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Digital tool kit collects resources for young adult ministry

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Young adults in the Catholic church: Where are they? You could say they're all over the place: Some are regular Mass attendees, some are away from home, some don't attend Mass, some are mothers, some are in the military, some are entering their third job, some are entering their first job, some are in college. It's a difficult demographic to minister to -- it encapsulates so many life stages and spiritual stages.

But all (or at least most) are on the Internet. And some young adult ministers looking for an effective tool to minister are trying out Young Adult Ministry in a Box, a digital resource tool kit for ministering to young adults, created in conjunction with Busted Halo Ministries, a Paulist ministry reaching out to young adult Catholics, and the Washington, D.C.-based National Catholic Young Adult Ministry Association.

For two years, Busted Halo and the association collected successful ideas and methods from existing young adult ministers, having each of them write "recipe cards" so that other ministers -- those who are either in the middle of their ministry or those trying to start one -- could see a detailed account of exactly what they did.

The U.S. bishops, who released their pastoral statement on young adults, "Sons and Daughters of the Light," in 1996, define young adults as in their late teens, 20s and 30s.

"Young adult ministry in the American church is sort of the stepchild that doesn't get a lot of attention," Busted Halo executive director Paulist Fr. Dave Dwyer said. Not to say it's been totally neglected; organizations have created programs in the past, Dwyer said. But Young Adult Ministry in a Box, released in February, is moving the curriculum from a physical three-ring binder on the shelf to a digital tool kit.

The tool kit's website, www.youngadultministryinabox.com [1], comprises discussion questions, links to relevant articles, activities, prayer ideas and more. The website allows subscribers to comment and share ideas, and "ministry mentors" are available to help subscribers throughout the year. Different icons indicate the type of activity (pray, serve, teach), level (beginner, experienced, expert), and cost of the activity (cheap, moderate, expensive).

"It builds on itself in addition to the 'static' curriculum, if you will, that we will be providing four times a year seasonally, every week, and -- potentially with the way people comment and interact -- every day there would be new stuff, new ideas and new momentum about it," Dwyer said. "I think the things in the past that have been tried, just by virtue of the technology that was available, would be a binder that would sit on somebody's shelf. ... This is designed to be quite a bit more interactive."

Juanjose Armenta-Aguirre, while enjoying his 12th year in youth ministry, recently received the challenge of young adult ministry at his parish, the Catholic Community of St. Luke the Evangelist in Houston, when the person in charge stepped down at his parish. To aid him, he'll be using the tool kit. Armenta-Aguirre is the director of youth ministry and youth faith formation.

"Young adults are busy," he said, partly because they are at different life stages. Some people can't meet until 9 p.m., and if that's when they have to meet, that's when they have to meet. Different parts of the month work for different people, he added, so some might show up to some things but just can't make it to others.

Thanks to the Internet, topics and culture change so quickly now that a big part of reaching young adults is to make sure the content -- and the medium through which it's delivered -- is current, he said.

Content in Young Adult Ministry in a Box is updated weekly. For example, one of the items for the week of April 16 was a discussion with a link to the *Newsweek* article "Forget the church, follow Jesus," followed by questions and a link to another article for further reflection.

Parishes have smaller staffs and smaller budgets, so they "are trying to do more with less," said Amy McEntee, executive board chair of the National Catholic Young Adult Ministry Association. A lot of times it is the youth minister who gets the added responsibility of young adult ministry.

That's what happened to Tina Burtch at St. John Neumann Catholic Church in Sunbury, Ohio, but she doesn't feel like the responsibilities piled on. In fact, the challenge has germinated even more ideas for her to do with the youths.

"It is such a different animal," she said, referring to young adult ministry to youth ministry. Youths are at a more stable (locationwise, at least) time in their life, whereas young adults are in transition, she said. Also, with the rise of Twitter and such, teenagers and young people are a "sound-bite generation," she said, and "our faith as Catholics is anything but a sound bite."

Although sometimes at a disadvantage when the youths view her only as the youth minister and not the young adult minister as well, her position allows her to recognize the needs of the youth going off to college and help them create strong connections to their faith so that they don't wander when they are young adults.

Young Adult Ministry in a Box is one tool she's started to implement. "Having all this information at our fingertips is amazing."

When creating the tool kit, Dwyer said, they thought of those who couldn't hire a full-time staff person. A subscription allows for three users who can access it on unlimited devices. This tool kit is to help those busy

youth ministers with the responsibility, or parishes that can't afford a full-time leader but can afford the $250 for the young adults to buy the tool kit.

"Obviously it's not intended to be used completely in absence of any kind of leadership of the church," Dwyer said. The activities include notes such as if a member of the church staff is necessary because of the content.

While the tool kit is designed to be flexible, for the most part its creators envisioned it being used at the parish level. However, it can help groups that combine their young adult ministry with others nearby to form a greater number.

At Pax Christi Church in Rochester, Minn., Zach Rawson hopes to expand the parish's young adult ministry into a citywide or areawide ministry.

At the start, he and the other young adult ministers wanted to make sure that they created a ministry with not only social activities but ample gatherings delving into faith.

"Young adult ministry isn't just limited to online," he said. He finds the tool helpful, but will make sure to use it not solely for its digital aspect, but also for relational ministry, Rawson said.

Rawson used the tool kit because he needed to start a ministry from the ground up, another selling point the tool kit makes. It has a section called "The Essentials," developed by what's called the "expert team" at Young Adult Ministry in a Box. The Essentials are for people starting from scratch, with questions such as "What does young adult ministry even mean?" and "Where do we find young adults?"

The Essentials section is also helping Jerome Cabeen in the Beaumont, Texas, diocese. The Office of Family Life director was looking to help pastors who requested information on ministering to young adults.

Cabeen is testing Young Adult Ministry in a Box in the central vicariate first and then plans to train leaders in the other vicariates and equip them with the tool.

For a guy who's not too keen on the Internet, Young Adult Ministry in a Box still won his enthusiasm because of the structure of the program, the content and the easy-to-navigate website. Every tool you need is right there, he said.

Although young adults need to make an effort as well, ministering to them is about "really meeting them where they're at in their life," Cabeen said.

Wherever that may be.

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[1] http://www.youngadultministryinabox.com