

the aRts

by Miguel De Angel

I've maintained the key highlights of the original version of this article summarizing a Bryan Belknap article¹ about encouraging art in youth ministry. This summary differs only in that I have added a few more excerpts from the Belknap article, some specific activities the Diocese of Arlington offers to help youth ministers in this effort, and my own ideas and suggestions based on things I have done in my own youth ministry program.

Have you ever thought to yourself “If I could only get through to that one teen!” Belknap starts by reminding us that “*the arts use emotion and experience to communicate—a perfect tool for reaching postmodern teenagers. Today’s kids long to experience God, to taste him... Art reaches past teenagers’ defense mechanisms to capture their souls.*” With such a powerful tool at our disposal, shouldn’t we all look for ways to use art in our ministries?

Even if you have been blessed with talents *other* than artistic talents or know no students with them you can start using art in your ministry by simply **encouraging critique**. Find some of the latest Christian music, books, and movies and engage your teens in a discussion about the themes as well as the execution of the particular piece of art. Don’t be afraid to compare them to mainstream art and music because...

It’s worship to offer our best to God.

Whether critiquing mainstream and commercial works of art or the students’ own work, set the bar high—artistic excellence isn’t simply the result of good intentions. If our best work praises God we should evaluate all work by its execution, not just its intention (this doesn’t mean belittling what your young people produce, but rather seeking out themes and giving concrete feedback in love... always validating before critiquing.)

All art is rooted in a relationship with God.

Don’t expect teens to open themselves up to critique, or even get the courage to show you their artistic creations out of the blue. Try to **encourage the arts** by providing an environment that welcomes art and by affirming the gifts of your young people. Resist the notion that people can only love God by becoming a missionary or minister (beauty queen Esther, politician Joseph, and wrestler Samson don’t fit in neat little molds).



The following are a few ways to encourage your teens to use their artistic talents:

1. Display art in your youth room. In our program we started by having my own art on the walls, framed art as well as a mural. Now we’ve taken much of my framed art down to make room for student’s art.
2. In much the same manner, reserve space on your bulletin board for a *Creation Corner* where they can display their art regularly. I started ours in one of the bulletin boards in the youth room with my own art and invited them to post their own art. As student’s work fills the bulletin board I remove some of my own. If I see the board is becoming stagnant, I can add some new artwork of my own and students respond with their own. It is a very informal and organic process, yet a public way to share their work.

3. The *Creation Corner* draws enough attention that you start seeing who has an interest in art. Having identified a few individuals with talents and interest you can start a *Drawing Group* where students can bring their work to share, draw and learn from each other. Painting, art, poetry and music could all be welcome.

The next step after building some interest is to **provide opportunities** for them to apply their talents and be surprised at how many they'll come up with on their own. Create an art gallery in your Church featuring student paintings and sculptures, or line the Church halls with teens' artwork(s). Invite them to create a mural for your meeting room, write poems inspired by your current series of talks, volunteer to edit your summer camp video footage, or even compose an original song.

Whenever we attempt to create something out of nothing, we're imitating what's at the core of God's nature.

Hold special events like the Diocesan Youth Ministry One-Act Play Competition and Short Film Festival every spring. At my parish we started a poster contest for our International Festival. I'd like to think that my pictorial prayers, meditations and comics in the weekly youth ministry columns in the bulletin have helped create an environment to allow for such a contest to happen, but otherwise I had nothing to do with the decision to start this contest.

Plan a coffeehouse evening for poetry reading, dramatic monologues, and original music. Make it an outreach event by encouraging your group members to invite their friends from school.

Be open: welcome new modes of artistic expression (web design, graphic design, etc.); *You have young people in your group right now with talents that are considered applicable only outside the church—bring them inside.*

Be open to subject matter – not every artistic work has explicit Christian themes, and that's okay. *Allow your students latitude in expressing themselves without contradicting scriptural truth* [or the truth guarded in Tradition]; show them the Church is a safe place to talk about the real issues affecting them. *...and don't forget to have fun!*

*"Then the Lord said to Moses, 'See, I have chosen Bezalel son of Uri, the son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah, and I have filled him with the Spirit of God, with skill, ability, and knowledge in all kinds of crafts—to make artistic designs for work in gold, silver, and bronze, to cut and set stones, to work in wood, and to engage in all kinds of craftsmanship.'" (Exodus 31:1-5).
There you have it. The first "Spirit-filled" person was an artist.*

After an art career spanning from multimedia design to cartoon animation and children's books, Miguel De Angel felt the call to youth ministry loudly. It did not take long before he leaned into it and took a Youth Ministry position at Good Shepherd. Miguel now looks for ways to use his artistic talents in ministry.

¹ Bryan Belknap, "The Artist-Friendly Youth Group," *Group*, Vol. 28 no. 6 (Sept/Oct 2002): p. 67-70.