

Young adult ministry shifts focus

The Division of Youth and Young Adult Ministry is shifting from a focus on young adult programs to an approach they hope will infuse young adults throughout parish life.

Rather than creating a club in an attempt to attract those between 18 and 35, the new approach, called Youth Adult Refocus, will give parishes tools to understand young adults and make parish life in general more welcoming for them, said Mark Pacione, director of the Division of Youth and Young Adult Ministry.

The challenge is two-fold: not only to get young adults involved but to help those in parishes understand how young adults think.

“No parish has a shortage of things to do,” Mr. Pacione said. “But to get young adults they’ll have to refocus.”

For example, he said Millennials, the generation born after 1981, like to work in teams. That makes parish work, often involving committees, a natural fit. But that same generation is used to focusing on a task and then moving on. They know they’ll change jobs, or move, so they’re not into long-term commitment.

“They need tasks that are collaborative in nature and short-term,” said Mr. Pacione. “That will cause us to rethink how we set up committees. It’s not a bad thing, it just means we have to rethink how we do that.”

Finding young adults is another problem for parishes, and it won’t be solved by looking in the pews. Only one-fourth of young adults attend Mass on a weekly basis. Where are they? At the coffee house, at the gym, on the Web, on Facebook, in college, in a mother’s group.

“The marketplace for young adults is online,” Mr. Pacione said, suggesting parishes look into Facebook or MySpace pages.

The Division of Youth and Young Adult Ministry has prepared six PowerPoint presentations to give parishes ideas. They’ve just begun doing presentations throughout the archdiocese.

Bishop W. Francis Malooly, western vicar, saw one of the presentations.

"I'm impressed with the approach," he said. "It's just a good move forward." He noted that teenagers have youth groups but young adults are a group that's easy to miss. Teens can be reached through confirmation and high school activities, "but with young adults it's clearly going to be a choice. I think we just need to invite them more. I like the idea of trying to make them welcome."

A self-assessment sheet, one of many tools prepared for this initiative, asks this question: "Is the first thing said to a couple calling to get married 'Are you registered here?' or is it 'How exciting for you! I am glad you have called your church at such an important time.'"

"They wouldn't be at your door if it wasn't important to them," Mr. Pacione said. "And even if they had been slack, why wouldn't they be welcome - we welcomed back the prodigal son."

One of the most successful young adults programs is Theology on Tap, developed some 25 years ago in Chicago.

Young adults gather in a bar or coffee house where a speaker or a topic of interest is introduced. A Theology on Tap in October featuring Archbishop Edwin O'Brien drew more than 100 young people to a Fells Point tavern. One of the strengths of the program is that it doesn't require a huge time commitment - it's done in four- to six-week sessions. It also offers young adults a chance to ask questions, even challenging ones, and a chance to socialize.

It taps into what makes young adults comfortable.

The presentations by the Division of Youth and Young Adult Ministry explain the differences between generations. Mr. Pacione points out that Gen X was the first generation of latch-key kids who saw both parents working, a trend that continued with the overscheduled Millennials.

"This generation gets it that family time is important," he said.

Baby boomers tend to define themselves by their professions, but Millennials and

Gen Xers define themselves by connections to friends and family. “The parish can be that place that defines them,” Mr. Pacione said.

The good news for parishes is that young adults “are very spiritual,” Mr. Pacione said. “They still have a strong appetite for the holy. They’re hungry for what we’ve got.”

When a parish assigns tasks, he said, “their tasks will be a little greener, a little more justice-oriented.”

After all, they’ve flocked to groups such as Habitat for Humanity. That’s why reaching them is crucial, Mr. Pacione said, “because they’re going to do it, whether they do it in church.”