

RELATIONAL MINISTRY

Relational Ministry is the bedrock of quality, transformational youth ministry. The concept of relational ministry is simple: relationships are at the heart of true conversion. In order to bring teens to a relationship with Christ, we must be willing to engage in relationship with them ourselves. The mission of Life Teen is to lead teens closer to Christ. We cannot do this unless we are willing to meet the teens where they are, develop healthy relationships, and walk with them closer to Christ. It is possibly the most important, and most difficult, aspect of youth ministry.

Being convinced of the need for relational ministry and actually doing it are two completely different things. Many youth ministers sit in their offices in front of a large pile of paperwork and wish that their ministry could be more relational. But let's be realistic – who has time to seek out teens on their turf and develop real relationships with them? First, it is important to understand that this is not a one-person job. It is vital that the youth minister model and empower the Core to engage in relational ministry. Second, relational ministry does not mean that you have a deep, life-changing relationship with every teen you encounter. There are four natural levels that our relationships with teens can be divided into: contact, connect, care, and challenge.

LEVEL 1: CONTACT (EVERYONE)

We can engage every teen at this level, regardless of who they are or how you know them. At this level, we let the teens know that we are interested in them and see them as a person of worth and importance. Some hints for making contact with teens:

- Introduce yourself. Don't wait for them to initiate the conversation.
- Make eye contact.
- Ask their name and remember it!
- Reach out to all teens, not just the ones who dress and act in "appropriate" ways.
- Be yourself.

LEVEL 2: CONNECT (MOST)

Although we can make contact with all teens, we will connect with a smaller group. At this level, we look for a common basis on which a relationship can grow. The reality is that we cannot and will not connect with every teen in our program. But hopefully there is someone that every teen can connect with. Some hints for connecting with teens:

- Ask questions. This shows interest in their lives and helps you know what you have in common.
- Meet them where they are. Take another Core and go to their games, plays, lunches, workplaces, etc.
- Involve them in the planning and execution of Life Nights, skits, videos, etc.
- Be available. Never be too busy to take time to connect with a teen.

LEVEL 3: CARE (SOME)

At this level, we know about the teens and we begin to give specific and individual attention. You know something about their lives, and there is trust and respect between you and these teens. Again, we will not be able to reach this level with all teens, but it is important that all the teens in our program are cared for by someone. Some hints for relating to teens in this level:

- Actively listen to them. When they talk, give them your undivided attention. Listen to what is being said beyond the words.
- Ask open-ended questions that draw the conversation to a more real level.

- Earn the right to be heard. Your good advice and preaching will not be accepted if you have not gained their trust and respect.
- If possible, meet their parents.
- Be willing to share your experience, your faith, and even some of your mistakes with the teens.
- Ask for their prayer requests and let them
- know that you are specifically praying for them.

LEVEL 4: CHALLENGE (A FEW)

Our ministry may only reach this level with a couple of teens, but it is here that we have the potential to directly influence a life. It is these relationships that give our ministry purpose and life. At this level we have gained the trust of the teens and have earned the right to be heard. It is a privilege and honor that demands an investment of our time and energy. Some hints for working with teens at this level:

- Ask questions that challenge assumptions and behaviors.
- Be ready for their questions. If you don't know the answer, learn it together.
- Speak the truth even when it is difficult. Don't sugarcoat it.
- Pray with them.
- Challenge them in leadership roles.
- Provide opportunities for them to step up as leaders in the program.

THE HEART OF LIFE TEEN

With total love, let's get one thing straight before we go any further...relational ministry, entering into the teens' lives and meeting them where they are on their faith walk, is one of most important thing we do. It's what we're all about in Life Teen, and it's what we should be about at Church, because relational ministry is of Christ, it was modeled by Christ and, in an apostolic Church, it is what we are called to by Christ Himself.

At the end of the day, what we do is not about a program or event. Those things are great but they are meaningless if teens are not engaged in relationships that ultimately lead them to a relationship with Christ. This is what we mean when we talk about deep, meaningful relational ministry.

It is an investment in the lives of the young people. We're talking about knowing where they are and where they're not, spiritually and socially. We're talking about a willingness to meet them there and walk with them closer to Christ. Building real relationships must be the goal of every Life Night, retreat, event, and trip. We must be purposeful in our interaction with teens and in our planning.

As youth ministers, we must make relational ministry our priority and ensure ample opportunities for teens to be transformed through meaningful relationships.

IMPORTANT REMINDERS

Dealing with people (especially teenage people) is not always easy or pretty. When we make a conscious effort to engage in relational ministry, it is important that we are aware of some of the dangers and work to avoid them.

DIOCESAN POLICIES

Every person who works with youth must know and follow their diocese's sexual misconduct policy as well as any other guidelines for working with youth. These policies are meant for the protection of both the youth and the youth worker.

CORE = C²

Within Life Teen, this C² model rule states that youth ministers or Core Members are never to be one-on-one with a teen. There should always be two adults attending a teen event together, going to a graduation party for a teen, meeting a teen off the church grounds or waiting for a parent to pick them up from life night. Following this rule will keep both you, the core, and the teen safe at all times and free from accusations of any kind. In addition, it will lead to teens entering into communal relationship with Christ, not just one-on-one.

BALANCE

As adult ministers, we are not simply their buddy, nor are we just an authority figure. Our role is distinct and different - we must work to maintain that balance and, if necessary, remind the teen of our role. We must take time for our families and personal lives.

GENDER TO GENDER

Do not allow yourself to enter into an intimate relationship with a teen of the opposite gender that might lead to one-on-one time together, texts, emails or online conversations through various social medias. Not having opposite gender relationships will keep you and your teens safe from unnecessary allegations. It is one thing to listen to a teen of the opposite gender in small group or at the end of a life night with a crowd of people in the background. It is something very different when it becomes one-on-one in a coffee shop; you must live above reproach.

ARE YOU FRIENDS, “Friends” OR friends?

One of the best marketing campaigns I have seen lately asked the question, “are you Friends, “friends” or friends?” This is a great question to keep in mind with teens in your youth group. Now, the word “friend” has levels attached to it in this world of social media. Let’s explore a teen’s idea of the word friend.

- Friends are peers that teens are in an intimate one-on-one relationship. These are their true friends who they hang out with on the weekends, eat lunch with at school and spend social time with on a daily/weekly basis
- “Friends” are typically peers with a romantic attachment or desire of a romantic attachment.

Friends with a small “f” are casual acquaintances or surface friendships. They are not a part of the inner circle and often are people that teens know, but don’t really know well. As core and youth ministers we are called to be a mentor, not just a friend or buddy. You should never be a “friend” or person a teen would consider for a romantic, intimate relationship.

You are also called to go deeper than a surface, “how was your week” relationship in order for teens to nurture a relationship with Christ. In addition, we should never be a friend since they are more one-on-one relationships that the teens develop with peers, not adult mentors.

How do we dance on this line? Simple - keep the relationship in the public eye at all times and centered on Christ.

If parts of your relationship with a teen need to be hidden—it is not of God and not a safe environment for you or the teen. Every conversation, text, email or encounter must be something you would share with your youth minister with full knowledge that it will be confidential unless the teens’ safety is at risk. This is the difference between gossip and protection of minors. This is also a fine line but one that is absolutely necessary to ensure safe, Christ centered relationships.

THE FUN FACTOR

Sometimes it is easiest to be the “fun” core and not really lead the teens to anything more than yourself. Make more than memories with your teens. Mentor them into a relationship that lasts a lifetime, a relationship with Christ. Be willing to discuss difficult and serious subjects with the teens. Everyone wants to have a good time, but teens should know that you can be taken seriously and will help them if they ever need help or are facing a situation they cannot handle on their own.

FACEBOOK, TWITTER AND SOCIAL MEDIA

Media can be a blessing or a crutch when it comes to relational ministry. Recently, Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI reminded us that “If your mission is to be truly effective -- if the words you proclaim are to touch hearts, engage people’s freedom and change their lives -- you must draw them into an encounter with persons and communities who witness to the grace of Christ by their faith and their lives.” these are wise words to remember as we address social media in relational ministry.

Unless the use of technology brings teens into a personal, face-to-face encounter with “persons and communities who witness to the grace of Christ by their faith and their lives,” the use of these forms of technology will be ineffective. Social media such as Facebook and text messaging is great for ongoing relationships that have already been developed, but lack the depth that teens truly seek.

They are wonderful for event and birthday reminders, checking in to see what your teens are up to during the week and great for accountability safeguards when viewing what teens post (both picture and wall posts). But when you feel you truly know a teen from this information, you miss an opportunity for real relationship depth.

Archbishop Celli described this well, “we are called, rather, to leave a visible imprint-- recognizable imprints that make one think because of the marks we have in fact left by our presence.”

At the 44th World Communications Day, Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI called for “authentic and courageous witnesses,” that will “smooth the way for new encounters, always ensuring the quality of the human contact and care for persons and their real spiritual needs.”

We must go deeper than a tweet or text, we must seek the face of Christ in person and enter into relationships that go beyond what they post on their Facebook wall.

PRAYER

All too often we get so busy working for God that we forget to speak or listen to Him. We must take time for prayer, silence, Scripture, and Sacraments. It is only in doing this can we effectively serve the teens.

OUTREACH

It is an easy trap to fall into... we get comfortable in just ministering to the teens who come to us rather than going out and seeking teens who might never come to a church event. In a recent study, only 11% of American Catholic teenagers are involved of some kind of youth ministry. What are we doing to reach out to the other 89%? This is why outreach is so vital to solid youth ministry.

Jesus did not just sit back and wait for people to come to him; he sought out the lost and then he sent his disciples out in the same manner. As Disciples of Christ, we must be willing to seek out the teens wherever they are.

As youth ministers, we must set a standard of outreach for ourselves and for our Core. Just a reminder: all outreach must be done in the C² model – take another Core Member with you when doing any outreach work. Below are just a few ideas for outreach:

CAMPUS VISITS - Schedule one or two days a week to visit a different high school campus. Check with each high school for their visitor policy before you attend. Let teens know when you are coming and arrange a place to meet with a few of them to show you around. Bringing food always helps.

SPORT/TOURNAMENTS - Attend a variety of sporting events or weekend tournaments including JV and varsity games. Most of the time JV games are during the afternoon and a lot of parents work, so having their youth minister or core cheering them on is a big deal. Collect sports calendars from teens at the beginning of the season and share them with your core to pick the ones you will attend together.

MUSICALS/PLAYS - Attending musicals or plays is both entertaining and ministerial. Including a shout out in the playbill from the parish is an even more powerful form of affirmation. Bringing a single flower and seeing your teens and their friends you have been introduced to throughout the year is a great way to show your love and support.

CHORAL OR BAND CONCERTS - With singing and talent competitions being some of the highest rated shows on tv, choral groups and bands are popping up everywhere. Just like musicals and plays, attending a choral or band concert is an amazing night out for Core. Teens who are in parish choir or band are usually very involved in choral or band groups at their school. Who knows, you might recruit a new member by the end of the night.

DANCE PERFORMANCES/CHEER OR DRILL COMPETITION - With So You Think You Can Dance on Fox and numerous talent competitions on tv, teens are dancing and for the first time in a long time you can watch with amazement and not horror. If there is a talent show, dance performance or cheer competition happening on an evening or weekend, get to it. They can be long, but your teens will amaze you with their talent.

LIFE TEEN CLUB OR CATHOLIC/CHRISTIAN CLUBS ON CAMPUS - Encourage your teens to start a Life Teen club on their campus and offer to be a guest speaker on a monthly or weekly basis. This is a great way for teens to grow in their faith as well as be a part of your teen's life on campus.

PEP-RALLIES - A lot of your teens are on student government. They are busy putting on pep-rallies for their school where various dance, band and sports teams are highlighted. Attending the homecoming rally or other pep-rally throughout the year is a great show of support and a great way to meet teens and administration.

DANCE CHAPERONE - Offer to be a chaperone at a dance such as Homecoming, winter formal or prom. Seeing you just might be the reminder they need on big nights like that to remain pure or stay away from drinking and drugs at the after parties.

QUINCEÑERA - Attending a Quinceñera Mass for the young Hispanic ladies of your parish is a great sign of support for a cultural tradition that is very important to the Hispanic community. Often times, three or four girls at a time will have a Quinceñera Mass, so go and support of all of them.

MULTI-CULTURAL EVENTS - Participating in various cultural events at your parish is a great way to show unity and support. Some are religiously cultural and some are not so be sure to ask the participating teens about the events happening and attend them. If possible, have core that are of the same ethnicity as the event attend with you.

GRADUATIONS (8TH AND 12TH GRADE) - If you are not attending 8th and 12th grade graduations, find a ticket and get to them. Bring a gift or card to give to them to show your excitement for this milestone achievement. Be sure to meet the parents and take photos that you can place on your parish website of all your graduates (with proper permission).

GO WHERE THEY ARE - Have a couple of Core meet teens to the movies (with proper permission forms of course) or meet up at a Starbucks or place where teens hang out on the weekends. This way, core can meet their friends as they bump into one another or get a cup of coffee. Some of the best relational ministry opportunities happen in a casual setting such as this.

BOOKSTORE BIBLE STUDY - Have your Summit or Unleashed Bible study at the local bookstore on a Friday or Saturday night instead of the church. You will meet a lot of teens' friends in a setting like this; you might even meet some future Core.

BIRTHDAY LUNCH - Invite teens that celebrate birthdays in a certain month for lunch and ask them to invite 2 friends that you have never had a chance to meet. You will pay for the teen (or maybe everyone if you do pizza and have the budget) but typically the friends pay for themselves. It is a great way to celebrate birthdays and a great way to meet their friends and invite them to your ministry.

COACH JUNIOR VARSITY OR VARSITY SPORTS - If a school allows it and you have the gifts and time to do it, be an assistant coach for a Junior varsity or varsity sport. This is a great way to get on campus, meet teens and help them grow spiritually while they grow in their sporting skills.

VISIT TEENS AT PLACE OF EMPLOYMENT - Find out from the teens where they work and visit them in the evenings and weekends. During the summer this is a huge way to stay connected to teens since you do not have a campus to visit at lunchtime. If possible, take their 15-minute break with them (remember C²).

SHOOT HOOPS AT LOCAL COURTS - Get a couple Core together and shoot hoops, play volleyball, Frisbee golf, or whatever sport with teens. Let teens know you will be doing this and have them meet you with some friends to play. It is great relational ministry time and a lot of fun.

When it is all said and done, relational ministry must be at the heart of any ministry we do. We must evaluate every program, event, retreat, and trip by its ability to engage teens in real relationships - both with us and with Christ. It is not only important for the teens, but it is vital for us to stay plugged into the lives of the teens we serve. Events that support relational ministry will keep us and our Core teams from burn out and continually remind us of the importance of this ministry.

