

Reflections on Youth Leadership Boards

by John Campbell

Over the years at St. Bernadette parish, we have experimented with every type of youth leadership model that we could find. My biggest realization through this process has been that, like most things, you will get out of youth leadership what you are willing to put into it. With that being said, much is also dependent upon the crop of youth in a given year. Some years, the harvest will be plenty, and the labor all seems worthwhile. Some years the harvest will be meager, and you ask yourself over and over – Why? Why do we do this to ourselves?

The following are short thoughts on different models we have tried:

The most effective way that we have found to facilitate young people to accomplish the work of youth ministry is to have a youth board with “officers” (or whatever other title you designate) who have clearly delineated and defined roles. In this model you can easily train each officer to fulfill the requirements/duties of his or her office. The downsides to this model include the likelihood of burnout, the complications with your leaders’ other commitments, and the possibility of losing some good candidates due to their involvement in other activities during a certain part of the year. Another challenge of this model is the process of choosing the leaders, and the potential for alienating those who are not chosen. Finally, young people, like most adults, are often very bad at empowering, enabling and delegating to allow others to share in the work and joy of Christian leadership. Therefore, when working with this model, it takes vigilance throughout the year to try to make sure the officers include others in the ministry.

Another model is the committee model. This model is very effective in that it allows many to share the wealth and burden of leadership. Great things can come of this model if you have very flexible, patient and proactive adults who are willing to work with a variety of schedules and do whatever it takes to enable and motivate the committees to continue to meet and plan month after month. Without such persistence, however, the committees fail to meet and make necessary decisions and plans.

The model that we currently use at St. Bernadette is a leadership team. Although I do not consider this to be the best model in terms of forming youth leaders, it is the most flexible because it allows anyone at any time to participate in the work of ministry. It basically entails a once a month meeting that anyone can attend to plan the upcoming meetings and activities. Therefore, some youth participate in leadership throughout the year, and others only occasionally. The downside to this model is the lack of continuity which makes a common vision, and any training very challenging. In this model, the roles and responsibilities cannot be clearly defined; therefore more things can fall through the cracks or be left up to the adults.

Volunteers play a critical role in youth leadership. At St. Bernadette, we have burned out leadership gurus, we have frustrated trainers, we have taken volunteers who have all the answers and caused them to run and hide. Each of these things happened when an eager volunteer came in with a specific vision of what they wanted to happen, and the goal of making leaders out of all of the youth. If, however, a volunteer is willing to work with young people, and a leadership team is their opportunity, that volunteer is probably more likely to be patient with the kids, work

with them where they are at, take them only where each is willing to go, and is usually fairly successful.

While these reflections may lead one to question whether having youth leadership is worth the effort, I believe that youth involvement in leadership is a crucial aspect of youth ministry for many reasons. First, their ideas are typically better than ours. Second, if our youth leave for college and beyond as merely spectators when it comes to their involvement in Church and their faith, I doubt that their faith will be sustained through the storms of life. It is my hope, therefore, that you are willing to try to develop youth leaders, and we can pray for each other as we seek ways to allow God to touch these young people that we have the privilege of serving.

John Campbell served as the Coordinator of Youth Ministry at St. Bernadette for 20 years before accepting the position as the Director of the Arlington Diocese San Damiano Spirituality Center in White Post, VA. He lives in Winchester, volunteers in youth ministry at Sacred Heart, and is married with five children.

*“These broken, wounded, and completely unpretentious people forced me to let go of my relevant self—the self that can **do things, show things, prove things, build things**—and forced me to reclaim that unadorned self in which I am completely vulnerable, **open to receive and give love** regardless of any accomplishments... I am telling you all this because I am deeply convinced that the Christian leader of the future is called to be completely *irrelevant* and to stand in this world with nothing to offer but his or her own vulnerable self.”*

-Henri Nouwen, In the Name of Jesus, p. 28-30