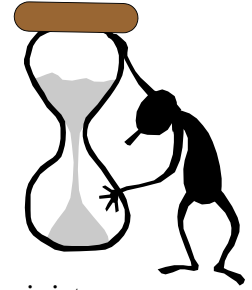


Longevity in Youth Ministry

by Rob Tessier



It has been said that the average span of a Director of Youth Ministry (DYM) at a parish is eighteen months. Parishes that experience such transition find it difficult to build any sort of foundation or momentum within their youth ministry program. Likewise, the first year that a DYM is at a parish is certainly the most challenging. The second and third years, though getting easier, can certainly continue to be a great challenge. However, those DYM's who have been able to make it to their fourth year will begin to experience far less challenges in their ministry. Unfortunately, the stress of the first year has such an impact that many leave the ministry before ever reaching their third or fourth year.

The top three reasons that seem to contribute to a short-lived youth ministry are:

1. First year burnout
2. Lack of support from parents, parish leaders, and/or pastor
3. Financial reasons

This article will address each of the above issues and ways to avoid common pitfalls.

First year burnout

Most professions are fairly well defined and provide a structure in terms of goals, objectives, working hours, and concrete ways to perform the tasks. Youth ministry can be performed in such a variety of ways and lacks such definition. When entering into a new assignment, it is absolutely essential that the DYM set realistic goals, to include the pastor's goals, and a plan for how to accomplish them.

One of the first priorities should be to create a "year-at-a-glance" schedule that displays all the meetings, trips, planning sessions, retreats, fundraisers, workcamp(s), and even office hours that the DYM intends to keep. Creating a "master plan" will contribute to a vision within an organizational system. Some DYM's may have the impulse to "find out what the teens want" or to "poll the parents." Polling the parents and teens about what the youth ministry program will look like is a big step towards disaster. The DYM has arrived at the parish to bring solutions and to set into place a program that will excite and draw in teens and parents. With that said, there are ways to allow input from teens and parents which is very healthy.

For example, the "master plan" states that there will be a monthly trip from September through July which will include one laser tag, a Kings Dominion outing, Diocesan Youth RALLY, and Christmas caroling in December. However, the DYM could seek input on what to do the other months. Another example would be that the "master plan" states that two major fundraisers are needed (one in fall and one in spring). However, the DYM could seek input from key volunteers and parents as to what type of fundraiser to run. The integration of a "master plan" mixed with input is a set-up for success. Also, be sure the pastor is on board with the "master plan". Then, when speaking at the pulpit, holding a meeting of parents, or gathering volunteers, the "master plan" can be often referred to. Volunteers, parents, and teens will be more likely to jump on board when they perceive the DYM really knows what he/she is doing. With that said, if a solid "master plan" already exists, then the key work will be to adopt and

integrate it. On the other hand, if a place has not had a solid youth ministry program, a “master plan” will need to be created.

Another top priority is to identify at least four or five families who will become actively involved in the ministry. It is these key families that need to tell their friends about the new youth ministry program and drum up excitement. An investment of time on the phone and in person needs to be made to communicate the vision of the program. When the excitement catches amongst parishioners, it will quickly spread. In addition, key volunteers among the young adults of the parish need to be identified. Within a month, there should be a network of parents, volunteers, and teens spreading the word about the ministry. Finally, one of the most important things a DYM can do to prevent burnout is to protect themselves.



Here are the top ways to protect from burnout:

1. Prayer life needs to be consistent and uncompromised.
2. A day off must be taken every week, completely free of ministry.
3. Be willing to say “no” if a possible ministry opportunity arises that on the surface is good, but will in the end require more than time and energy will allow.

The late Fr. Stewart Culkin, a great supporter of youth ministry, often counseled his DYMs that it is better to do fewer things and not burn out than it is to do too many things and burn out. This wisdom is immense and must be heeded. Sometimes the heart will desire to say “yes” to a great thing, but the mind must sometimes step in and recognize when it is essential to say “no” in order to preserve the longevity of the DYM.

One last point: it is essential that a DYM have a community of friends that are also involved in youth ministry, have a solid prayer life, and with whom open sharing can take place. A support system will greatly reduce the risk of burnout as others can offer advice and support through more difficult times. The diocesan Office of Youth, Campus, and Young Adult Ministries and the Deaneries are great places to gather with peers for this type of support. Usually the DYMs who do not take the time to reach out to other co-workers in the vineyard are the ones who become too consumed by their own ministries and experience burnout. Be sure to take advantage of training days, retreats, and gatherings with other DYMS as one important way to help avoid burnout!

Lack of Support from Parents, Parish Leaders, and/or Pastor

In order for a DYM to survive, they must have support from the Pastor. In order for the Pastor to give support, the DYM needs to clearly and consistently communicate the “master plan” and be sure they see eye to eye with the Pastor. If a volunteer or a parent has a problem with the DYMs vision or plan, then the Pastor can step in and offer his support. The Pastor and the DYM need to be on the same page. The DYM is an arm of the Pastor and needs to be in line with the vision of the Pastor. When interviewing, a DYM needs to be sure he/she is selecting a parish where there will be no conflict of vision with the Pastor.

With that said, there could be conflict with parents and parish leaders. Some parish leaders who are not familiar with youth ministry may feel it is a waste of parish resources. It will be important to gain their trust and support early on by communicating the “master plan” and the rationale behind it. “Selling the ministry” to key voices in the parish and parent community will pay tremendous dividends. If these key parishioners feel that the ministry is a waste, then they will make getting anything accomplished very difficult. However, if the parents and parish leaders value the vision and plan, then they will find ways to offer their support and help prevent burnout.

Financial Reasons

Nobody enters youth ministry because it is the place to get rich. Hopefully, each person who enters into this field does so because of a strong calling from God. Youth ministry can be performed effectively by someone in their early 20s as well as someone in their 60s. A single person will certainly find it easier to live on youth ministry wages than a married person with children. Financial stress and responsibility grow tremendously when a person enters into marriage and family. Unfortunately, it is at that time that many DYMs stop working for the Church and find a different profession. Before allowing this to happen, it's important to truly discern and trust the direction that God is calling. It may be that He has a plan for longevity but only desires the DYM to better trust Him with material needs. Though it may seem an impossible task to raise a family and be a DYM, there are plenty of examples where it is taking place.



Here are some things that should be attempted in trying to overcome the financial problems:

1. Live simply and be careful of all the extra expenses that add up (e.g. McDonald's for lunch, Starbucks, and expensive cell phone plans)
2. Communicate with the Pastor about changing family needs. If a DYM is having children, it is important to give the Pastor the opportunity to increase his/her salary to help better compensate the higher expenses. The DYM should also stress the desire to continue in the position and the value that stability brings to the ministry. If the pastor is willing to invest more of the parish resources in the DYM and other pastoral staff, then turn-over is lessened and the ministries can grow stronger over the years.
3. Be creative in terms of ways to earn a little extra income. Here are some suggestions:
 - a. play music at a weekly Mass for a regular stipend
 - b. become a sub once or twice a week at the local schools
 - c. teach part-time at the Catholic school on-site or a Catholic high school
 - d. tutor on the side or give music lessons, etc.
 - e. work at a summer camp or create your own

To overcome the financial difficulties that a life in ministry brings, it's important to seek support, be creative, and trust in God's provision.

Rob Tessier has been a Director of Youth Ministry in the Diocese of Arlington for 23 years and has been serving at All Saints Parish since 2001 while also serving as Middle School Religion and Theatre Teacher at All Saints Catholic School. Additionally, Rob is founder/director of both Upper Room Theatre Ministry and Spotlight on the Arts Summer Camps which both bring the arts alive within a Catholic setting for youth. Currently a graduate student in the Masters of Catechesis and Evangelization program through Franciscan University of Steubenville, Rob's first degrees are in Speech Communication and Theatre from Miami University. After undergraduate studies, in 1996 Rob was trained by the Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Clown College followed by a professional tour with the Greatest Show on Earth as one of its clowns. A calling to ministry within the Church led Rob back home to full time Youth Ministry and a deeper participation into the Youth Apostles Institute based out of McLean, VA. Married shortly thereafter, Rob and Carole now have 9 children between the ages of 6 - 21, live on a small farm, and perform as the Tessier Family Singers to area nursing homes.