

## ***Has Our Vision Been Renewed? Shifting Perspectives/Shifting Methodologies***

***Robert J. McCarty, D.Min.***

***Executive Director, National Federation for Catholic Youth Ministry***

For the past thirty two years the field of Catholic youth ministry has been blessed with a comprehensive vision articulated by our bishops. The 1976 *Vision of Youth Ministry (VYM)*, the original statement promulgated by the USCC Department of Education, identified goals, components and principles for pastoral ministry with youth. *VYM* was expanded and revised in the 1997 *Renewing The Vision: A Framework for Catholic Youth Ministry*, approved by the entire USCCB, adding even more credence to a comprehensive approach to pastoral ministry to, with, by and for young people. The development of both documents utilized an extensive consultation process with practitioners examining the current state of the Church's pastoral ministry with young people and proposing necessary shifts and new directions.

So, has our vision been renewed? Emphatically – YES! And NO! The pertinent question is “Has our vision renewed our methodology and ministerial approach?”

### **Shift Towards Discipleship**

*Renewing The Vision* heralded several shifts in our overall vision of youth ministry. The 1976 *Vision of Youth Ministry* used the Emmaus story from Luke's gospel (LK 24:13-35) as the primary image for youth ministry, depicting youth ministry as an accompaniment approach, where we walked with our young people along their faith and personal journey. Youth ministry provided opportunities for young people to ask faith questions, integrate faith into real life, break bread together, and experience community.

And though obviously this is still important, the 1997 *Renewing The Vision* document proposed a discipleship image, based on the Great Commissioning (MT 28: 16-20), where young people are sent out on mission. Today the emphasis is on calling the young Church to a great adventure, to be disciples of Jesus Christ who are called to transform the world.

### **Shift in Methodology**

A second shift occurred in methodology or approach. Our ministry has – or must - shift from youth group to youth groupings. We can no longer rely on a single youth gathering or community to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse youth population. In terms of culture, ethnic communities, family, lifestyle and geographic setting, our young people have a wide range of needs, interests, resources, time, and even spiritualities. It is unrealistic – and ineffective ministry – to expect a youth group to be the primary vehicle for comprehensive youth ministry. Parishes are challenged to provide a range of settings and formats for ministry and to develop creative approaches to fostering faith and responding to life concerns.

### **Shift in Emphasis**

A third shift is one of emphasis. The ministry is moving from a focus on building relationships and developing a sense of community among our young people to an emphasis on evangelization – the genuine proclamation of the Good News of Jesus – and on catechesis – the deepening of our understanding and our commitment. Certainly, ministry must be relational if it is to be effective, but now the personal relationships and the community are not the endpoint. Rather, they serve as a context for an authentic encounter with Jesus Christ and for fostering knowledge of the gospels and our traditions. And effective evangelization and catechesis must lead towards an engagement with the world through justice and service.

Integral to comprehensive youth ministry is systematic and intentional adolescent catechesis. But that does not suggest that traditional classroom models are the most effective approaches to catechizing young people. Rather catechesis is an apprenticeship into the Christian community - and apprenticeship requires opportunities, experiences and strategies that foster both knowledge and skills. Pastoral leaders are challenged to integrate an intentional catechetical dimension in all current youth ministry programming; e.g. youth gatherings, prayer experiences, retreats, and service projects, while also providing specific catechetical opportunities that utilize methodology appropriate and effective with young people. Further, the faith community itself becomes the context for catechesis when we intentionally engage young people in the pastoral, leadership and liturgical ministries of the parish.

Without being too simplistic, youth ministry has shifted from an emphasis on bringing young people together in the community to sending young people out to transform the world, providing them with the knowledge, faith skills, and authentic relationship with Jesus Christ necessary to live as disciples.

### **Recognize the Gift**

However, we are now challenged to enhance *Renewing The Vision*. First, youth ministry leaders will increasingly move from seeing themselves as missionaries to youth and to youth culture, bringing the gospel and the church into their lived reality, to being advocates for young people in both the Church and in the societal arena. Not only will we continue to advocate for their responsible participation in the life, work and mission of the faith community, but we will also advocate for their responsible participation in society. The issues of immigration, health care, education, poverty, juvenile justice, and violence and war are their issues now and the voice of youth ministry needs to speak clearly. We must remind both the church and societal arena that our young people are a gift to be shared, not a problem to be solved.

### **Foster Identity**

Second, we are challenged to intentionally assist young people in fostering their Catholic identity. In the post modern world of individualism, relativism, and religionless spirituality, we are challenged to develop a comprehensive approach to catechesis that includes religious education (cognitive), faith formation (affective), and discipleship (behavioral). The *Baltimore Catechism* #2, question #4, asks” “What must we do to gain

the happiness of heaven?” And answers, “...to know, love and serve God in this world.” To know, love and serve provides a comprehensive framework for catechesis.

### **Provide A Language**

A catechesis that touches their head, heart and hands needs to be anchored in a spiritual home – and catechesis must provide a language for youth’s experiences of God! The 2005 National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR) describes young people as inarticulate in matters of faith and Church. Youth ministry must provide opportunities and settings where young people can literally practice speaking about their faith, where they can ask hard questions about faith and the Church, engage in theological discussion with their peers and with faith-filled adults, and practice their answers.

An important dimension in forming a Catholic identity is providing young people the skills or “practices” integral to discipleship. Skills refer to the behavioral aspect of faith. Young people need the skills to act out and live out their faith. Faith practices are those activities and actions that form a Christian way of living. In the past these practices were often absorbed by young people through their participation in the community with active, practicing believers and reinforced by their parents. However, in this culture of religious consumerism, we can no longer assume that young people have learned the behaviors of Catholic disciples.

Faith skills include those practices that deepen one’s relationship with God: learning how to pray, how to use scripture, how to keep the Sabbath, and how to participate in communal worship. However, young people also need the disciple skills of making moral decisions, practicing forgiveness and reconciliation, reaching out in service and compassion, and critically reflecting on societal values and issues. Faith communities and pastoral ministers are challenged to be intentional in providing opportunities for developing faith skills and practices. Apprenticeship has a significant behavioral or skill dimension.

### **Renew Parish Life**

And the third challenge – we – and the entire Church – are challenged to renew parish life. Regular Mass attendance is decreasing dramatically and youth’s connection with parish life is increasingly tenuous. If it takes a village to raise a child – if it takes an entire faith community to foster the faith of young people – we have to attend to the parish. In parishes where the community’s pastoral and liturgical life is vibrant, youth ministry can thrive. But when the life of the parish is staid and routine, even the best organized and resourced youth ministry efforts will ultimately dwindle.

And why – because the NSYR identified the faith practices and beliefs of parents as the most significant impact on the faith practices and beliefs of adolescents. And if our parents are not engaged in the faith community, their children and youth will probably not be connected as well. But we already know this. We preach the importance of parents as primary religious educators and we teach about the primacy of adult faith formation. Has our methodology followed our vision? The significant impact that family has on the spiritual beliefs and practices of young people and an emphasis on the importance of

intergenerational experiences in healthy adolescent development are clearly pointing towards an evolving model for youth ministry. Parish is still the best vehicle for supporting faith along the entire life span, so we all must attend to liturgy, justice and service, pastoral care, prayer, and catechesis in the broader faith community.

This requires that we no longer think of youth ministry as a program, but as a response to the needs of young people and as the utilization of their gifts. Youth ministry no longer involves only young people, but now reaches out to our families and the larger adult faith community. Youth ministry is no longer about continually separating youth from the parish, rather it is about integrating youth into the life, work and mission of the community. Youth ministry is not a catechesis disconnected from life. It is enabling young people to genuinely encounter the living Jesus Christ who calls them into discipleship. And, therefore, youth ministry is no longer the responsibility of an individual ministry coordinator or team, but calls for the entire community – through the collaboration of the parish staff – to “own” our young people.

### **The Challenge**

*Renewing The Vision* shifted our ministerial direction and now we are challenged to renew our methodology and approach. Has our vision been renewed? Emphatically YES! Has our methodology been renewed? Emphatically, it must!