

THE FUTURE OF YOUTH MINISTRY IN THE CATHOLIC CHURCH OF AUSTRALIA

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MY AREA OF EXPERIENCE is in youth ministry, having been a diocesan youth ministry co-ordinator since 1998, and a leader and participant in youth and young adult ministry since the mid 1980's. Having been asked to reflect on the future of the Catholic Church in Australia, I can best do so from the viewpoint of an adult involved in ministry with young people, and watching the trends and influences in the field known as 'youth ministry', from a leadership rather than a young person's perspective.

No-one has a magic mirror in which we can definitively say that 'This is what the future will be'. In looking to predict the future then, we can look to recent trends, and also to the experience of youth ministry leaders. There are positive signs and warning signs. This article will explore three major areas: the publication of *Anointed and Sent: An Australian Vision for Catholic Youth Ministry*¹, the impact of World Youth Day in Sydney in 2008 and the potential impact of academic offerings in the field of youth ministry.

In approaching the topic from the viewpoint of youth ministry, I have two caveats: Firstly, all the baptised, as members of the Body of Christ, are called to be in relationship with others who are members of the Body of Christ, including young people. Thus, we are *all* youth ministers, although some have responded to this call through dedicating their working hours to professional ministry. The second clarification is one that I am often called to make, and a soapbox that I regularly stand upon. *Young People are not the future*

of the Catholic Church. Hopefully when they are adults they will remain a part of the community; however, to suggest that they are *only* the future is selling young people short. Even though they may not be seen to be present regularly in Eucharistic gatherings they are still part of the present reality of the church in Australia. If they are only referred to as the future, no matter how glowing or positive the reference, what is being implied is that they will only be full and useful members when they are no longer young. To suggest that young people are only 'the future' denies them the right and opportunity to share with the intergenerational community their God-given gifts and talents, their passion for exploring and living their faith, and their openness to making a positive difference in the world. Indeed in *Ecclesia in Oceania*, the Catholic bishops 'wished them to know that they are a vital part of the Church today, and that Church leaders are keen to find ways to involve young people more fully in the Church's life and mission.'²

If the average young person were asked if they wanted to be 'more involved in the church's life and mission' the answer would most likely be in the negative. Perhaps this is a matter of language rather than a true reflection of attitude, and a question of young people actually understanding the life and mission of the church. At a recent retreat day with year eleven students in regional Victoria, one of the warm-up activities was a 'yes/no' continuum. Students were asked to move to either end of the room, or a point along the middle to vote 'with their feet' as to their stance

on a number of issues. In being asked 'I want to be involved in Social Justice' a mixed reaction occurred, with those voting 'no' generally not understanding the language used. The next question was more revealing: 'I want to be involved in helping others.' Almost the whole group moved to indicate the affirmative.

When Jesus stood to give an image for his life's work in the Synagogue, he read: 'The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.' (Luke 4:18-19) Perhaps it is too simplistic an interpretation, but surely this can be seen as part of the 'life and mission of the church today' and similarly classed as 'helping others'. In *Ecclesia in Oceania* we read that 'It is essential that Church leaders study the culture and language of youth'. We don't need to dumb down our language to communicate, rather make an attempt to understand what young people are hungering for, instead of assuming that because they do not express themselves in the way of adults that they do not hold similar desires. Although young people may not use the same language, their passion has been noted: 'The Bishops were quick to applaud young people for their acute sense of justice, personal integrity and respect for human dignity, for their care for the needy and their concern for the environment'.

One of the goals set by the Young Christian Students movement in their 2008 National Gathering is that by 2020 the YCS are '... taken seriously as an action based movement, rather than just a youth group.'³ In casual questioning at the national YCS conference in 2010, high school students were asked about the distinction between an 'action based movement' and a 'youth group.' Those who replied wanted to make the distinction between youth groups that they had attended where the experience was mostly social, or groups at school who



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focused on social justice, where the group would become aware of social justice issues, but often did not have an action response based on their learning, or reference to the gospel in doing so. Young Christian Students want to be seen by the wider church as a movement that can and does make a positive, gospel based difference on the world.

'Anointed and Sent: An Australian Vision for Catholic Youth Ministry'

On the 17th of July 2009, the anniversary of Pope Benedict XVI's arrival in Sydney, *Anointed and Sent: An Australian Vision for Catholic Youth Ministry* was launched by the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference. This document had been the product of a long consultation process, and was built on the scaffolding of 'Renewing the Vision'⁴, the document of the US conference of Catholic Bishops, published in 1997. Australia is not the only country that has followed the lead of the USA in producing a vision document. New Zealand published *Standing Tall: Tu Kahikatea*⁵ in 2006 and the Irish bishops have recently produced *Called Together. Making the Difference*⁶.

What hope for the future can a vision document hold? The answer can only lie in how and where it is being used. If the document were to remain unopened on dusty shelves, then there is no chance of change. However, since its July publication there have already been shifts in the way youth ministry is envisioned. The document has already been used

to shape job descriptions and strategic plans for youth ministry, and is an integral part of academic studies in youth ministry, both for high school students participating in the 'Catholic Schools Youth Ministry Australia' program as well as adults involved in academic study at under graduate and post graduate level.

As a country, Australia has a diversity of expressions of youth ministry, from the many groups and ecclesial movements, to the influence of religious congregations. These, as well as parishes, dioceses and schools have been engaging in ministry with young people for many years. However, to quote a phrase from Dr Robert McCarty, Director of the National Federation for Catholic Youth Ministry in the USA, we are 'Experience rich and language poor'⁷. *Anointed and Sent* gives adults in youth ministry the language to theoretically discuss their perspectives and programs for young people. It provides three goals and eight focus areas, and states that they hold equal importance. This give an organisation the ability to say 'We have a major emphasis on Prayer and worship, Evangelisation and Leadership Development' and another to say 'We have a focus on Justice and Service and Catechesis' and, rather than arguing about which is more relevant for young people today, they can see where their ministry fits in as a part of the whole picture.

Whilst many organisations such as the Australian Network of Diocesan Youth Ministry Co-ordinators (ANDYMC) and the St Vincent de Paul Society have held meetings for interstate collaboration in the past, opportunities for dialogue between leaders across organisations are becoming more available. The inaugural Youth Leaders Gathering, held at Rosehill in November 2008 gathered over 300 adult and youth leaders from schools, dioceses and parishes and movements. The follow-on Australian Catholic Youth Ministers Convention scheduled for October 2010 will do the same. Such opportunities for networking amongst pro-

fessionals in the field of youth ministry, with the background of *Anointed and Sent* as a language for discussing their charism, will hopefully go a long way towards creating a greater sense of unity in the youth ministry community. This can only benefit young people who are searching for their niche, and can be directed towards the various ways they feel called to explore and express their faith.

World Youth Day in Sydney 2008.

World Youth Day certainly turned the spotlight on young people and their experience of faith, in both the eyes of the church and the secular media. The week in Sydney provided young people with the chance to explore their faith, and change their lives. The event was also a catalyst for change in the field of youth ministry.

Apart from the increase noted locally in youth masses and young adult groups, WYD has generated a greater awareness of youth ministry in the eyes of the general community and in the eyes of the Bishops of Australia. To respond to this, and put in place structures to continue to support the development of youth ministry in Australia, the Bishops Commission for Pastoral Life, under the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, have established the Australian Catholic Youth Council and employed Mr Malcolm Hart as Senior Youth Ministry Projects Officer for a period of three years. A youth leaders gathering was held in November 2008, and from it the document *Moving Forward with Jesus*⁸ was created, outlining strategies for the next three years to build on the graces of WYD08. This strategic planning, at a national level, involving parishes, dioceses, groups and movements provides a positive outlook for the future of youth ministry in Australia.

At a local level leading up to WYD, the *Journey of the Cross, Icon and Message Stick*, as well as the *Days in the Diocese* program, had a great impact in the life of the church. In

larger centres, there was a great deal of money raised and sponsorships given that allowed youth ministry to operate on a much more 'professional' level than was previously possible. The production of polished advertising, employment of many additional staff and liaison with government added a gloss to projects and programs that many underfunded youth ministries could usually only dream about. In smaller centres, resources were provided to subsidise local activities, from money for community meals with young people and international visitors to practical ideas and scripts for hosting a local 'Stations of the cross.' Unfortunately, now that the 'event' has gone, so has much of the funding, leaving the community and young people with an expectation of a certain level of pizzazz around projects and youth ministry offices without the ability to produce at World Youth Day levels. Whilst young people are looking for follow up to WYD, and the youth ministry office may have the dream of creating an amazing reflection tool, with booklets, videos and podcasts aimed at encouraging young people to explore their faith in a post WYD setting, the money for professional design and recording is generally not available. Thus a resource that may have great content will be less likely to attract the attention of those it was intended to engage, as it lacks the professional level of presentation that has come to be expected through the WYD culture.

In many smaller rural areas, there was a slightly different focus to that of the larger cities for the Journey of the Cross, Icon and Message Stick and Days in the Diocese. Adults learnt that they can provide an atmosphere where young people are engaged and welcomed in the Catholic community. It also provided a unique opportunity for young people to share with adults their experience of faith. Having such a focal point, a deadline, and the potential for attention from secular media and the wider church, many communities gave their best to the project. People came out of the woodwork to make something happen for and

with young people, and generated a wider community awareness of young people in the local area. In some areas, a greater collaboration between parish and school, or diocese and movement was generated, leading to a more harmonious working relationship.

That's not to say that the follow up has been perfect or has borne fruit in every area that hosted visitors or was visited by the Cross, Icon and Message Stick. Rather, it suggests that when people have a goal for their ministry with young people that is articulated and known by all, action happens. It is easier to see results when there is a concrete project in hand, rather than a nebulous 'We should do something...' If there is to be progress in ministry with young people in the future, collaborative projects may be the answer. That is not to say that creating programs and projects is the goal for youth ministry, but rather the vehicle that is used to create positive relationships between adults who are passionate about sharing faith experiences with young people, and creating opportunities for young people to gather and form relationships with each other and the adults who care for them. Knowing that there will be a regular youth mass in the parish, supported by the students in the school, creates a focal point for action, collaboration and the building of positive relationships. It also provides young people a chance to share their gifts and talents and to participate in prayer and worship with the wider community.

World Youth Day also encouraged dioceses and movements to employ coordinators where previously there was no specific office for youth ministry. In some cases this position has continued post WYD. However, in a number of cases it has involved a change in staff. Over the past twelve years a trend has been noted at the annual meeting of ANDYMC which is that World Youth Day as a project is often the catalyst for a youth ministry coordinator to leave the role. This was even more evident at the 2009 ANDYMC membership meeting, where over two thirds of the group were new to their

roles, generally having replaced a diocesan co-ordinator who had left post WYD. Whilst it can be read as a positive sign for the future of youth ministry as a profession that people are willing to step into roles such as that of a diocesan youth ministry co-ordinator, I believe it is also a sad reflection that no matter how great the positive effect that World Youth Day has in the lives of young people, many co-ordinators become burnt-out and disillusioned with their work after co-ordinating a World Youth Day experience. The experience and wisdom of such people in many cases has been lost. When looking towards the future, the next World Youth Day involves planning for pilgrimage to Madrid in 2011. Co-ordination of an overseas pilgrimage is a different beast to that of a local event. In the current staffing of the twenty eight geographical dioceses and the five non-geographical dioceses in Australia, there are around twenty dioceses with employed youth ministry staff. Whilst some have WYD leadership experience in other arenas, only two of these have previously been the central co-ordinator for a diocesan pilgrimage to an overseas World Youth Day.

World Youth Day is an amazing event that makes a significant impact on people. For all the blood, sweat and tears of those involved in the co-ordination of pilgrimage and the legacy that it leaves, the consequences for the faith development and life of individual young people are what really matters.

Academic Offerings in Youth Ministry Studies.

Another sign of hope for the future in youth ministry is the introduction of academic studies in youth ministry. In years gone by, ministry with young people was almost the sole domain of the curate or the younger nun, whose foremost qualification was their age, rather than education in specific youth ministry skills.

As vocations declined and the ready population decreased of this group, young people were left without 'church appointed' people

who would be specifically mindful of them within the community. This gap has often been filled with enthusiastic volunteers, or lowly paid youth workers, young and old, who seek to make a difference. Whilst their efforts cannot and should not be discounted, lack of training and education has in many cases set them up for failure. A school would never employ teachers simply because they were willing and able. Education Departments insist on a suitable academic qualification before young people are given into their care. Similarly, an aged care facility would not employ nursing or occupational therapy staff simply because they were of a similar age to the clients and were passionate about helping their peers. Unfortunately at present, age and willingness seem to be the main qualifications expected from those in the Catholic Church employing people to work with youth. It is unfair to then compare the outcomes of Catholic youth programs with other Christian denominations with successful youth ministries, without looking at the background education and formation required of their paid, parish based youth ministry co-ordinator.

The landscape is starting to change. The Broken Bay Institute (BBI) has offered four academic units in youth ministry since 2004, as part of either undergraduate or post graduate studies. Coupled with introductory units in theology and biblical studies, a 'Certificate in youth ministry' has been available that gives credit towards higher degrees. With their recent alignment with the University of Newcastle, these units have been reviewed and BBI now offer a specifically targeted, university accredited 'Graduate Certificate in Theology – Youth and Campus Ministry', and 'BBI Certificate in Youth and Campus Ministry'. Australian Catholic University now offer a Diploma in Youth Ministry, which articulates into a Bachelor of Theology, and has previously had youth studies as part of its curriculum. Other dioceses and institutions offer coursework in theology and youth ministry related studies that can be cross credited to

BBI or ACU, or aimed towards employment in youth ministry.

The Institute of Faith Education in Brisbane has offered a Certificate IV level course that includes electives in youth ministry for a number of years, and many other dioceses offer non-accredited studies in the field.

‘Catholic Schools Youth Ministry Australia’ is a Canberra based organisation that has been introducing a youth ministry program for high school age students. This mixes an academic understanding of youth ministry theory using *Anointed and Sent* (and in previous years, the US document *Renewing the Vision*) and studies in youth spirituality with a practical experience of organising and participating in liturgies, music and drama to express faith, as well as exploring each of *Anointed and Sent’s* focus areas.

Academic studies provide participants with an introduction to key documents and resources, a respect for professional and analytical application of theory to practice, an understanding of research into young people and spirituality as well as a network of others who are co-workers in the vineyard.

Whilst it cannot be a fail-safe against burn-out, those who supplement their practical work in youth ministry with academic study in the field are more likely to envision their ministry as a legitimate career, rather than a stopgap between ‘real’ jobs.

The challenge for the Catholic Church in the future is to insist on academic qualifications in the employment process, or make them a condition of continued employment. In establishing this standard, it is also important to create employment packages that include clearly defined working conditions with remuneration structures that adequately reflect experience and education. These guidelines need to be nationally implemented and appropriate to all levels of youth ministry, from those starting out in a part time parish based position to full time diocesan work.

So, where to for the future of youth ministry in the Catholic Church? There are many signs of hope and many areas that require further development. Structures are needed to foster sustainability in youth ministry; *Anointed and Sent* and the experience of World Youth Day provide a framework around which effective youth ministry can be built. The increase in academic offerings for those in youth ministry leadership provides a background and theological underpinning for youth ministry efforts. Ultimately however, being in youth ministry is about building relationships. For some it is direct relationships with young people, for others it is to serve those who work directly with youth. It is in following and cherishing these relationships throughout the years that we see the fruits of our efforts in youth ministry, and great signs of hope for the future.

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