

PART ONE

The GROWTH and DEVELOPMENT of the CHURCH'S MINISTRY with ADOLESCENTS

SIGNS OF HOPE

One of the most hopeful signs over the past two decades in the Catholic Church in the United States has been the renewal of ministry with adolescents.

A Vision of Youth Ministry initiated a transformation in the Church's thinking and practice that has matured over the past two decades. It emphasized the following aspects of ministry with adolescents:

- Ministerial and pastoral. The pastoral, integrated vision of Church, expressed through the eight components (ministries of advocacy, catechesis, community life, evangelization, justice and service, leadership development, pastoral care, and prayer and worship) was grounded in a contemporary understanding of the mission and ministry of Jesus Christ and his Church. *A Vision of Youth Ministry* made it quite clear that ministry with young people was integral to the life of the Church. Far from peripheral to the Church's concern, ministry with adolescents was *essential* for helping the Church realize its mission with its young members.
- Relational. Effective ministry with adolescents was built on relationships. The central place of the Emmaus story in *A Vision of Youth Ministry* demonstrated the primacy of relationships and of discovering God within those relationships.
- Goal-centered. In articulating two primary goals for ministry, *A Vision of Youth Ministry* gave specific direction while encouraging leaders in local communities to create a variety

of ways to reach their goals. There was no longer one way to minister to adolescents.

- Multidimensional. An effective ministry incorporated eight components with their program activities so that the needs of all the young people could be addressed and the resources of the community could be wisely used. This multidimensional approach was a needed response to social-only, athletics-only or religious education-only youth programming.
- Holistic and developmental. *A Vision of Youth Ministry* proposed an approach that attended to a wide spectrum of adolescent needs and that was attuned to the distinct developmental, social, cultural, and religious needs of adolescents.
- People-centered and needs-focused. *A Vision of Youth Ministry* focused on young people. It encouraged an approach designed to address the particular needs of young people in their communities. *A Vision of Youth Ministry* did not recommend program models or specific activities, recognizing that the day had passed when one program structure could respond to all the needs of youth.

A Vision of Youth Ministry was the catalyst for a dramatic increase in new and innovative pastoral practice with adolescents. Since the late 1970s, the Church has seen the growth of multidimensional parish youth ministries throughout the country, the emergence of the role of parish coordinators of youth ministry and Catholic high school campus ministers, the development and widespread availability of high quality youth ministry training programs and youth leadership training programs, an increase in the number of quality youth ministry resources, attention to the needs of families with adolescents, and expansion of the scope of ministry to include young and older adolescents.

We are very encouraged to see that the renewal of ministry with adolescents has had a positive impact on the lives of young people. The

1996 study of parish youth ministry program participants, *New Directions in Youth Ministry*, offers the first data on a national level specifically on Catholic youth ministry. The study is good news for the Church because it shows that adolescents who participate in parish youth ministry programs identify faith and moral formation as a significant contribution to their life, have a profound sense of commitment to the Catholic Church, attend Sunday Mass regularly, and show continued growth while they remain involved in youth programs. These are positive signs that the Church's investment in ministry with adolescents is making a difference in their lives and in the life of the Church.¹

A NEW MOMENT

Two decades after the publication of *A Vision of Youth Ministry*, the Church's ministry with adolescents is confronted by three new challenges.

First, the changes in our society present the Church with a new set of issues. We are deeply concerned by America's neglect of young people. The United States is losing its way as a society by not ensuring that all youth move safely and successfully into adulthood. All across America, far too many young people are struggling to construct their lives without an adequate foundation upon which to build. We are also concerned about the consequences of the social and economic forces affecting today's families. The effects of consumerism and the entertainment media often encourage a culture of isolation. Far too many families lack sufficient time together and the resources to develop strong family relationships, to communicate life-giving values and a religious faith, to celebrate family rituals, to participate in family activities, and to contribute to the well-being of their community. Too many communities do not provide the economic, social service, and human development infrastructure necessary for promoting strong families and positive adolescent development.²

These new challenges can point to new opportunities for ministry. The Church's ministry with adolescents and their families has an important contribution to make in building healthy communities and in providing

the developmental and relational foundation essential to a young person's healthy development. We need a vision and strategy that addresses these contemporary challenges.

Second, new research has provided insight into the factors that make for healthy adolescent development. Through its surveys with more than a quarter of a million adolescents in 450 communities across the United States, the Search Institute, a research organization dedicated to promoting the well-being and positive development of children and adolescents, has identified forty essential building blocks or assets for positive adolescent development, reflecting the extensive literature on child and adolescent development, resiliency, youth development, and substance abuse prevention. These forty building blocks³ include *external assets* provided by the community through families, schools, churches, and organizations, and *internal assets* developed within the adolescent (e.g., commitment to learning, positive values, social skills, and positive identity). The Search Institute research on asset-building indicates that

- asset development begins at birth and needs to be sustained throughout childhood and adolescence;
- asset building depends on building positive relationships with children and adolescents, and requires a highly consistent community in which they are exposed to clear messages about what is important;
- families can and should be the most powerful generators of developmental assets;
- assets are more likely to blossom if they are nurtured simultaneously by families, schools, youth organizations, neighborhoods, religious institutions, health care providers, and in the informal settings in which adults and youth interact;
- everyone in a community has a role to play.