

Grades 7 & 8 – **TEEN DISCIPLES** - AN ADAPTABLE, ENGAGING 2-YEAR JUNIOR HIGH MINISTRY PROGRAM - *Updated June 2019*

Note:

Materials for Grades 7 & 8 are designated “**Year A**” and “**Year B**”. They can be used for either grade level. A student who misses Year A can begin with Year B then study Year A the following year. If the religious education program is small and 7th grade and 8th grade is combined, the combined group can work with Year A one year and Year B the next year. It doesn’t matter which they begin with.

I. Message: Diocesan approved:

- textbooks with spiral curriculum
- lectionary based materials
- diocesan provided experiential sessions
- online resources in line with current Catholic teaching

II. Outcomes and Evaluation

1. The fundamental goal of religious education and youth ministry is to draw young people into deeper relationship with and knowledge of the person of Jesus Christ.
2. Instead of structuring the year around a textbook, this curriculum structures the year around a variety of engaging experiences which encompass **Community, Worship and Service**.
3. Textbooks are used in preparation for and as a way of “unpacking” the experiences.
4. The goal is for youth to be able to attach the language of faith to hands-on experiences.
5. Youth need to recognize faith, education and everyday life as inter-connected, and they need to be challenged and engaged.
6. Important connections of this ministry should be maintained:
 - a. between religious education and youth ministry;
 - b. between families and parish programming;
 - c. between regular sacramental practice and faith formation;
 - d. and between everyday life and the content of faith.
7. **By the end of Year A**, youth should clearly recognize that they are created in love with a phenomenal dignity, but that this dignity has many implications for how they should treat themselves, other people and the created world.
8. **By the end of Year B**,
 - a. Youth should better understand the structure and symbolism of the Mass, and better appreciate the need for their full, conscious and active participation.
 - b. Youth should recognize the importance of each of the sacraments, and of Baptism and Eucharist in particular.
 - c. Youth should recognize Christ’s dynamic presence in the Church and through the scriptures.

Year “A” – Created to Love

Theme Overview:

1. The theme *Created to Love* is designed to address the basic question of self-worth and dignity.
2. Being created in God’s image, people are called to love others and to learn to be moral, thoughtful, compassionate and just people.
3. The Advent Retreat connects anticipation of the Incarnation of Christ with the belief that human flesh is indeed a good thing. Chastity and a basic sense of respect for one’s body and others’ bodies become a corollary theme for the year.

4. When youth have the opportunity to gather with a larger group of youth their own age who are also trying to live the Christian life, they are strengthened in their belief that they can live these culture-changing values.

Experiential Sessions:

1. First Gathering of the Year: Opening Party/Prayer
2. Middle of October: Environmental Cleanup service project
3. November: before Thanksgiving Holiday: Family Thanksgiving Prayer
4. Early December: Advent Retreat: Created to Love
5. Middle of December: Advent Service Project & Prayer
6. January: Gift Discernment Exercise
7. February: Hunger Banquet Activity
8. Easter: Families encouraged to participate in Easter Vigil or Easter Morning Mass
9. Last Gathering of the School Year: Closing Party and Transition to Summer Sessions
10. June/July: *Deal Or No Deal* resource from the Center for Ministry Development
11. July/August: *Justice for All* resource from the Center for Ministry Development

Year “B” – The Living Body of Christ

Theme Overview:

1. The theme *The Living Body of Christ* most centrally connects with a deeper understanding of and participating in the Eucharistic Liturgy – the Mass.
2. The entire year is broken down into a progression of some of the basic movements within the Mass – Opening Rites, Liturgy of the Word, Liturgy of the Eucharist and Concluding Rites.
3. Within that larger theme, individual sessions can be designed to fit with certain places in the Mass. For example, a chapter on the sacraments of healing, including Reconciliation, could be placed at the point in the introductory rites when the penitential rite is celebrated.
4. Youth need to recognize the double meaning of this theme. Eucharist comes to mind when they hear this theme, but youth also need to recognize their unique place and their identity as members of Christ’s living, breathing, growing body, the Church.

Experiential Sessions:

1. Second Gathering of the Year: Lock-IN, Theme: Prayer
2. October: Reconciliation and Forgiveness
3. Early December: Catacomb Prayer Service
4. Middle of December: Advent Service Project & Prayer
5. January: Regional Retreat, e.g. NET Retreat or Diocesan sponsored Retreat
6. February: Catholic Relief Services *Food Fast*
7. March: Family Meal Service Project
8. Easter: Families encouraged to participate in Easter Vigil
9. Last Gathering of the School Year: Closing Session with Teaching Mass
10. June/July: Team Building
11. July/August: Stargazing

The handbook with additional information plus 2 Training links *Engaging Youth in Learning* and *Connecting with and Empowering Youth*, featuring Michael Theisen, follows this brief explanation of the program.

*Curriculum designed by Joseph Streett, Diocesan Director of Religious Education 1989 to 2016
and Greg Baker, Diocesan Director of Youth and Young Adult Ministry 2004 to 2007.*

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TEEN DISCIPLES

**JUNIOR HIGH PROGRAM
FOR THE DIOCESE OF ERIE**

© 2019 Update



An adaptable, engaging 2-year junior high ministry program

Department of Religious Education

Introducing Teen Disciples

“Young people are hungry to know more about their faith. New creativity and energy along with alternative models for catechesis are needed to educate the young of our faith communities.”

National Study of Youth and Religion (2004, p.58)

The fundamental goal of religious education and youth ministry does not change. It is the privilege of this ministry to draw young people into deeper relationship with and knowledge of the person of Jesus Christ. However, the methods and models of ministry must continually adapt to new times and circumstances. The world has changed, and is changing. While many recent studies have shown that young people today are spiritually hungry, many models of education and ministry have fallen behind the times.

One response to the challenges of today’s ministry is to re-think how we approach curriculum.

“Although we mean to hand on a living tradition, often what we actually offer youth are bleacher seats to the holy life. The term curriculum (from the French word courir. “to run”) means “the course we run.” Yet our paper-laden “curricula” —a misnomer if ever there was one—often teach youth about the baton of faith we intend to pass on to them without ever actually letting them run the relay.”

-The Godbearing Life, 115

After piloting a new model of junior high ministry with about twenty parishes of all shapes and sizes across the diocese, a curriculum that seeks to give equal weight to the four principal aims of catechesis: message, community, worship and service is presented here.

Instead of structuring the year around a textbook, this curriculum structures the year around a variety of engaging experiences. The textbook series is used in preparation for and as a way of “unpacking” the experiences. This does not mean that the textbook is unimportant, or that the important concepts and vocabulary of faith take a back seat. Instead, it means that youth will be able to attach the language of faith to hands-on experiences. All current research on learning suggests that this hands-on approach is the most effective one for today’s young people.

These hands-on experiences also ensure that constant connections are being made between the lives of young people and the content of the faith. Energy, freshness and passion are added to this program by engaging the support of the community, families and senior high peer ministers.

Teen Disciples is a program of religious education and a program of youth ministry. In today's world, a separation between these ministries is not helpful to our young people. Youth need to recognize faith, education and everyday life as inter-connected, and they need to be challenged and engaged. All young people need the things typically called youth ministry activities: community-building, retreats, service projects and large gatherings and events. It is these experiences which engage youth at a deeper level and make them more interested in learning about the faith.

It is important to recognize that this model is a beginning—it does not include the breadth of opportunities that can be included in a complete and comprehensive model of youth ministry and catechesis (which is well-described in *Renewing the Vision*, the framework for youth ministry provided by the United States Bishops). But for many parishes, this model will be a good beginning.

Consider the Gospel story from Mark 2:1-14: Jesus Heals a Paralytic.

When he returned to Capernaum after some days, it was reported that he was at home. So many gathered around that there was no longer room for them, not even in front of the door; and he was speaking the word to them. Then some people came, bringing to him a paralyzed man, carried by four of them. And when they could not bring him to Jesus because of the crowd, they removed the roof above him; and after having dug through it, they let down the mat on which the paralytic lay. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, 'Son, your sins are forgiven.' Now some of the scribes were sitting there, questioning in their hearts, 'Why does this fellow speak in this way? It is blasphemy! Who can forgive sins but God alone?' At once Jesus perceived in his spirit that they were discussing these questions among themselves; and he said to them, 'Why do you raise such questions in your hearts? Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, "Your sins are forgiven", or to say, "Stand up and take your mat and walk"? But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins'—he said to the paralytic— 'I say to you, stand up, take your mat and go to your home.' And he stood up, and immediately took the mat and went out before all of them; so that they were all amazed and glorified God, saying, 'We have never seen anything like this!'

Does ministry with young people in some ways resemble this parable? Some young people seem disengaged and apathetic, seemingly paralyzed in their personal growth. Some young people ask, "What is the point of all of this?"

Does ministry with young people in some ways resemble this parable? Some young people seem disengaged and apathetic, seemingly paralyzed in their personal growth. Some young people ask, "What is the point of all of this?" or utter the classic line of junior high youth, "I'm bored!" Beneath the occasionally challenging surface, most youth are by nature energetic and questioning. Junior high youth are particularly drawn to find a place to belong, to matter, to be challenged and to grow. They are hungering for real substance in life.

"Youth are looking to the church to show them something, someone, capable of turning their lives inside out and the world upside down. Most of the time we have offered them pizza"
 -The Godbearing Life, 9

Those who effectively minister to youth today are challenged to be like the people who lowered the paralyzed man. They must be dedicated and creative, determined to find any possible path to bring young people to Christ. They must bring young people from the crowdedness of their lives and do what may seem to be impossible: to lower young people beneath the roof of their insecurities, doubts and confusion, offering the privilege of encountering Jesus Christ for themselves.

But to carry out this mission, the friends of the paralyzed man also needed accomplices and guides, people to clear the crowd, to say some words of encouragement, to make sure that the path to Christ was kept open. In short, it takes unbridled creativity, dedication, and lots of people in various roles to most effectively bring young people to Christ.

This leads to a second response to the challenges of today's ministry, which is to re-think who bears responsibility for the catechetical program. It cannot be the responsibility of the youth leaders, religious education leaders and catechists alone. Families, the wider community, and peer ministers have a responsibility for and unique gifts to offer to enable a much more engaging program.

Perhaps the young people are not the only ones who resemble the paralyzed man. Youth leaders, religious educators and catechists all have their mats. They may have grown used to ways of ministering that are comfortable and familiar, but they do not necessarily deeply connect with the young people. Put simply, the traditional classroom model of educating youth in faith is only partially effective at best. Teen Disciples is an invitation to "take up your mat and walk!" It is necessary to leave behind the comforts of familiar ways of ministry and journey into this new model of engaging the hearts and minds of young people! This includes inviting parents, peer ministers, young adults, and parishioners of all ages and gifts to be part of the program.

The Mission Statement for Teen Disciples speaks of this ministry happening in “A loving community of faith, forming young Catholic disciples in self-respect with passion for the mission of the Gospel.” Youth will thrive in their growth in faith when the whole community is actively responsible for faith formation.

A third response to the challenges of today’s ministry is to let go of outdated teacher-student models of ministry and allow youth to assume increasing ownership of and responsibility for their faith.

This Teen Disciples handbook includes many resources that can be a great asset to the catechetical journey. The curriculum and resources are designed to help catechists effectively teach, evangelize and empower youth to become faithful disciples of our Lord, Jesus Christ. In place of the model of teacher-student, the vision statement relates a model of mentor-apprentice. The Teen Disciples Vision Statement reads: “Mentoring young apprentices to the Gospel in the Catholic tradition, in discovering their giftedness, responding to the Spirit of Jesus Christ and embracing the world with God’s love.” This shift in language indicates a fundamental shift in how the role of catechists, youth leaders and youth themselves must be altered if youth are to truly learn and live the faith.

As this new model of ministry is engaged, make a few important promises about ministry with young people:

Youth will be engaged and challenged when learning about and living out the faith. The important connections of this ministry will be maintained:

- between religious education and youth ministry;
- between families and our programming;
- between regular sacramental practice and faith formation;
- and between everyday life and the content of faith.

The purpose of this ministry, which is to connect young people with Jesus Christ, will always be the first priority.

Those who minister to youth, especially during the turbulent junior high years, are carrying out a most important ministry for the church. The time, energy, creativity and passion needed to model and teach the faith to youth is a unique act of generosity and love. The church community thanks all ministers to youth for their resounding “yes” to Christ’s invitation to share the Gospel. The God who is not outdone in generosity will abundantly bless all ministers, their families and their work with young people.

Teen Disciples #1 Training Engaging Youth in Learning



with Michael Theisen

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Mr. Michael Theisen, from the *National Federation for Catholic Youth Ministry*, offers a variety of concrete examples of ways to engage young people. Suggesting a paradigm shift of ministry towards deeper participation, engagement and growth, Michael examines the variety of faith formation models that exist with young people, points to what is working best, and offers key ingredients for active learning with young people.

This link contains:

1. Teaching Through Games
2. Catechesis With Adolescents
3. Youth Learn Best When...
4. Engaging Youth
5. Active Learning
6. Evaluating Classroom Designs



Teen Disciples #2 Training: Connecting With and Empowering Youth

with Michael Theisen

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Mr. Michael Theisen, from *the National Federation for Catholic Youth Ministry*, offers helpful insights into the spiritual lives of young people. He stresses the value of and offers suggestion for faith sharing with young people. He also offers suggestions for building community with young people, as well as how to simply be present to teens.

This link also includes question and answer segments, offering insights into: large groups, service learning, youth leadership and peer witnessing and prayer with youth.

This link contains:

1. The Spiritual Life of Youth
2. Faith Sharing
3. Faith Sharing Strategies
4. Ministry of Presence
5. Building Community
6. Q&A and Room Evaluation:
 - a. Large Group Events
 - b. Service Learning
 - c. Peer Leadership Skills
 - d. Deepening Prayer Experiences
 - e. Evaluating Classroom Designs

Works Cited in this Handbook

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