

Effective Practices in Leading Small Faith Communities

by Eric McDade

A comprehensive parish youth ministry program should provide young people with small faith groups or communities. While there are benefits to large-group activities, young people tend to grow in their faith when they have regular, consistent time in small faith groups with adult facilitators. Two to three adults leading each small group of 10-15 teens provide an excellent ratio to build strong relationships. Following this model and the ten practices listed below will help you to develop a community where young people feel comfortable learning, sharing, and growing in their faith alongside their peers.

1. Create single-sex groups

A lot of the socialization in high school centers on impressing members of the opposite sex. Segregating young people by gender offers them an environment where they are likely to feel more comfortable being open and honest about what's really going on in their lives.

2. Model the faith well

Live out a deep spiritual and sacramental life. Engage in spiritual reading and educate yourself about the faith so you are able to explain it in clear and convincing ways. Young people have a knack for spotting a phony; work to grow in faith so the youth will identify you as an authentic witness for Christ and his Church.

3. Work with a team of adult leaders and build good friendships with the other adults.

Different teens will connect better with different adults. The advantage of having a team of adults lead a small faith community is that it offers young people a variety of witnesses to the faith. Additionally, insofar as the adults live out a life of Christian friendship, it provides a good witness and model for the youth.

4. Give good talks and tell good stories

Jesus frequently taught by telling stories. It's a good idea to follow his lead. Tell interesting, compelling stories that demonstrate different truths about the faith. If one can prudently reference stories about one's own life experience, these stories also have the added advantage of implicitly witnessing to the faith.

5. Inspire your young people

Developmentally, high school-aged students are at a stage where they are striving for independence. When possible, it's better to inspire your teens to do the right thing instead of "telling them the right thing to do." Tell stories (see above point) that illustrate the point you're trying to make. Many young people who would be eager to argue or discuss a directive are less argumentative when suggestions are made through a good story.

6. Be a solid, consistent presence in your young people's lives

Being an effective witness for Christ and his Church requires sacrifice. It's important to make it a high priority to be present to the small faith community at the weekly meetings and regular retreats. High school teens go through lots of ups and downs, and adult

mentors are charged with the task of bringing Christ's love to them. A consistent presence by adults goes a long way in demonstrating that Christ's love is with a young person in both good times and bad.

7. Participate in the sacraments with your youth

As Catholics, we believe that the sacraments put us in touch with Our Divine Lord. Facilitating events where young people get to attend Mass or confession should be a priority. In particular, there is a value in creating events where adult mentors and youth have the opportunity go to confession. Confession can be perceived as a daunting experience by many youth. The experience can be made easier when they see adults they respect availing themselves of the sacrament. Additionally, penance service activities offer the adult mentors an opportunity to pull teens aside and address fears or concerns that a particular young person may have about confession.

8. Take your youth on retreats and workshops

Retreats and workshops offer a unique opportunity for teens to grow in communion with God and each other. Retreats often are occasions for powerful conversion experiences, and help rally the youth together around a Christ-centered mission. It's important to build a number of retreats into the annual schedule. Likewise, workshops on specific topics are wonderful opportunities to deepen understanding, camaraderie, and connection.

9. Encourage the youth to see their peers as brothers/sisters in Christ

Youth spend the majority of their time with their peers. It's helpful to encourage the youth toward the notion that they are a Christian community that is called to both challenge and support each other. As Christians, they are also called to include those on the margins and make outsiders feel welcome. In the long run, the youth will profit tremendously if they can build solid Christian friendships with other teens that endure over the years.

10. Make sure the youth have fun

Especially during the school year, teens spend a lot of time in a structured environment. While they can profit from the predictability that structured meetings offer, it's important to make sure the adults are facilitating a fun, joyful atmosphere that is attractive to them. Make sure your teens have time to play, have fun, and socialize. Young people are required to go to school; there is no legal mandate that they attend a church youth gathering. Fundamentally, a small faith community must be joyful and attractive if young people are to attend with any consistency.

Eric McDade helped run a small faith community for high schoolers from 1999 to 2018.