

Youth Discipleship Plan – Leaders Guide

Candidates for Confirmation must be prepared to assume the role of disciple and witness to Jesus Christ in their church community (CCC 1319). Many parishes in Vermont (and around the country) are frustrated by the number of teens who get confirmed but then are never seen again. The hope behind the following initiative is to assist our youth (in conjunction with their parents) in creating a scaffolding through which their faith can grow in the years following Confirmation. Thus, the Diocese of Burlington is asking each parish to begin (if you have not done so already) a program by which teens will prayerfully discern how they will continue their walk of faith both in the parish, but also in the larger community. Though this discipleship plan can take a number of different forms, we would like to offer some general guidelines and recommendations.

- 1) **Parental involvement.** Parents need to play an instrumental role in any discipleship program. John Paul II in his encyclical Familiaris Consortio (The Fellowship of the Family) states:

By means of love, respect and obedience towards their parents, children offer their specific and irreplaceable contribution to the construction of an authentically human and Christian family. They will be aided in this if parents exercise their unrenounceable authority as a true and proper "ministry," that is, as a service to the human and Christian well-being of their children, and in particular as a service aimed at helping them acquire a truly responsible freedom, and if parents maintain a living awareness of the "gift" they continually receive from their children.

Later in the same encyclical John Paul writes:

By reason of their dignity and mission, Christian parents have the specific responsibility of educating their children in prayer, introducing them to gradual discovery of the mystery of God and to personal dialogue with Him: It is particularly in the Christian family, enriched by the grace and the office of the sacrament of Matrimony, that from the earliest years children should be taught, according to the faith received in Baptism, to have a knowledge of God, to worship Him and to love their neighbor.

Indeed, you should avoid any discipleship program that omits parents. Parents should instead be viewed as collaborators and partners in this ongoing journey of faith with their children. We understand, and have seen firsthand, how parents are sometimes an impediment to spiritual growth (valuing sports and other activities over church, poor personal witness, etc.), but we must continue to acknowledge and build up their roles as the first educators in the faith.

- 2) **Prayerful discernment.** The process of developing a plan for discipleship should be prayerful and not merely thoughtful. Though it is impossible to have a full picture of God’s plan at any given moment in time, we believe God seeks to share His life and plan if we ask. St. Paul says this “mystery which has been hidden from the past ages and generations, has now been manifested to His saints” (Colossians 1: 26). It is imperative that we communicate to our young people that the plan God has for them are ‘plans to prosper and not to harm them, to give them hope and a future’ (Jeremiah 29: 11). Finally, following Christ is ultimately, and at first, a turning away from our will and what we want to do. Jesus says, ‘Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me’ (Luke 9: 23). Though following

Christ does bring joy and peace, it is not and never will be easy. In other words, it is crucial that we communicate the challenges of being a follower of Christ and the ‘narrow road’ and ‘narrow gate’ (Mt. 7: 14) they will encounter as they continue on their journey of faith.

- 3) **Listening to their stories.** This process should be conversational and personal. We *have* to move beyond programs and situations where we do not truly and deeply know the teens who are in our pews. Jesus is the model for this approach. Like the road to Emmaus, we are called to listen to their stories, their hearts, their fears, and their dreams. We want to create parish communities where a young person will know there are mentors and leaders who are concerned about them and care in a clear and palpable way about their ongoing formation *after* they get confirmed. Indeed, we hope any ongoing sit downs (we recommend not calling these ‘interviews’) and discipleship forming program will begin a *long and ongoing* relationship with our young people that will continue through adolescence and into young adulthood. It is not enough to confirm them with no follow up, accountability, etc. This is the fundamental shift we are looking for through this program.

The discernment of their own gifts, charisms and ministry opportunities should be a joy-filled experience. Pope Francis writes in The Joy of the Gospel:

The Church which “goes forth” is a community of missionary disciples who take the first step, who are involved and supportive, who bear fruit and rejoice. An evangelizing community knows that the Lord has taken the initiative, he has loved us first (cf. *1 Jn 4:19*), and therefore we can move forward, boldly take the initiative, go out to others, seek those who have fallen away, stand at the crossroads and welcome the outcast. Such a community has an endless desire to show mercy, the fruit of its own experience of the power of the Father’s infinite mercy. Let us try a little harder to take the first step and to become involved. Jesus washed the feet of his disciples. The Lord gets involved and he involves his own, as he kneels to wash their feet. He tells his disciples: “You will be blessed if you do this” (*Jn 13:17*). An evangelizing community gets involved by word and deed in people’s daily lives; it bridges distances, it is willing to abase itself if necessary, and it embraces human life, touching the suffering flesh of Christ in others. Evangelizers thus take on the “smell of the sheep” and the sheep are willing to hear their voice. An evangelizing community is also supportive, standing by people at every step of the way, no matter how difficult or lengthy this may prove to be. . . Finally an evangelizing community is filled with joy; it knows how to rejoice always. It celebrates every small victory, every step forward in the work of evangelization.

Pope Francis elsewhere talks about the need of evangelizers who should not ‘look like someone who has just come back from a funeral’, but instead joy-filled ministers of the Gospel whose lives glow with fervor because they have themselves received the joy of Christ in their own hearts. Again, may this process be filled with joy, hope and love!

- 4) **The discipleship plan should be specific and concrete, but also open to movements of the Holy Spirit as a young person’s particular journey of faith unfolds.**

Everett Fritz in his book The Art of Forming Young Disciples says:

Ministry is the process of meeting a person’s pastoral needs. This is an extremely important concept. It is not enough to have a curriculum, resources, structure, volunteers, participation and events. If youth ministry at the parish doesn’t meet a young person’s primary pastoral needs, then youth ministry is not happening. To make disciples, we must form people intellectually, and as human persons. . . Every individual has pastoral needs, and when a person *lacks relationships with mentors and like-minded peers in his church* (italics added), he lacks the relationships that are necessary to meet his individualized needs. If success is measured by making disciples, then our ministry has to start with a plan for meeting the individualized needs of each young person.

Fritz states that teens have a hierarchy of needs that we, as adults and mentors, need to focus upon and seek to meet: the need to be understood, the need to belong, the need to be transparent and real, a need for critical thinking about the faith and a need for guidance. We believe the discipleship plan should help meet and address these needs of each young person. *Without meeting them where they are* and addressing these needs, we will be speaking above and beyond them.

**5) Mentors and creating a mentoring culture**

One of our greatest challenges moving forward is creating a mentoring culture with the adults in the parish. Religious education where teens are put into a classroom is, in many ways, convenient, safe and secure. Though not to the omission of religious education and intellectual formation, the shift we are proffering is seismic in nature. We are looking for communities of faith who collaboratively work together to mentor and model for our young people what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. A community that follows up, holds accountable and creates a spiritual home for all the youth who come to our churches. What this looks like exactly in each parish will vary, but creating a mentoring culture needs to be at the core of this discipleship paradigm and program.

Suggested further reading on forming young disciples

- The Art of Forming Disciples – Everett Fritz (Publisher: Sophia Institute Press (February 22, 2018)
- Forming Intentional Disciples – Sherry Weddell (Publisher: Our Sunday Visitor; 1st edition (July 10, 2012)
- Sustainable Youth Ministry – Mark DeVries (Publisher: IVP Books; 1 edition (November 10, 2008)
- Engaging a New Generation – Frank Mercadante (Publisher: Our Sunday Visitor (May 31, 2012)
- Growing Teen Disciples – Frank Mercadante (Publisher: Saint Mary's Press (June 18, 2002)
- Discipleship Focused Youth Ministry – Eric Gallagher (Publisher: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform; 1 edition (September 29, 2016)
- Purpose Driven Youth Ministry – Doug Fields (Publisher: Zondervan; Youth Specialties edition (February 24, 2013)

Resource to consider:

**Howard Gardner’s Multiple Intelligence Theory.** Howard Gardner, longtime Professor of Education at Harvard University, developed an influential theory utilized throughout academia today -- the theory of multiple intelligences. We believe this template may be useful in helping young people discern not only what their ‘intelligences’ are, but how God can use their gifts to his glory and purpose. Thus, this would be a ‘grace building upon nature’ approach – as Aquinas wrote, “Although man is inclined to an end by nature, yet he cannot attain that end by nature, but only by grace because of the exalted character of the end”. Many young people today suffer from nihilism, fatalism, a lack of purpose, confidence and mission. Gardner’s model helps to identify the natural strengths each person has. Though we want them to be involved in our parishes, we should teach and equip them to see discipleship as something that is woven and integrated into the fabric of their lives. A simple example might be ‘musical intelligence’. How can I be a follower of Jesus Christ as a musician? A discipleship program can easily incorporate Gardner’s theory into discerning how the Holy Spirit can utilize these gifts. An article on Gardner’s Multiple Intelligence theory can be found here:

<https://www.cornerstone.edu/blogs/lifelong-learning-matters/post/what-are-multiple-intelligences-and-how-do-they-affect-learning>

Since his theory came out, a couple other important ones have been added – namely moral and spiritual/existential intelligence. Learn more here:

<http://infed.org/mobi/howard-gardner-multiple-intelligences-and-education/>

Note, it is *vital* important that any utilization of Gardner’s theory does not veer off into pop psychology or a tool that is merely self-serving. Instead the goal is developing the moral virtues and recognizing how these virtues are developed within the real-world context of sports, music, theater, work, science, etc.