

Advocating for Youth in Your Community

by María Calacan

Getting to know your community and the issues that are affecting youth and their families builds an environment of love, support and appreciation for diversity that testifies to the love of Jesus Christ. The building of relationships inside and outside your parish community assists the Director of Youth Ministry (DYM) in understanding where your young people come from, what is the root of their struggles, and what sets them on fire with the love of Christ so you can encourage them to be faithful.

For example, in 2008 there was an issue with the County of Fairfax closing the Support on Suspension program in the Culmore area of Falls Church. During school suspension, parents struggle to find youth a safe, supervised program where they are able to keep up with their schoolwork and where they are prepared to resume their studies (FPY-SOS White Paper). Partners got together to organize fundraising efforts and created relationships with Fairfax County Partnership for Youth, businesses, faith-based and non-faith-based community organizations. St. Anthony of Padua Parish allowed Rotary Club to sell raffle tickets after Masses, the imam of the local mosque contacted local business owners for donations and the community partners pulled together for the community's youth to keep the program afloat for the 2008-2009 school year.

While working with community partners, I learned that the graduation rate for Hispanic and African American youth in Fairfax County, VA was dramatically lower than that of Anglo students, specifically in the Culmore area high schools and middle schools (FPY SOS – White Paper). Many parish youth have already participated in the program and now are leaders advocating for the program. A youth minister understands and walks with young people by meeting them in their various life situations (*Renewing the Vision*) and looks for all resources inside and outside the parish to support the families. A DYM may also receive requests from parents asking for a letter of recommendation to present to the public school boards. This is a prime example of meeting and supporting a young person and their family during a difficult life situation, especially when there may be a linguistic or cultural barrier. It is difficult to reach out to families and youth when they are lacking knowledge of processes and possible solutions, in this example specifically suspension/expulsion from a public school.

Thinking outside of the box and being part of the resolution is simple. Be open to learning, communicating, and not ignoring the injustices of society, specifically those that deal with families and youth. Another example is that the county sends information out before summer break to all communities requesting them to be a “host” for summer meal programs for county youth. Perhaps the community parish is not able to host the program but is able to communicate to families so youth are able to have a meal or two during the weekdays. Hosts in Fairfax County include faith-based organizations, community centers and schools.

Those who minister to youth know that the transition of middle school to high school and beyond is stressful. It is hard to give testimony and preach that everything is possible with the help of Jesus when youth experience many doors closing for them and their dreams seem almost impossible. Young people are caught between finding the right path and following the easier

path. Youth overcome obstacles like learning English and adapting to another culture, and they are in search of a better life. They serve the community through various ministries at church and through school programs that help other young people understand the importance of reading and writing in their native language. A youth worker walks with these youth to help them see these challenges as blessings and encourages them to persevere academically and faithfully recognize that these gifts will help them succeed. Through their testimony of faith, young leaders in the community and parish are developed and they encourage all young people who find themselves frustrated and sometimes alone in their struggle.

A young person was admitted to a university, went to freshman orientation and was sent back home hundreds of miles away upon trying to register because of their legal status. This is a very sensitive subject that many see as political but as a Church, we need to stand up for adolescents. We should work to promote just immigration laws which respect the common good and dignity of the human person. We should especially stand up for those who are voiceless and powerless in society (*Renewing the Vision*). Basic needs for youth include having a safe home environment, receiving an education and a meal at least once each day. DYMs need to be reminded that this is not a third world country that is suffering from these issues. These are our youth sitting in the pews at our Masses that may look and talk a little different, but were made in the image of God. We may unknowingly be already walking with these young people, but because they are embarrassed or have some fears of being rejected, they have not shared these struggles.

How to advocate in your community

Know your community by building relationships with the representatives of community faith-based organizations, county programs for families, schools, and diocesan youth-specific organizations. The Catholic Diocese of Arlington is blessed with a diverse population that enriches our Catholic Church. There are many languages and faces but still the same Spirit. It's important to remember that and to have a kind presence and open heart toward those of other cultures.

Youth workers should learn what resources are available for families and young people and work together for a common goal. For example, I have participated in the Culmore Partners meetings that are held monthly and been a part of the planning committee for the Community Day, an event where young people of the parish are able to show off their wonderful talents and learn about various community services. Participating in county and community dialogues builds a network of people looking for and advocating for the issues of the community at large. Inviting older youth to participate is important, as they can become advocates for the issues with which they are living. This gives them hope and keeps them focused on the right path by letting them know they are not alone in the struggle.

María Calacan is a former Director of Youth Ministry at St. Anthony of Padua in Falls Church, VA. She currently serves at Mother of Light Center, a relationship-driven outreach to the poor and needy in Arlandria's Chirilagua area.