

## How to Create the Church We Want for Our Children

### Movie Clip from Field of Dreams

*In the big inning, when man created baseball, the America's were a form-filled land with changes taking place coast-to-coast, north to south, while this mighty phenomenon swept across the nation. God said, "Let there be light," and giant lights drew the people out of the darkness like a magnet. God said, "Let there be a dome in the middle of no where," and colossal stadiums were erected. God said, "Let there be vegetation," and the infield was separated from the outfield. God said, "Let the ballparks teem with an abundance of living creatures." And so it happened: they came in uniform, street clothes, costume, and strange attire to that which had been created. League owners saw how good it was and smiled. Players began to gain dominion over a small white ball. Such is the story of baseball's creation with apologies to the writers of Genesis 1:1-2:4)*

The parallels, metaphors, and symbolism between church and baseball are many. Baseball is a team sport made up of individuals with gifts and physical talents. The church, the Body of Christ, is a community of individuals connected and affected by what all its parts do. Formation starts early with baptism and playing catch in the back yard and continues until a player retires permanently. Skill levels develop and strengthen through good coaching, discipline, practice, specialized training, and time in the field.

While baseball's history is considerably shorter than that of creation and God's presence, it continues to capture the heart, soul, and imagination of many people all over the world. In many ways baseball, and sports in general, have become a kind of religion unto themselves with the amount of time, energy, and resources devoted to their practice. In the movie *Bull Durham*, Annie says,

*I believe in the church of baseball. I've tried all the major religions and most of the minor ones. I know things. There are 108 beads in a Catholic rosary and 108 stitches on a baseball. When I learned that, I gave Jesus a chance. There is no guilt in baseball and it's never boring. Yep, I've tried them all and the only church that feeds the soul day in, day out, is the church of baseball."*

While she is wrong about the number of beads in a Catholic rosary, I was intrigued with her statement that the connection between the beads and the stitches was the factor that invited her to

give Jesus a second look. I have long been a fan, a player, a coach, and an umpire of either baseball or softball, which is more than I can say of my Catholic religion. Both my kids played sports and we would often miss Mass or class to attend a sports event. I didn't feel guilty about it – I didn't care.

(confirmed in first grade. Forced to attend. Hated it. My kids brought me back. Was asked to teach. Sold out for 30 sheckels. SMP dealing with tough times. Making decisions. Divorce. I am the poster child for “you can teach an old dog new tricks.”

My interest in using sports metaphors to access religious concepts and nurture faith formation peaked when kids missed a class due to some sports obligation. It reached a “tipping point” when an anonymous father verbally assaulted me on the phone because I had asked the class and his son to do a project researching a saint. At the next class I began asking them a series of questions: “How many of you play sports? How long do you practice? How did it feel to make the team? What happens when you miss a practice? What happens to your game when you don't practice? What does it feel like to sit on the bench? Have you attended extra practices to make it to a district championship or be in the All-Star game?”

It was clear from their answers that they loved sports, wanted to be active participants, and would do anything to improve their skills. I let them know that it was my TEMPORARY job as catechist and youth minister but the PERMANENT job of their parents to help them to prepare for the all-star game, to be the best disciples they could be. I didn't want them to “waste” their time trying to make the team, learning about faith and religious practices, collecting trophies and sacraments, only upon Confirmation to pick up another happy meal in a drive by program and miss the abundant banquet God had in store for them. I did not want them to be content sitting on the bench, or worse, quit the team – like I had so many years ago.

There is a joke told about the pastor who was confronted with the problem of bats in the church belfry. Various experts in the field of extermination suggested a number of solutions but none of them seemed to work effectively. Then a religious educator suggested to the priest that he make arrangements to have them confirmed. “Once they make their confirmation,” she said, “we will never see them in church again.” The joke, like most jokes, is funny, but it is also a sad commentary on the state of adolescent faith formation and general interest in “church stuff.”

There is rampant confusion over the sacrament of confirmation. It seems to be the only sacrament that creates animosity rather than the grace it is supposed to bring as we try to cram everything there is to know into 2 years before they graduate and leave. Many kids never have that encounter with Christ that leads to a desire to search for more.

The problem of youth flocking to other denominations or quitting the team after Confirmation is prevalent across the board. In the NSYR (National Study of Youth and Religion) cited in a book call *Soul Searching* by Christian Smith, Catholic youth fared only slightly better than Jewish youth for being actively involved in their faith. Sean Reynolds from the Archdiocese of Cincinnati wrote a paper “Forming Young Disciples: Are We Asking the Right Questions” (see **handout**) for the National Symposium on Adolescent Catechesis (all the papers can be found on line). In it he suggested four reasons for our low score:

1. **Catholic upward mobility and mainstream acculturation undermine the vitality of the church.** (In some places church is seen as a Walmart where a check will cover their contribution, and services/sacraments are “bought”. Church is one of many options and for some it is not seen as relevant to their life.

2. **Catholic Schools and Religious Education/ “CCD” no longer serve as the primary means of faith formation.** (*Ray’s aggravated response, “What do you want from me?” is not unusual for people who work in this messy, challenging, delightful and rewarding world of youth that is not always understood, supported or appreciated. Youth ministry folks are being asked to do what multiple institutions used to do in collaboration.*)
3. **Evangelization and formation are low institutional priorities** (*Youth ministry offices are the first to close. Add Norwich to the list. Diocese in financial trouble can not afford to send their Directors to national or regional meetings depriving us of the gifts, talents, and experience they bring to the table*)
4. **Young people reflect the religious laxity or commitment of their parents.** Sean asked us to create headlines that reflected both the reality and the hope of faith formation with youth. Our group started with *“DRE shot by irate parent upset over confirmation requirements”* and eventually got to *“Parents open homes for Faith formation in the domestic church”*

The reality is that there is a huge need for adult formation of parents as “no previous generation inherited so little of the content and sensibility of the faith from their parents as today’s youth.” (Appleby)

**If we build it, will they come....??? I believe that they will.**

But we must have a blueprint, a vision of the kingdom of God, and a team working in collaboration before we can begin to construct it. According to the 1997 USCCB document *Renewing the Vision*, the purpose or goal of Youth ministry- dare I say all faith formation and parish ministry- is to

- 1) Foster the total **personal and spiritual growth** of each young person (promoting positive adolescent development and growth in discipleship and Catholic identity)
- 2) Seek to draw young people to **responsible participation** in the life, mission, and work of the faith community (developing “youth friendly” faith communities)
- 3) Empower young people to **live as disciples** of Jesus Christ in our world today (learning how to be a disciple by being a disciple)

There are a number of essential building blocks or components that build a strong church not just for our young people but for all of us. The GDC lists six tasks of Catechesis

1. **Faith Knowledge** – this is the stuff we need to know to win the \$25,000. prize on Jeopardy. How many of you know the 7 gifts of the Holy Spirit? **EXAMPLE**
2. **Liturgical Formation** – Parts of the Mass. Source and Summit.
3. **Moral Formation** – this is where rubber hits the road. We need to begin to apply the knowledge to form a conscience and make informed decisions. Need to understand why the church teaches what it teaches. What example are we as adults setting? News headlines say not a good one.
4. **Prayer** – We need to pray, be people of prayer, and teach our YP to pray.
5. **Community** - Apply the 10 commandments to real life with real people. Build responsible YP when we give them responsibility. Help them to connect to each other and to others who are part of the body of Christ. **Youth Spectacular, NECYC, NCYC, WYD helps YP to experience “big church”**
6. **Mission** – this is game time – the stuff that all the previous practice prepares us for. We go to Mass to get strengthened so we can go out to complete the mission that Jesus gave us. **Mission trips - Micah, Young Neighbors**

- **Conversion** -Hunger 101 prepares us for a trip to the Shelter or a week long mission trip where youth are transformed in a way that no book can do. **Sports movies** are great for illustrating conversion which leads to greater teamwork and better performance.
- **Households of Faith**– All our classes together during a year add up to little more than a day. YP are with their families 24/7/365. The church can partner with parents to help families navigate the waters of adolescence or we can set up a battle field and alienate the very people we are serving by the hoops and loops we make YP jump through to get the sacrament of Confirmation.

There are nine major positions on a baseball team. There were twelve apostles on Jesus’ team. Both teams have others on the bench in case of injury, betrayal, or a good foot washing. All positions are equally important to the overall success of the team. It is a coach’s job to help athletes find and develop their strengths. In the movie *Major League*, a bunch of misfits and has-beens are invited to a try-out camp by the Cleveland Indians. The owner selects her general manager, who then says to Jake Taylor (Kevin Costner), “I need a catcher who will lead the team.” In youth ministry programs, finding this leader is a key component to building an effective team. A catcher is in a position to see the whole field and often helps to coach other team members. The catcher needs to have a handle on faith basics and the rules, be flexible and tolerant enough “to crouch” in uncomfortable situations with parents and youth and agile enough to handle whatever comes across the plate. They are in the most vulnerable position but they also wear the most protection, and most are not afraid to take risks. They are intimately involved in every aspect of the game: they need to keep track of balls, strikes, the number of outs, and the score- baptismal records, payments, teaching staff, curriculum, textbooks. They need to know something about each batter/student that comes to the plate so that they can suggest to the pitcher

what to pitch as well as direct other players/leaders to various locations in the program. What would be ideal would be a team of catchers proficient enough that at any one time they can step in to co-lead the team and play each others positions.

Once you have selected your “catcher” you have eight more positions to fill “with diverse, healthy, spiritually mature adults who share leadership and decision-making responsibilities. A holistic approach to a comprehensive youth ministry, “womb to tomb,” integrates eight components/positions of youth ministry as laid out in *Renewing the Vision*:

1. Advocacy

2. Catechesis

- *Jesus was a master teacher and there is no need to re-invent a methodology wheel. (Delia Halverston and Tom and Joani Schultz point out the many ways that Jesus taught the people in his company):*
- *Jesus knew and listened to his disciples;*
- *used what was at hand, especially nature, to help people understand;*
- *taught with stories, visual, and songs to help people remember;*
- *asked the right questions and lots of them;*
- *used scripture; taught with authority and from experience;*
- *challenged authority; welcomed women;*
- *encouraged commitment; used small groups*
- *was in tune with God; modeled solitude and reflection;*
- *Jesus didn't have a teacher's manual as all the material was in his heart and soul. He didn't have any textbooks except scripture and he was rarely in a classroom. Most of the time he was just 'hangin out' with people in every ballpark in Jerusalem, a constant presence in the lives of people.*

3. Community building – kids electronically connected – no social skills

4. Evangelization – everything we do teaches

5. Justice and Service

6. Leadership Development
7. Pastoral Care
8. Prayer and Worship.

Sound familiar? (6 tasks of Catechesis). You have a brochure on your seat that explains a little about each one and a course that can be brought to your team of catechists.

The importance of well-trained and supported leaders and parents who partner with youth to be full, active, conscious, participants in the life and mission of the church can not be over emphasized. Bob McCarty – Director for the NFCYM said that “teens basically recreate themselves every three years,” If you can’t get adults to cover all the positions, don’t overlook the potential of young people, confirmed or about to be confirmed, who may be eager and willing to learn and already have many of the skills you are looking for through leadership positions on student council, sports teams, scout troops, and other youth-oriented groups. When recruiting a team, it is helpful to look for flexible people who are competent, comfortable with change, and willing to update their skills on a regular basis.

Developing disciples is like developing ball players. If the focus of the formation of the adolescent disciple is to “catechize them toward a commitment to act, pray, and live as Jesus did,” then that ought to be true of the people in the position of passing that information along, be they catechist or parent.

*There can be no fire in the pew if there’s ice in pulpit.’ Fruitfulness and fire are cousin images. If there’s no fire in the teacher’s lectern, there will be no fire in the desk of the students. If there’s no fire in the hearts of parents, there can be no fire in family prayer or in their children’s faith. (Hays 64)*

I don’t see formation and transformation happening using only the school model of assigned seating at chairs attached to a desk in a straight row with the teacher as the dispenser of information and the student as simply recipient. They may score 100% on the test but they will

fail miserably on the playground. Baseball cannot be learned in a classroom, sitting quietly at a desk, looking at diagrams on the chalkboard and listening to a lecture. The learning comes from the experience of hitting, fielding and throwing the ball; walking, running, stealing or sliding into bases; taking a “brush back “pitch; making a spectacular catch; executing a “suicide squeeze”; being consoled or ridiculed when the winning hit trickles between your feet.

Faith formation isn't any different. Faith formation should engage:

1. **“the Head”** - “the what,” the “cognitive/intellectual,” “the faith as believing,” morality and keeping the commandments, the creed, traditions and teaching;
2. **“the Heart** – “the who,” “the affective,” “the faith as trusting,” prayer and worship, community and social activities, relationships with Jesus, God and the Holy Spirit;
3. **“the Hands”** – “the how,” “the behavioral,” “the faith as doing,” discipleship, justice and service, “faith without works is dead.”

Young people need to experience a community of worship, learn to recognize Jesus in those they meet, do the spiritual and corporal works of mercy, struggle to carry someone else's cross, get a detention for standing up to a teacher picking on a student, protest the sanctions the United States imposes on other countries, and speak up for the unborn. To be good disciples they need to practice serving food at a soup kitchen and seeing a classmate who eats there every day. They can put a face on poverty by tutoring kids in the neighborhood at the Catholic Worker House. Teens learn to pray, appreciate scripture, and grow in their faith by feeling the same welcome as the prodigal son, by saying grace at home, lecturing at Mass, breaking open the word in drama or song, being a bead of a living rosary or the angel Gabriel in the Christmas pageant, or grieving at the funeral of a friend.

While parents are supposed to be the principal educators of their children's faith formation, that task has often fallen to religious education programs. Unfortunately, many parents upon enrolling their children abdicate their responsibility – “Drive by drop offs” or “stop, drop, and roll” – and we have let them.

Kids learn about baseball when parents take them to a game or sign them up for Little League. Kids learn about church when they go to Mass as a family. There is an increasing disconnect. If a church wants to have a program that informs, forms, and transforms young people it ought to start with a team of adults who are trained, supported, motivated, and empowered. **They must love young people**, have a relationship with God, and practice their faith. Unfortunately, finances, rather than what we say we value, dictate what we get. Even if we are desperate for catechists, “Mrs. Willdo” ought to attend some refresher courses before entering the classroom.

As part of the body of Christ whose parts are mysteriously connected and dependent on each other for full function, “any member who fails to make his proper contribution to the development of the church must be said to be useful neither to the church nor to himself”

**(Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity/Apostolicum Actuositatem, Chap 1, para 2).** While a program could begin with “warm bodies,” “lay persons who permanently or temporarily give themselves to a special service of the Church are obliged to be properly formed for that work.” (Code of Canon Law 231)

Parker Palmer says that vocation comes from listening to and accepting “true self,” with its limits and its potentials, as well as from listening to what your life intends to do with you. Vocation is not a goal to be pursued or achieved but a gift to be received, a “calling that I hear.” “Vocation does not come from a voice ‘out there’ calling me to be something I am not. It comes from a voice ‘in here’ calling me to be the person I was born to be.” (Palmer 4-10) In the movie *Field of Dreams*, Ray Kinsella hears a voice, “if you build it he will come.” Though he continues to ignore it, the voice is persistent. Ray becomes an object of ridicule when he plows

his cornfield and life savings under to build a baseball field. As he continues to be guided by the voice, he “goes the distance” and is afforded the opportunity to see a glimpse of heaven, play a game of catch with the father he rejected, and savor the joy of “relieving his pain” and receiving redemption.

“Youth Ministry is a calling more than a career. It’s having a deep passion to come alongside students and help them walk in Christ.” (Chow 37) Most youth ministers have received a similar “unreasonable” call, like Ray Kinsella, that compels them to work with young people using gifts and talents in a way that honors and fulfills the image God had when God knit us together in the womb. In the end, who we are as leaders is more important than what we do as leaders. (Chow 30,37)

I came kicking and screaming into this vocation and now it’s the only thing I want to do in spite of my inadequacies and the many layers of hierarchy and hypocrisy in the church. “Our ability to impact students for Christ will be largely influenced by our ability to build and lead an effective ministry team.” (Chow 15) Jesus spent the better part of his ministry recruiting and training people to follow him and replace him.

Not everyone will have the time, passion, interest, or capacity to do everything that a young person might need or want, so helping the team to discern and focus their gifts and talents is essential. A third baseman needs a strong arm to be able to throw to first base, quick feet and good hands to handle the ball up the line. A pitcher needs a strong arm, composure, balance and a variety of pitches. A batter needs quick hands, eye-hand coordination, power and confidence. Everyone on the team has special skills and contributes significantly to the success and effectiveness of the whole team.

A person who has interest in justice and service ought to know something about Catholic Social Teaching, the locations of “youth-friendly” shelters and soup kitchens, and how service ties in with discipleship. A person who coordinates prayer and worship ought to first be a person of prayer, attend Mass, be familiar with Mass parts and why we do what we do, and be able to engage young people in experiencing the fullness of a variety of prayer. The community builder should not only know a million games but they should like to play them and be able to welcome, organize, and control a large group.

Life is more than a spectator sport and Jesus wasn't one to let his disciples sit on the bench, no matter how tired they were or how much they doubted their capabilities. He sent his disciples out in “healthy interdependent” (Everist 31) pairs empowered with authority over unclean spirits. While a walking stick, a single tunic and sandals may be all that a parish budget will allow, we ought to equip our leaders with a complete “Disciple tool box.” Mike Carotta in his book *Sometimes We Dance, Sometimes We Wrestle*, suggests that because of a “crisis of spirit” which leaves young people feeling powerless in the face of overwhelming challenges, adults and youth serving agencies need to be an “intrusive presence” in the lives of young people. (Carotta 18, 116-125)

### **How do we do this? Who will do this?**

YOU Will. Ask YM's to stand (thank them. DRE's. Catechists. Parents. Grandparents. HERE is the curriculum. Look around you. Whatever text book you use, your example speaks the loudest. The important thing is to connect information with the young person's formation in the real world- “stuff” that will engage or transform him/her on the field and get them off the bench. There are a qazillion books out there to equip the team (and I own ½ of them....) Leonard Sweet, suggested that all curricula presented to young people ought to be EPIC: experiential, participatory, image based and connected, which is what church/Mass does every Sunday - if we understand the symbolism.

It takes a lot of “manpower,” no matter what skill level is required, to put a winning team on the field. Adolescent faith formation has to be more than getting hits and scoring runs, more than “collecting sacraments” and meeting the minimum requirements. It is not possible to cram for a World Series, to try to teach all the fundamentals of the game in one season as many of our confirmation programs try to do. We have to help youth and their parents see that everything is an essential “baby step” on the journey that began at Baptism and continues with the “YES” of Confirmation and continues throughout their life..

We didn’t start out by taking a pitched ball - we practiced off a stationary T and worked our way up through the system, the “scope and sequence” progression that built on the material we learned the year before. Practice was as important as a game. We went to church to learn about being church. As a team, we learned the fundamentals, got on the field and had plenty of opportunity to practice the skills, and displayed our “expertise” on game day.

**HARDBALL CLIP - bread and our lives blessed and broken “I play baseball for you”**

I have no magic solution that will solve the dilemma of how to “do confirmation,” but I do know that it takes the whole village, the whole church to give a dang, to nurture the faith of all its members. We need to get folks out of the stands and back on to the field to share the work of the coaches (and the salaries of those elite players!!!! )

If you can only remember 4 things about this presentation remember this:

1. **Parents matter** – We are their partners in developing a Catholic lifestyle for their family. It was only recently that I realized that I had said yes to God to working with Youth long before my kids were born and that I had been a youth minister for almost 29 years in the domestic church for my son Chris (28) and daughter Natalie (26) and all their friends. And though we often missed Mass due to sports or some other lame excuse, I was

performing the Corporal Works of Mercy every day by feeding the hungry, caring for colds, concussions and boo boos, giving them a roof over their head, buying clothes for their growing bodies, and unleashing thoughts and doubts that had imprisoned and paralyzed their mind when their dad left. I practiced the tenants of Catholic Social teaching by recycling, saving water, keeping the house cool in the winter, and shopping at second hand stores. I honored the dignity of their human persons during their adolescent years!!)

**STATUE – We need to look on our young people as God looks at us with unconditional love and wraps her arms around us tightly around us. PITA angels**

2. The church (that is us in the room) must make a commitment to **hire full time people** with skills and credentials who know how to minister to/with/by/for youth and their families and we must give them a **budget** to work with so they don't spend 80% of their time fundraising.
3. No more lone rangers – we **must collaborate** across agencies, across town, across parish committees for the sake of our youth and the sake of the whole church. We might read about family systems especially blended families to help us cope with shrinking resources for complex opportunities.
4. Holy Family retreat center ROCKS– Really, Openly Cares about Kids Spirituality.

“If you build it, will they come?” You betcha. If WE build it, he will come, for where 2 or more are gathered, God is already there. And when God is the center of the vision, whatever we build will ensure God's presence and people – parents and families alike- will feel **compelled** to come and “they won't know why.”

greatest gift you can give someone is your time and attention. You have given me both. It is an honor and a privilege to serve the young church. **Thank you. Blessing - God is Now here.**