

EQUIPPING DIOCESAN LEADERS

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That's how this all started for me. I found that there were a lot of road-blocks for parish leaders when it came to NCYC. As a diocesan director, there were things I could do to make those obstacles go away. In doing so, we, in the Archdiocese of Dubuque, have seen the flood gates open, and literally thousands of teens have benefitted. I'll try to list a few of the best ideas that have been most fruitful to our diocese.

First, we want to be able to clearly articulate the advantages of forming an NCYC group. We should not assume that all parish leaders know what NCYC is, or value it more than alternative youth programming like summer conferences, service trips, or local retreats. Our primary goal is simple, to invite young people to encounter God and His Universal Church. NCYC is unique in this way. It is the largest gathering of Catholic young people in the country. There are more Catholic teens (and more kinds of Catholic teens) at NCYC than anywhere else. Our teens will be exposed to a variety of prayer experience and Catholic expressions that they can't find here in Iowa. But, the value of NCYC doesn't end with the Closing Mass. We have also been very deliberate about using NCYC as a catalyst to grow and strengthen parish youth ministry when groups return home. Not only are your teens coming home with a renewed faith, but so are the adults who came along. That positive energy can transform a parish. The young people (and the adults... don't forget the adults!) have seen a vision of what a faith community can be. That positive encounter is contagious, and has the power to transform the culture of a parish. Through the enrichment of parish youth ministry (and the whole parish as a result), we are also able to equip young people so that they can grow in their faith through young adulthood. When a person returns from NCYC, their faith journey is not over. They need the encouragement of the adults in their faith community to cheer them on. They will have questions. They will have hungers for more spiritual encounters. They will need accountability and encouragement. That is what parishes are for! And, just like NCYC isn't the end of a teen's faith journey, being an active teen in a parish isn't the end either. We need to maintain the faith energy that NCYC provides so that our teens can connect with a college campus ministry, a military chaplain, or a young adult ministry after graduation. We have to pass the baton. It is really important that youth ministry focuses on preparing young people for what comes next in their faith journey... life beyond high school.

Once we clarified what our goals were, we had to explore which strategies we could employ to get us there. We learned that engaging and equipping the local leadership (parish youth ministry leaders, pastors, volunteers) was our highest priority. If parish leaders have enough support and encouragement, they are much more likely to put in the work to build a group. So, we went about designing our diocesan delegation with a primary focus on supporting group leaders and the adults they bring with them. Here's what that looks like:

1. Communicate as much as you can, as soon as you can, and efficiently as you can. We created a Group Leader Packet that explained everything they needed to know.
2. Focus on the Adults! The best thing that our delegation did was inspired by the great people of Rochester, New York, under the direction of the great Michael Theisen. We provide a team of adult volunteers who operate behind the scenes, and in the shadows, to ensure that our adults are supported on-site. Our A-Team (advance team) walks the halls of our hotels at night from 11:00 PM until at least 3:00 AM so that no adult chaperones have to give up their sleep (a sleepy chaperone is a cranky chaperone). We provide transportation and run errands during the day. We also have nurses available for medical consultations should group leaders, chaperones, or teens have any concerns. This allows the adults who are at NCYC to focus on *their* priority, which is to accompany the young people from their parishes.
3. Make it as easy as possible (logistically). There are usually a lot of hurdles in bringing young people to an event. We made efforts to streamline all the bureaucracy that we could. Forms, payment plans, and expectations were sent out months in advance. The diocesan office helps group leaders with registration, arranging for lodging, arranging for transportation, some meals, and on-site support. Our group leaders know that they are not doing this alone. That has allowed for people who are not in typical "Youth Ministry" roles to step up and bring this opportunity to their parish.

The logistics around any large event like this are the most difficult. Here are a few tips that we have learned over the years.

1. Build a partnership with your hotel(s). The staff at the hotel deal with groups of teens all the time, and a lot of those encounters are not positive. So, invest time in letting the hotel staff know how awesome and amazing your teens are. Share with them your plans to keep the kids motivated for positive behavior. Develop a plan together for communication should one of your teens make a poor decision. Ask their opinions on what has worked best with other groups. Negotiate all agreements in good faith and transparency. Remember, they have a business to run and other guests to accommodate. If you are mean or demanding of them, they will reply in kind. Instead, invite them in as partners.

2. Anticipate Hunger. I noticed that the greatest reason people left their room after curfew was because they were meeting a pizza delivery guy in the lobby. Teens get hungry. So, we set about a pre-emptive strike. We order pizzas to our hotel each night so it's there to greet the kids when they get back after a long day at the conference. This gives teens a space to eat and socialize before bringing that noise (and hunger) to their bedrooms. This simple move got rid of most of our hotel discipline issues. We also provide a boxed meal when our buses arrive in Indy since we know that there are not enough dining options around our hotels to feed that many people in a short amount of time. We still hold the record for the largest Jimmy John's order in the US.
3. Treat Adults like Adults. We made the decision that teens may be forced to share a bed, but adults deserve more. Our adults will not have to share a bed with anyone... unless they are attending with their spouse. We only put two adults in a room with two beds. This costs a bit more for us, but the benefit is clear in the increased energy and focus we get from our adults. And, like I said before, since our A-Team is walking the halls, all they have to do at night is unplug and rest. With this service, we have found that it is not difficult for group leaders to find enough chaperones.
4. Brace for Change. We used to have a policy that all registrations were final. We would collect non-negotiable payments (our payment plan collects a portion of our package price every couple of months), and if there was a change at the local level, parishes would be out the cash. That prohibited parish leaders from taking any chances. They were motivated to bring the smallest group possible so that they wouldn't get in trouble with their pastor if someone dropped out. Sure, we at the Archdiocese were immune from change, but our parishes (who we are here to serve) were not. Now, we allow parishes to buy and sell spots from one another. Generally speaking, if a parish has a few people drop out, a neighboring parish has two more that want to go. We maintain as much flexibility as we can so that parish leadership can make the best decision for their parish. If we were more rigid in our approach, parish leaders would be wise to consider opting out of NCYC. Keep your administrative plan as flexible and supportive as possible.
5. Do your paperwork! (or find someone who will). We have learned that an efficient data management system is essential. Our diocese put together an NCYC-focused database that allows us to make swift changes. Our group leaders have access and can see their information in real time. We track parish payments, scholarships, registration, rooming assignments, bus assignments, everything! It makes management so much easier. If you do not have a background in data management, find someone who does and buy them nice things. Then, stay on top of things. Make reasonable deadlines and follow-up with those who are behind. Do not wait until November to get your ducks in a row.
6. Budget for the worst. Our Archdiocesan package includes some overhead costs. We usually bump up our costs about 3% -5% over what we think it will actually cost us. A sure way to get a bishop (or pastor) to be dissatisfied with your work is to continue to lose money. That little cushion goes a long way to protect our diocese.

7. Budget for the best. Finally, we have learned that some people can afford more than others. We add \$10 per person to our package price so that we can generate financial assistance for those in our diocese who cannot afford to go. That is enough money to cover a full registration cost for all who need it. And, for those who have the funds, \$10 is not going to make a difference to them. Pooled together, though, it can make a huge difference to someone else. You may note that NFCYM has added a \$5 stewardship fee to NCYC passes so that they can also assist people in affording the NCYC experience. We take care of each other. It's what makes us Christian!

It is true that I have probably put more effort into NCYC than your average diocesan director. But I would say that the return on the investment has been remarkable. You reap what you sow.

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