well. I struggled to understand how those who were once so passionate about Jesus and His church were now claiming to be agnostic or even atheistic.

It was only after looking back on my specific experiences in youth group and in recalling my college education and training in ministry that I could begin to discern why so many of my friends (and, moreover, so many of our youth and young adults today) have fallen away from the Catholic faith. A large component of the problem lies in ineffective youth ministry practices. Simply put, the experiences my friends and I often had in youth ministry, consisting of weekly gatherings where a hundred of us played basketball for an hour and then spent twenty minutes or less in faith discussion on a moral topic, wasn't adequately meeting our essential needs as adolescents.

Five Needs, One Solution

So, what does an effective and ideal youth ministry program look like? To answer that, it's important to consider what teenagers need most in our modern world. Credited experts in Catholic youth ministry have identified five things:

1. The need to be **UNDERSTOOD**

Everyone has a need to be understood. However, it is even more important for teenagers who are still developing into full maturity. Unfortunately, the majority of teenagers often feel that adults don't understand them. When an adult takes a genuine interest in a teenager and seeks first to understand, that adult earns the right to be heard. It is necessary to first understand what is going on in the minds and hearts of teenagers before an adult can effectively hand on the faith to them. It's like that often quoted truism: , teens don't care how much we know until they know how much we care.

2. The need to **BELONG**

Teenagers need to have a sense that they belong before higher growth, like understanding and living the Christian faith, can truly take place. In fact, teenagers will often compromise the morals in which they have been raised in order to be able to belong somewhere. Teens will find a way on their own to meet the need to belong if adults don't help teenagers build healthy, life-giving relationships with one another. On the other hand, if adults create an environment where teens are known, loved, and cared for, they create an ideal environment for discipleship.

3. The need to be **TRANSPARENT**

Teenagers rarely have the freedom to be transparent today, especially with one another. In their experience, it is too dangerous to be vulnerable in a peer-dominated world that is so focused on image and popularity. Teens long for the opportunity to be transparent about their doubts, concerns, fears, insecurities, hopes, and dreams, and to have the confidence to know that they will not be judged, but rather loved and supported. This is necessary for teens to grow in self-awareness and self-esteem. A place where trust has been established creates an environment where transparency – honest discussion - can take place.

4. The need to engage in **CRITICAL THINKING**

Teens are transitioning from concrete to abstract thinking and are able to conceptualize ideas such as truth, justice, fairness, and love. They are capable of pondering big questions such as "Is there a God? Do I need religion? Can I know God's plan for my life?" Additionally, they are in the process of establishing independence and becoming their own person. Deep down, they desire to be treated as adults and no longer want to be told what to do or what to believe. They are critically evaluating what they have been raised to believe and are not that interested in answers to questions they are not asking. Thoughtprovoking questions, lively discussion and dialogue, and freedom of expression are the things that engage teenagers in critical thinking about faith and life.

5. The need for **GUIDANCE**

In order to become adults themselves, teenagers need dialogue, collaboration, and friendship with other adults. Relationships with adults help them answer deep and fundamental questions such as: "Am I lovable? Am I capable? What difference does my life make?" Teens are naturally idealistic and desire to be challenged to greatness through the direction, encouragement, and support of caring adults. It is a well-known principle that young people will rise to the level of our expectations of them. Ultimately, teenagers will give their lives to Jesus through the witness and encouragement of loving, faith-filled adults.

With these points in mind, there is truthfully only one way to sufficiently and effectively meet all five of these driving needs of teenagers.

The answer is in small group discipleship. Small group discipleship refers to a ministry style that involves small, community-based relational environments that serve to assist in fostering spiritual disciplines. Jesus used a small group to build and spread His Church; in devoting the majority of His time in ministry investing in a group of twelve men, the disciples were hence empowered to go and make more disciples.

And how effective that model was! The Catholic Church has since reached every continent and is now home to 1.2 billion people! We can imitate this same response to the Lord's Great Commission to "make disciples of all nations" by following His example in starting small. St. Theresa Youth Ministry invites parents, peers, and teens to embrace this small group discipleship model through a platform called YDisciple.

Why YDisciple?

YDisciple is a youth ministry platform that empowers parents and parish leaders to work together to form and multiply small group discipleship for teens. YDisciple is intentionally relational and focuses on key influential relationships in the lives of teenagers, peers, parents and other caring adults. The platform is relevant and deliberate about introducing content and thought-provoking discussion in a small group setting:

Small Groups consist of 5-8 teens of the same gender who are close in age and ideally already friends with one another. This meets the needs to be UNDERSTOOD, to BELONG, and for TRANSPARENCY.

Discipleship is fostered by one or two caring adult leaders who, in communication and collaboration with parents, facilitate the presentation and discussion of topics about faith and life. This meets the needs of CRITICAL THINKING and GUIDANCE. This model establishes trust, faith sharing, accountability, and provides guidance to the teens as they grow in their relationship with Christ.

Consequently, YDisciple is not a program, but rather an apprenticeship in the Christian life in that it specifically models and invites teens into a life of active discipleship. At St. Theresa Parish, we invite teens to embrace this life of discipleship in a unique way through our new identity as **Young Missionaries**.

Young Missionaries: Warriors of Love

St. Theresa Young Missionaries is a ministry of our high school youth. Young Missionaries are confirmed Catholic teens who are committed to the Church's mission of love of Christ and neighbor through active discipleship. We "fight the good fight" of faith through embracing the "Little Way" of radical love modeled by St. Theresa, our patroness of missions. Young Missionaries encounter Christ and share the Gospel with others through involvement in YDisciple groups, retreats, service outreach, and social events throughout the year.

Please be sure to check out our website at <http://sttaustin.org/hsyouthmin> to learn more about the vision of Young Missionaries and how to get involved with a YDisciple Group. I am ecstatic to see how these new programs will produce radical discipleship amongst our teens through the example of St.

Theresa. May our Little Flower guide and inspire us in imitating her vocation of love through her Little Way of great holiness!