

YOUTH MINISTRY GOING FORWARD

Ministering in a COVID-19 Pandemic Environment

Part 1. A Small Communities Model of Youth Ministry



COMMUNITY

Small faith communities provide opportunities for deep conversations, to learn about different aspects of our Catholic faith in greater depth, and build relationships with one another.

CONNECTION

When unable to meet face to face, use every tool available to reach out and stay connected, as well as to spread hope and continue to be a light to the community.



CELEBRATION

We can't wait to celebrate the day when we can safely gather again. When the time comes, we will come together with joy and gladness to praise and give thanks to God.

The Catholic Church has an all-embracing respect for the life, value, and dignity of every person. We have a responsibility to assure that ministry activities and environments are safe and conducive to growth and transformational encounters with Christ for all those we serve. Attention to this responsibility is an expression of our commitment to a consistent ethic of life.

As the pandemic has gone from weeks into months, and months into an extended future with no clear end in sight, the work of changing and dealing with unknown and evolving scenarios can feel exhausting and overwhelming. Our Catholic faith and parish-based youth ministry provide an anchor that serves as a source of love, support, and mercy for all teens and families as they navigate this difficult pandemic as followers of Jesus Christ. The safety of the young people and families entrusted to our care is unequivocally our number one priority as the Catholic Church strives to fulfill our mission. The safety of all people in the local community is also essential because we care about the dignity of all people.

Youth ministry is the ministry of the entire parish community. It is the role of the youth minister to work with teens, parents, families and parish leadership to determine how best to do that based on the challenges in the current environment. Youth ministry often involves programs that gather large groups of teens together. However, that option is not readily available nor is it the best option in a pandemic environment.

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought about significant restrictions to large group gatherings to prevent the spreading of the virus. While safety information regarding best practices continues to evolve as the pandemic continues, the following practices have remained consistent since the beginning of the pandemic to limit the spread of the virus and to increase the chances of personal and group safety:

- Keeping 6 feet of physical distance or more between persons.
- Wearing a facial mask when in groups to protect yourself and other people.
- Access to testing to know who has contracted the virus.

- Contact tracing when a person has been found to have the virus.
- Personal hygiene and hand washing behaviors.
- Awareness that individuals may have and transmit the COVID-19 virus to others without having symptoms or serious illness themselves.
- An awareness that when a person with pre-existing health conditions or who is elderly is exposed to the virus, the risk of serious and possibly fatal consequences increases.
- An awareness that when larger numbers of persons gather in proximity for an extended period of time, the risk of infection from the virus increases.
- Pay attention to the trends and patterns of COVID-19 infections in your geographic area, in [Ohio](#), and from the [Center for Disease Control](#).

The youth minister is responsible for planning and coordinating faith formation opportunities that uses both virtual and in-person activities, so that the parish can continue to play a primary role in the faith life of the teens and families entrusted to our care. These opportunities include celebrating sacraments, individual and communal prayer, serving others, personal formation, catechetical formation, one-one-one formation, family formation, small group formation, gathering together virtually, and gathering together in person.

While being attentive to these guidelines is responsible and ethical leadership in ministry, please continue to consult with current developments and guidelines from the Diocese of Cleveland. Stay in regular communication with your pastor regarding youth ministry programming during the pandemic. Check out the [COVID-19 Youth Ministry Resources](#) on the diocesan website for regular updates.

This document aims to assist with parish youth ministry planning in the COVID-19 pandemic environment. The pastor and youth minister are responsible for the application and safe operation of the parish youth ministry. They are expected to be familiar with and attentive to the applicable and evolving CDC guidelines, recommendations, and orders issued by the State of Ohio and local health authorities and guidance provided by the Diocese.

Small Groups moving toward Large Groups – SAFELY!

The preferred option for youth ministry during this time of the COVID-19 pandemic is to form small groups or communities of ten (10) or less people that will gather in person and / or virtually. Why small faith communities? It is the preferred option for youth ministry because of the compelling evidence for greater safety in small groups. Pragmatic strategy for safety during a pandemic is essential.

A theological approach with transformation as the goal, however, is a priority. Youth ministry has long used small group gatherings in many settings (service projects, catechesis, pastoral care, bible studies, etc.) to provide opportunities for young people to grow as disciples of Jesus Christ. Small groups allow for deep conversations, learning different aspects of our Catholic faith in greater depth, and calls them to serve the mission of the Church. As the small faith community journeys together, relationships are built between the teens and each other, and between the teens and the adult youth ministry leaders. Large groups allow for dynamic experiences, a safe place for seeing friends, making new friends, and being together in an environment of warm hospitality and belonging. When small group gatherings are combined with large group activities, youth ministry programs are able to reach more teens and families in more settings.

While doing small group youth ministry, we can hold on to the goal and lay the groundwork for bringing those small groups together for larger group gatherings as soon as that can be done safely and with minimal risk of spreading the

COVID-19 virus. When that time arrives, the work and formation that has taken place in small groups can feed into the large group activities in ways that are effective, transformative, and safe. Forming missionary disciples is the Spirit's work, but our work is to develop an intentional path to allow the Spirit's work to be most effective.

The following safety practices and an informed awareness of risk need to be considered when planning any ministry programs or experiences. Please refer to the "[Guiding Principles for Parish Ministries](#)" for a framework of reflection to help you discern the next steps in your planning. Here are a series of questions to get you started and inform your judgment regarding programming decisions:

- What are the objectives of the program and in what combination of ways can the objectives be achieved in a pandemic environment?
- Who is the ministry activity for and how can it be done without increasing their virus risk level?
- How might the youth ministry activity objectives be achieved in a small group model approach?
- How might the youth ministry activity objectives be achieved in a family-centered small group approach, where the family is the small group and the parents are the primary leaders?
- What support, training, and resources do your adult leaders need to effectively serve in a small group youth ministry leadership role?
- What is the process if someone in your parish or ministry group tests positive for COVID-19? (See the CDC recommendations for [when a staff member or congregant becomes sick](#).)





Establishing a Small Communities Model of Youth Ministry

Step 1. Form a Leadership Team

- Determine the primary purpose of your small groups in order to inform the selection of right leaders.
- Identify a core team of 8-10 adults to serve on the leadership team. Adult leaders serve as mentors / advisers. They can also serve as small community coordinators. If establishing youth-led small communities, they can provide support to the small community youth leaders through resources and training, as well as accountability.
- Adult leaders should demonstrate a love and concern for the church at all levels: the ability to make young people feel comfortable and at ease, a personal relationship and sense of God, good listening skills, an ability to affirm others, and a servant heart.
- Make sure all adult leaders have completed all necessary training for the safety of youth: [VIRTUS training](#), background checks, the reading and acknowledgement of the [Policy for the Safety of Children in Matters of Sexual Abuse](#) and the [Standards of Conduct for Ministry](#).
- Bring the leadership team together to share faith and pray. Provide training and discern gifts.
- Core team leaders start by experiencing their own small group and building trust, openness, and confidence in the new model.
- Conduct ongoing evaluation.

Step 2. Develop a Shared Vision

- With the adult leadership team, reflect on how the small communities will support your overall youth ministry strategy and purpose. The goal is not to increase attendance or bring in large numbers, but to care for the People of God and make disciples.
- Assess your parish youth ministry. Remember that there is no one-and-only way of doing youth ministry. What do you need to drop, change, and/or merge from the existing youth ministry model in your parish? What special circumstances in your youth ministry need to be considered in moving toward small communities?
- Be creative. Consider the various ways you can integrate the themes and components of comprehensive youth ministry in a small community model.

Step 3. Start with the Experience

- One way to transition to a small community model is to begin with a common experience. Small communities can grow organically as a follow up to a previous retreat experience. They can also be used to provide ongoing faith formation as part of the high school Confirmation or catechetical program.
- Another is to form gender-specific groups by creating separate male and female small communities. These must have also gender-specific adult mentors/advisors.
- Small communities can be based on specific areas of interest such as music, community service, sports, etc.
- Small Communities can also be formed to empower and form youth leaders for peer evangelization.

Step 4. Define the Small Communities Structure

- Determine the number of the small communities that will be needed to support your new model of youth ministry.
- Determine group membership. How will small communities be formed? Youth ministers may decide to establish mixed or separate communities based on age, grade level, school, language, etc. Will young people self-select the small community that they would like to belong to?
- In small community models, participants stay in the same small group with the same adult leaders. However, it is also important to provide opportunities for the various small communities to come together. Be sure to follow the [“Best Practices for Safe Youth Ministry in a Pandemic Environment.”](#)

- Engage the family through the small communities. What is the role of parents? What type of resources do they need? Is it possible to establish parent, family, or intergenerational small communities?
- What kind of parish involvement and commitment will be needed to foster a small group model parish wide?
- Identify and define leadership roles within the small community. Small communities provide an ideal opportunity for leadership development. There are two types of leadership roles within the small community based on time commitment. Roles that can be rotated among community members on a more frequent basis (i.e. weekly, monthly) include:
 - *Prayer Facilitator* - This person is responsible for preparing and facilitating the prayer experiences. They invite other community members to actively participate in prayer.
 - *Timekeeper* - This person is responsible for making sure that the flow of the meeting stays on schedule.
 - *Reflection Facilitator* - This person is responsible for facilitating any small group discussions.
 - *Secretary* - This person is responsible for taking notes from the meeting and reporting back.
 - *Social Activities Facilitator* - This person is responsible for facilitating any icebreakers and community building activities.
- If you plan to have youth leading the small communities, you will need to identify a small community youth leader who is willing to make a more long-term commitment and be responsible for the overall coordination of the meetings / activities. We also recommend that you identify an assistant youth leader who will be present at all the meetings and be ready to step in when needed.

Step 5. Determine the Small Group Format

- We highly recommend having both in-person and virtual small group gatherings. Each session should incorporate prayer, catechesis, reflection and faith sharing, and pastoral action / application to life. We also recommend that you plan for a variety of experiences as a small community including retreats and community service.
- Be realistic. Take into consideration current resources, adult leadership availability, safety, and other details related to your parish.

- Establish the meeting schedule for each small community. We recommend that each small community leader submit a schedule to the youth minister. Be sure to offer a variety of times and locations that will fit the teens/families schedule.
- Identify the program, curriculum, or resource that the small communities will use.



Step 6. Implement the Small Communities Model

- Develop a communication plan to inform the parish community, especially teens and their parents, about the changes in the youth ministry program. Encourage participation in the small communities and provide information about how to sign up. Be careful not to frame the small group model as less than or as an inadequate substitute. Frame it as an excellent formation model that has a long and rich history of effective formation in the Church. Most RCIA formation programs use a small group framework due to numbers and time length of the RCIA experience.
- Provide online registration. First come, first serve. Limit space to 8-9 teens with 1-2 adults. Once all spaces are filled, indicate that immediately.
- Prepare your adult leaders in advance to lead the small groups. Estimate how many you expect to need and then add three (3) to five (5) additional leaders. That way you are prepared to add new young people safely and you can encourage teens to bring their friends to participate.
- Conduct ongoing evaluation.

