

Mentoring Youth

(From the Archdiocese of Cincinnati, 2007)

Mentoring adolescents in faith can be both rewarding and challenging. It requires a unique commitment – a covenant, if you will – of adults and youth to walk together on the journey of faith.

Unlike most of the other models (for youth ministry), mentoring has as its starting point a specific real or felt need of an individual young person. Discernment of an individual youth's needs is a crucial first step in pairing up youth and adults.

In the traditional mentoring situation one youth is paired up with one adult. However, it is not uncommon for two or three youth who share similar needs and interests to be paired with the same adult.

The duration of the mentoring relationship depends upon its goal(s).

Typical steps of a mentoring process:

1. Individual needs, issues, concerns and interests of youth are discerned.
2. Gifts, talents, interests and expertise of adults are discerned and training of adults is provided.
3. Youth and adults with correlating needs, interests and gifts are paired up with each other.
4. Orientation is provided for youth and adults regarding the process, requirements and responsibilities of the participants. Goal setting takes place.
5. An agreement or covenant is made between mentor and youth(s) and with the supervisor of the program with regard to duration of the mentoring relationship, frequency and location of meetings and specific individual responsibilities, etc.
6. Mentors and youth(s) begin to meet regularly to achieve their goal(s).
7. Regular check-ins with a supervisor ensures that the adult mentor and youth mentee remain on track.

Adult mentors are specifically trained to hear and respond to the questions and concerns youth have about their developing faith.

Adult mentors must have ready access to appropriate resources. The "curriculum" is focused on youth needs which are placed before caring adults. It is the job of the adult mentors to help their youth(s) to discover the ways in which God has spoken and continues to speak to them. In a very real way, adult mentors act as interpreters and guides of the presence of God in the lives of young people. They offer suggestions,

insights, challenges and training in discipleship. The method and strategy may include scripture study, liturgical training, dealing with life issues, service projects, exploration of Catholic social teaching, pastoral care for hurting teens and families – and much more.

Adult mentors serve as guarantors that faithful living is a worthwhile goal and discipleship in Jesus changes the world. The young person receives a caring ear, unconditional love, challenging questions, stretching experiences – with an adult who is a role model of faithful living, with the wisdom that comes from age and experience.

Advantages of Mentoring

- A more comprehensive approach to youth ministry is engendered because the adult mentor acts as the agent and sponsor of youthful participation in the faith community.
- A holistic approach to discipleship in Christ Jesus is balanced between theological discussion and practical experience. Young people not only learn the faith, but also how to live out that faith in conversation with their adult mentors.
- Because the “curriculum” is goal-specific, the mentoring situation often has an established beginning and end. Many adults who have a limited amount of time to give will be drawn to participate.
- The program requires the participation of a broad range of adults who bring all sorts of expertise, interests, gifts and talents. Many caring adults will appreciate the flexibility of the program and recognition of their unique gifts and skills. Often, it has been a struggle to help adults connect their “secular” lives to their “faith” lives. This program gives them the opportunity to match their avocation or job-related skills with their vocation as disciples of Christ.

Some Concerns about Mentoring

- Careful attention must be paid to the Archdiocesan Decree on Child Protection, which mandates that at least two adults must be present for any activity for children. Mentor meetings must take place with more than one adult present, which is possible if meetings occur in the context of a broader gathering in a public setting. Mentors must not meet with participants in their own homes, or set up private meetings away from the church.
- Since the curriculum is taken from the life situations of youth, adult mentors must be trained sufficiently in order to integrate the principles outlined in official Church documents on adolescent catechesis and the core content of the Catechism of the Catholic Church in their dealings with youth.
- Not everyone is suited to mentoring. Special care must be taken to ensure that the match between adults and youth is beneficial and healthy. The policies outlined in the Archdiocesan Decree on Child Protection must be rigorously adhered to.
- Because not

every adolescent needs or wants to be in a mentoring situation, other catechetical strategies must be made available to them.

- Careful planning and discerning of the needs and gifts of the participants is crucial. Done poorly, the mentoring situation could cause more harm than good.
- Mentors must be trained to recognize the deeper needs or warning signs of at-risk youth so that appropriate referrals may be made. Mentors who are not professional counselors must acknowledge their limitations and consistently seek appropriate action whenever situations warrant it.
- Ongoing training and periodic check-ins are absolutely necessary for the success of the program and the participants. If the program is large with many participants, constant attention to supervision remains a challenge for DREs and Directors of Youth Ministry who have many other tasks to handle.