

# Simple Ways to Build Community Among Young People

by Leo Chavarria & OYCYAM Contributors

In our context of youth ministry, it is essential that we find ways to build community within our many youth groupings so that teens know that they matter and are valued or wanted. These elements of community are missing in so many of our young people's lives. Many young people are isolated and feel that no one "sees" them. As youth ministers our role is to get our adult volunteers and other teens that are connected to the community to reach out to those that are not. Here are some ways to reach out to our young people in order to build community within these areas:

## **You Matter:**

We all want to matter. More than anything else our youth want to feel that someone recognizes them for who they are. Try these things to show your youth that they matter:

- **Snail Mail:** Write a handwritten note telling your young people that you are thinking and praying for them. You can do this on their birthday, or on special occasion. However, the random handwritten note out of nowhere is best for showing that they matter. Have your adults and other teens be a part of this as well.
- **Interests:** When you express interest in things a young person cares about it shows them that they matter. Having conversations, debates or discussions about their interests engages young people in a way that intellectually and emotionally lets them know that the person before them is not just casually passing the time. Perhaps ask about their ethnicity, their family's background or culture of origin. Showing a genuine interest in the lives of your young people is huge! Train your volunteers to do this well and you will see how many young people get connected to the community.
- **Inject yourself into their lives:** When you go from *expressing* interest in something a young person cares about to actually *showing up* to that thing they are interested in, it is a game changer! Go to your young person's plays, games, recitals, etc. This takes time and effort which translates to "you matter". If time is an issue, find out what time your young person is performing and stay for that part only, or arrive 30 minutes before the game ends so that you get to see them in action and then connect afterwards. Having other adult volunteers or teens from the community come with you also shows your young person how much they truly matter.

## **You Are Wanted:**

Whether you are seeing a young person at a coffee shop, at a small group gathering, or in a large youth grouping, giving them your undivided attention shows that you want to be there with them.

- **Personal Invite:** We all advertise to the masses and that's important. However, there is nothing quite like a personal invitation. Either yourself or through a volunteer, personally reach out to young people so that they know you genuinely want them at the event. Go out of your way to speak to them in person if possible. If a phone call is the best way to connect with this young person, then give them a call! If you don't reach them, leave a

voicemail asking when would be the best time to chat by phone. Or simply make the invitation, then have a teen leader follow up with a phone call or text, so that the invitation is coming from the entire community and not just you. do not leave a voice mail. Make sure you keep calling until the young person picks up their phone and you actually have a conversation with them. Have some of your teen leaders follow up with a text or phone call so that the invitation is coming from the entire community and not just you.

- **Quality time:** When you are getting together with a young person, it is important that you are not rushed. There is nothing worse than when someone is antsy because they have another appointment. Give young people your undivided attention so that this time with them helps build trust and expresses to them how much you actually want to be there.

### **Room for Differences:**

When a young person comes from a minority culture, family structure, or has a differing level of ability from their peers, making an extra effort to meet them where they are and get to know them on that level can make a great impact. Part of seeing a young person and communicating that they are wanted involves showing awareness and appreciation for what makes them unique and the layers of meaning their life experiences hold. Entering into conversations with them about these things lets them know that they are important parts of the community into which you're inviting them.

When a young person knows that they matter and are wanted by an individual or a group of people, they will naturally seek to be a part of that community. Working on the above steps with your adult volunteers and teen leaders will help those in your care connect more easily to the community.

*Leo Chavarria is a husband, father, speaker and blog writer. Leo has been involved in Youth Ministry since 2003. He served as the Director of Youth Ministry at St. Mary of the Immaculate Conception parish in Fredericksburg for over eight years.*

## Simple Steps for Building Community Among Young People

by Christine Najarian



One of the best things that I have found to build community is this: DON'T USE NAMETAGS. If all of the young people are constantly wearing nametags, then there's no need to learn each other's names. If we don't learn names, how will we ever build community?

When trying to build community, it is also important to have a good team of student leaders. One of the most vital aspects of community, which the nametag issue also touches on, is that each young person feels that they are "known." When someone arrives at a youth event for the first time, I dispatch some of the leaders to make contact with that person and help welcome them. To be welcomed at the first event will help shape their impression of the group in general.



However, community building is more than just welcoming new members into the ministry. It is *increasing knowledge and continual care of one another*. As a Director of Youth Ministry, we can create several opportunities for this.

To help the teens increase their knowledge of one another, we provide group discussion time, problem solving activities, and social opportunities. Through each of these different types of interactions, they will get to know each other in different ways and have shared experiences. Sometimes spending an afternoon playing cards can help build more community than a well-planned discussion group. This is why it is important to provide a variety of youth groupings with many different opportunities for interaction.



The continual care of one another within the parish is vital in building community. Encouraging and teaching the teens to pray for and with one another is an important aspect of this. Helping them to speak to each other kindly and without sarcasm is another.

*Community building is made simple if you remember to:*

- 1) Make sure each new student feels welcomed and known.**
- 2) Give the teens adequate opportunity to get to know each other; and**
- 3) Teach the teens to care well for each other.**

*Christine Najarian is the Assistant Director of the Office of Youth, Campus, and Young Adult Ministries in the Diocese of Arlington. She coordinates many of the large events for youth in the Diocese including RALLY, BASH, and Life is VERY Good. Christine has lived in Northern Virginia for most of her life but managed to go to high school on three different continents. She returned home to the United States for college and is a proud graduate of George Mason University where she was very active in campus ministry. Prior to working for the Diocese, she served as the Director of Youth Ministry at Holy Spirit Catholic Church. Christine is currently pursuing a Master of Arts in Catechetics and Evangelization from Franciscan University of Steubenville.*