

Make It Real

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Make It Real

A Practical Resource for Teen-Friendly Evangelization

Frank Mercadante

Saint Mary's Press™

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Part A

Setting the Foundation

What Is Evangelistic Outreach Programming?

An Introduction to Evangelistic Outreach

While attending a “solemn” gathering of youth workers, I heard a requiem chorus gaining momentum. “Teens are too busy today,” moaned a young, frustrated youth minister.

“They have no time for Church events,” wailed a veteran youth ministry coordinator.

“Parents care more about their kids’ sporting events than Church activities,” grimly chimed another disillusioned youth worker.

And a litany of lamentations groaned on to the rhythm of the finely orchestrated dirge. I broke the beat by noting, “The problem isn’t that teens are so busy that they don’t have time for youth ministry offerings, as much as it is that those offerings are simply not worth their time.”

Up to that point in my life, I had never considered dying as a martyr, let alone at the hands of Catholic youth ministers. But before the first stone could be chucked at my head, I quickly added: “Don’t get me wrong: I agree—youth are busier than ever. I’ve often asked teens, ‘Are you busy?’ And without hesitation they almost always respond with a resounding, ‘YES!’ Today’s teens have more opportunities than any other generation of young people. However, I will usually follow up with a second question: ‘Are you so busy that you have no time to do the things you really want to do?’ And with a knowing expression, they almost always concede that they find the time to do the things they really want to do. So, in other words, when we hear, ‘I am too busy to attend youth ministry events,’ it is a polite excuse for, ‘Youth ministry is not worth my time.’”

Instead of focusing our efforts on building ministries that are truly worth teens' time, we have often shifted the blame onto our young people and their parents. We comfort ourselves by complaining, "If only they had their priorities right and were more committed to the Church." Additionally, we have combated their "complacency" by raising the age of Confirmation in order to conscript teens into our ministries. If they will not come on their own, we will make them come, we reason. Unfortunately, prisoners do not make great learners.

The best youth ministries stand on their own. Teens attend the events hosted by those ministries because they want to, and they want to because those events meet their needs. Young people invite their friends because they are proud of their Church and feel that it has something valuable to offer their peers.

I heartily agree with Jim Rayburn, the founder of Young Life, who said, "It's a sin to bore a kid with the Bible" (Young Life). When I first started in youth ministry, I wanted to construct a ministry that addressed the perceived needs of unevangelized teens. I wanted it to be a place where teens could have fun, develop friendships, hear the Good News in the light of their issues, and experience the love of Jesus Christ. I also sought to build a youth ministry where teens *wanted* to be, and to provide a "church" experience to which they were proud to invite their friends. Over the years I watched our ministry grow from about twelve teens to over three hundred on a given night. But more importantly, the ministry became a vehicle that the Holy Spirit used to touch many teens with the Good News of Jesus Christ.

Defining Large-Group Evangelization

One of the most effective ways to reach a significant number of young people from a good cross-section of social groups is through large-group evangelization. *Large-group evangelization* can be defined as "consistent preaching of the Gospel to as many young people as possible through large-group gatherings that address perceived and unperceived needs of youth."

Consistent is a key part of the definition. A lack of consistency, or irregularity, is not only disturbing for the human digestive system; it also constipates the momentum of large-group evangelization. Large-group evangelization needs to be consistently planned for the same *day*, during the same *time*, at the same *location*, and with the same *quality* to have the maximum impact on teens' lives.

We are creatures of habit. Most days I have little recall of how I arrived at work. I know, of course, that I drove my car, but I remember little about making turns, stopping at lights, or going down streets. As a result of consistent repetition, I put very little thought into getting to work. (Some might say that is true about my approach to a lot of things!) Likewise, consistency in programming builds routine in young people's lives. Teens are very busy. Having to work at remembering a meeting lessens their chance of attending it. If they have to look at a calendar, find a schedule, or call a friend to find out where and when a gathering is, they are less likely to show up at it. Establishing the same day, time, and location for a recurring event reduces the amount of effort it takes to get to that event. Gatherings that are held every Sunday at 7:00 p.m. in the church gym are less likely to fall through the cracks of daily living than are sporadic events. Additionally, when we switch days, times, or locations, we have to publicize the event all over again.

A helpful trick is to name the event after the night it is held. For instance, you might call an event that is held every second Sunday of the month Second Sunday. If that name sounds too generic, try combining it with a catchy descriptive title, like Second Sunday Jam.

Young people are more apt to attend a gathering in a location that is familiar and comfortable. Teens who are not members of a parish might be hesitant to come to the parish church if they feel they do not belong there. That may not be a significant factor if teen members accompany most visitors to your youth events, but if your parish church is in a remote area, or if nonmembers are uncomfortable there for some reason, consider getting together at a more centralized, neutral, or well-known location.

Momentum, carried forth from one gathering to another, is an important dynamic of large-group evangelization. Large-group evangelization works optimally on a weekly or semi-monthly pattern. Monthly gatherings, though possibly effective in themselves, are too infrequent to reliably sustain momentum through the friction of daily life. Participants forget the fun, the relationships, and the impact.

Besides a consistent time and place, we need consistent high quality. Unfortunately, many young people presume that a church-sponsored event will be boring. That presumption is not the result of innate natural instincts; we youth ministers must concede that at times we have inadvertently formed it.

We have not always been known for our adventurous programming, innovation, or exciting sessions. Instead we have often served a steady diet of lifeless “teen” liturgies, meaningless meetings, and so-so, somber small groups! In many ways our gatherings have earned their reputation.

It should not be that way! Excellence should be our standard for ministry. Young people are surrounded by quality. We live in a fiercely competitive environment, and most institutions know that if they are to survive, they have to provide a superior service or product. Furthermore, young people today have a wide array of dazzling opportunities from which to choose. There are many different movies, TV channels, sporting events, and social activities, all competing for their time. If we are going to hold large-group evangelistic events, then we need to do them with “typical excellence” (with excellence so deeply ingrained in the events that it is considered part of their nature). If any message deserves to be presented with the highest standard of quality, it is the Good News of Jesus Christ. Teens expect us to apply ourselves and to make the things we plan for them worthwhile. We must put time into praying, planning, and preparing for our gatherings in order to make them creative and effective.

Teens live in a fairly closed environment. Word travels fast through their schools. Creating a positive and attractive image and reputation in the minds of young people is critical to the survival and growth of large-group gatherings. If youth ministry has a reputation for being boring, disorganized, and lifeless, we will sooner or later suffer extinction. We can produce a positive image by providing a gathering that is characterized by typical excellence.

Large-Group Dynamics

A large-group evangelistic gathering characteristically involves twenty to several hundred teens. The dynamics of large groups differ from those of small groups. For instance, the wave, which is commonly enjoyed by large audiences at stadium gatherings, might look rather pathetic if attempted by eight teens in Mrs. Flemdrop’s living room! Large-group evangelization is a unique form of programming, with its own personality, activities, patterns, and processes.

Before we look at the specifics of large-group dynamics, a word of caution: Because we plan a gathering for large numbers does not mean that hundreds of teens will necessarily attend. A gathering is not magical. Its size will be proportion-

ate to our practice of relational youth ministry. Large-group evangelization gatherings become places for teens with whom we are building friendships. If both adult and teen leaders are invested in the program, are actively inviting newcomers, and are building relationships with the teens that attend, we will reap a great harvest. *Remember:* The foundation to successful large-group evangelization is the development of one-to-one relationships.

The large-group dynamic includes the following qualities: (1) opportunities to meet new people, (2) fast-paced and action-filled programming, (3) an enthusiastic tone, and (4) a message expressed through a variety of media. Let us look at each quality in detail.

Opportunities to Meet New People

Most teens think it is fun to go places where a lot of other youth are present. Large-group evangelization capitalizes on that dynamic. It becomes part of the drawing card for a teen who may not necessarily be thinking about his relationship with God as much as about his crush on regular-attendeé Drop Dead Darla. Getting to know Darla is a perceived need; getting to know Jesus Christ is a very real, but unperceived, need. Most unevangelized young people will attend events because of who will be there—not because of what will be presented.

Large-group events should be designed to help young people build friendships with one another. Teens will keep coming back to a program because they have made friends with other committed teens or have met adult leaders who care for them. We want to create a good and positive sense of interaction.

Fast-Paced and Action-Filled Programming

Today’s youth cut their teeth on television. They have been reared on *Sesame Street* and MTV, where scenes, camera angles, and perspectives change every few seconds. Consequently, many of today’s adolescents have the attention span of a mosquito. Therefore, a large group of teens will lose interest quickly if programming stalls. Large-group programming should be fast paced and full of action. Most activities should last no more than 5–15 minutes. Any lull between activities will prove deadly; if we fail to immediately direct teens from one activity to the next, we will lose the group to side conversations. A night of wrestling the young people’s attention back after each activity is exhausting for the leadership team and appears chaotic to the participants.