

Engaging Young Adults at a Catholic Mega-Parish

Tricia C. Bruce

Maryville College

Walk through the towering solid wooden doors of St. Ann's Parish to attend Mass on Sunday and you will be greeted by friendly ushers, a handout with song lyrics and reminders about upcoming parish events, and your choice of seating among an overflowing crowd of more than a thousand. One 26-year-old parishioner recalled her first impression of St. Ann's: "It's big." At the 4:30 pm Sunday Mass, you'll see high-schoolers occupying the first several rows of center pews and linking arms around the altar during the preparation of the Eucharist. You might also notice attendees raising their hands during emotionally charged liturgy music, the presiding priest wearing sandals, and a homily that references Facebook in the same breath as redemption. After the 75-minute service, attendees will disperse en masse, some headed to a massive parking lot where carts abundant with Hispanic food are setting up to intercept parishioners arriving for the 7:00 pm Spanish Mass. Others will walk toward the nearby "St. Ann's Center," a converted retail strip now housing parish offices and meeting rooms, busy with Sunday evening ministry events. St. Ann's is alive and thriving.

With more than 28,000 registered members, St. Ann's Catholic parish in Northwest Dallas County, Texas, is among the largest congregations in the United States. The parish offers seven Masses each weekend in a 1,400 seat sanctuary and is home to more than one hundred ministries. Its birth and rapid expansion correspond to a period of substantial growth in the Catholic population of greater Dallas. At the mobilization of two local Catholic women in 1984, 75 families petitioned the Diocese of Dallas for mission status with the eventual goal of parish formation in their town of Coppell, Texas. Under the leadership of the late Msgr. Kilian Broderick, St. Ann's officially became a parish in 1989 with some 850 registered families. When the community dedicated its brand new, \$14

million worship space in 2001, the parish had grown to more than 16,000 registered members averaging only 35 years in age. Pastor Broderick at the time remarked that “We very rarely have funerals at St. Ann’s...However, we have a wedding every couple of weeks.”¹ The parish today describes itself as “a young vibrant community,” a quarter of which is Hispanic.²

While some might interpret a congregation of this size as being simply too large to build community or effectively engage young adults, St. Ann’s has found success in doing exactly this. By creating a ministry space that bridges “youth” and “adulthood,” embracing a “new dynamic orthodoxy,” and empowering lay leaders, the parish provides a useful model of effective outreach to 18-29 year-olds.

Creating a Ministry Space Bridging “Youth” and “Adulthood”

Visit St. Ann’s on a Sunday or Wednesday evening and you’ll be intermingling with some 600 middle-schoolers, 500 high-schoolers, and dozens of volunteer leaders. On a weekday, you’ll undoubtedly cross paths with some of the 1,300 students enrolled in Religious Education classes. Travel just down the road on a Thursday evening and you’ll encounter fifty or so twenty-somethings at a Mexican restaurant, laughing and chatting at a “Holy Happy Hour.” At St. Ann’s, youth ministry is a central focus and popular success, as well as the context from which its ministry to 18-29 year-olds first emerged. Viewed as neither fully “youth” nor fully “adults,” parishioners in their 20s are welcomed into a ministry that acknowledges their transitional status between the two.

A key ingredient to St. Ann’s success in reaching 18-29 year-olds lies in how the parish has defined a ministry space specific to this age group, one that recognizes emerging adults’ transitional status between youth and adulthood. It was out of St. Ann’s strong programming for parishioners under 18 that its effective ministry to 18-29 year-olds first emerged. The 1997 development of a Sunday afternoon Youth Mass and corresponding innovation in liturgical music styles laid the foundation for what has become an extremely popular parish high

school ministry. Thousands of parishioners—young and old and everything in between—now participate in Sunday’s Youth Mass, where a deep reverence for the Eucharist is augmented by original and reinterpreted modern rock tunes led by St. Ann’s music director and recording artist, Curtis Stephan. Though a parish school has long been in planning discussions at St. Ann’s, the fact that none yet exists has had the effect of funneling greater resources into youth ministry. Parish staff includes three full-time and one part-time youth ministers.

Following a decade of success engaging middle- and high-schoolers and drawing all ages to a dynamic Sunday afternoon Youth Mass, leaders at St. Ann’s grew more aware of the need to establish a ministry “home” for graduates of the high school ministry and parish newcomers in their 20s. As one 25-year-old woman suggested, “If you have a youth group and you don’t have a 20-somethings group, why do you have a youth group? Because what are you preparing them for?” Another parish leader reflected that “we were completely missing the boat” when it came to ministering to those in early adulthood, an age group typically excluded from youth ministry despite their inclusion in the Catholic Church’s global “World Youth Day.” Youth, St. Ann’s leaders came to appreciate, doesn’t suddenly stop at high school graduation.

Responding to this need, “Twenty-Something” was born in 2007, targeted to parishioners age 20 to 29 and intentionally distinct from a “singles” group. Having an age-specific ministry helped to carve out a particular niche for young adults that acknowledged their transitional status between youth and adulthood. “You can’t treat this age group the same as you do the singles group or the Men’s club or any of these other groups,” said a youth minister. “This is a group in transition...You cannot just treat them like another adult ministry in the parish that has to be self-sustaining. They’ve gotta have our support.” Young adults at St. Ann’s echo this view of shared responsibility, as reflected in one 24-year-old parishioner’s comment that “step one has to be a commitment from the church.” Parish support is demonstrated by, for example, the partial financial subsidization of Twenty-Something. Unlike other adult ministries at the parish that are required to be financially self-sufficient, Twenty-Something has a

dedicated line item in St. Ann's annual budget. By providing funds to assist with programming such as speakers and retreats, St. Ann's is strategically acknowledging the not-yet-stable financial and career situations of parishioners in their 20s. Additionally, though no staff member is officially tasked with overseeing Twenty-Something, the Director of High School Ministry has been instrumental in promoting and shaping parish programming for 18-29 year-olds. This staffing support has offered stability to a ministry that sees higher-than-typical turnover in lay leadership. The first three Twenty-Something coordinators, for example, got engaged during their leadership years, creating a running joke that if someone wanted to get married, they should become the coordinator.

While grounded in and supported by the parish, Twenty-Something nonetheless operates under a largely autonomous, lay leadership structure. Young adults (some of whom grew up participating in St. Ann's middle and high school youth ministry) coordinate all activities, from weekly bible studies to monthly "Holy Happy Hours" to occasional retreats and social outings. Some 325 young adults are on the group's email list and events draw between 25 and 75 people. The Twenty-Something coordinator makes a substantial commitment to activity planning each year, assisted by other young adult leaders in charge of specific programming areas. Though not paid, these leaders are regarded respectfully by parish leaders and given the freedom to create a ministry in the way they see most fitting to the needs of young people at St. Ann's. This is a ministry by and for parishioners in their 20s.

The name "Twenty-Something" itself creates an obvious space where parishioners in their twenties feel welcome. Though parishes often designate age-specific ministries through high school, this tends to stop at graduation, changing into ministries designated by marital/family status or ministry interest. St. Ann's young adults cringed at the "singles" ministry label many parishes employ to reach younger Catholics; the singles group at St. Ann's rarely attracts anyone under 35. One 26-year-old woman shared that "really what I was struggling with was trying to build relationships with people my age and with my faith

background. So I was looking for a community that would provide that type of networking, without the negative stigma of a singles group.” Rather than being oriented entirely around socializing or dating, Twenty-Something events aim to deepen participants’ spiritual lives and knowledge of the Catholic faith. Any romantic relationships (of which there have been several) emerge naturally. An age-specific ministry label (“Twenty-Something”) resonates with potential participants looking to build community among young adults undergoing similar life transitions.

In these ways, St. Ann’s is intentionally and effectively creating a young adult ministry that bridges “youth” and “adulthood.” Parish leaders acknowledge the continuation and unique challenges of ministry needs in the transitional post-high school, college, and early career life stages. St. Ann’s recognizes the liminal status of young adults as being both “young” (thereby needing support with finances and personnel from the youth ministry office) and “adult” (thereby granted autonomy in programming and leadership). An age-specific ministry that avoids formal reference to marital status and balances support with independence has attracted and increased commitment among the area’s young adult Catholics.

Embracing a “New Dynamic Orthodoxy”

“Who’s available to sign up for an hour of Adoration?” asks a 23-year-old woman holding a clipboard, minutes before the start of Monday night’s Twenty-Something Bible study. Twenty-four hours a day, 362 days a year,³ the Adoration Chapel at St. Ann’s remains open for prayer, spiritual reading, and silent contemplation in the presence of the Eucharist. It is the only Perpetual Adoration Chapel in the diocese and one of just 68 in Texas and 825 nationally.⁴ Adoration is one of many examples of the strong emphasis St. Ann’s places on devotion and worship. Confession is another. Young adults convene monthly for a 7:00 pm “Confession and Dinner” (“It wouldn’t be a bad idea to aim for 6:45 if you’re not a good line person” prods one of the Twenty-Something organizers on the group’s Facebook page). Reflecting on the popularity of the sacrament at St. Ann’s, a

priest shares that “We have confessions galore...I’ve never heard so many confessions!”

The centrality of these practices reflects the character of St. Ann’s as, in the words of several parish leaders, embracing a “new dynamic orthodoxy.” The phrase, with origins and advocates at the Franciscan University of Steubenville, emphasizes “fidelity to the Magisterium, sacred scripture, and sacred tradition.”⁵ One parish leader elaborated on how this plays out at St. Ann’s:

“St. Ann’s strikes a nice balance between the sacred and orthodoxy and things like Perpetual Eucharistic Adoration, but also a freshness and an openness. I don’t think you can put a label on us. Definitely it’s not like super-traditional, but it’s not liberal...just very alive. That kind of ‘new dynamic orthodoxy’ is a good embodiment of that. Not just conservative, but to be dynamically orthodox. But to be rooted in the tradition of the church.”

To put it another way, St. Ann’s is not afraid to be Catholic. Parishioners disparage the notion of relativism, instead celebrating their “(re-)conversion” to the Catholic faith and the universal presence of Jesus Christ in the Eucharist at every Mass. Young adults and leaders alike convey an amazingly consistent message of adherence to Church teachings. One Twenty-Something leader identified one of her major concerns as making sure that “whatever we profess at Twenty-Something is in accordance with the Catholic Church’s teachings.” Conversations center less on disagreement with teachings and more on, as one young woman phrased it, “pressures that make [them] hard to swallow.”

In this way, 18-29 year-olds attending St. Ann’s are challenged to learn about and live out Catholic teachings without fear. “I feel like [church leaders] do a really good job of challenging us to be moral in different ways,” said one 24-year-old. Numerous young people at the parish conveyed stories of struggle and reconciliation with difficult aspects of their faith. A 30-year-old male shared that “After a couple years of using [Natural Family Planning], a lot of the sins of my life fell away. And I started to see, ‘Wow, there’s more to this than just regulating

the size of your family.” Another 24-year-old female described her encounter with difficult church teachings in this way:

They’re challenging only because I was ignorant. And when I actually did more investigating and talked to more people about what it actually means, and really understood why it is the way it is, then it became like, “Oh yeah, duh!”

While one might expect a church attracting young adults to welcome more openness and flexibility in approaching difficult church teachings, St. Ann’s has found success in the opposite: providing a firm moral stance and clear explanation when it comes to complex theological issues.

Part of what congregations can learn from St. Ann’s success in attracting young adults, therefore, is that not all young adults are adverse to orthodoxy. In fact, many are attracted to St. Ann’s precisely because it takes a strong stand on issues such as those related to sexuality, the sanctity of life, men’s and women’s roles, and regular participation in the sacraments. Standing apart from other churches in the American religious marketplace,⁶ St. Ann’s is successfully “selling” itself by playing up an intense commitment to the Catholic faith through Mass attendance, adoration, confession, adherence to Church teachings, and more. And young people are “buying” it, increasing both membership and commitment to St. Ann’s in the face of more general trends that point to a decline in religious adherence and participation among 18-29 year-olds. One lesson from St. Ann’s success is that it is not necessary to water down religious orthodoxy to attract young people, but rather to highlight it and emphasize its distinctiveness—even its challenge.

Empowering Lay Leaders

As a very large parish, St. Ann’s cannot be managed entirely or even predominantly by one person. The current pastor described being spread very thin across the numerous sacramental and ministerial needs of the parish’s 28,000 members. One parishioner recalled a conversation with the late Pastor Broderick in which, while walking by room after room filled with activity,

someone asked how he kept track of it all. His reply, recollected by this parishioner, was “You know, God said where two or more are gathered in my name that He is there with them. And I put my trust in the Lord that he’s doing what he needs to do in those rooms.” Part of St. Ann’s success in effectively reaching, serving, and integrating young adults into parish life, then, comes from identifying and empowering lay leaders.

One of the key elements in this process is parishioners’ participation in the Ohio-originated spiritual renewal program “Christ Renews His Parish” (CRHP, pronounced “Chirp”). First introduced to St. Ann’s in the early 1990s, these parishioner-led weekend retreats are open to anyone 18 and up, are gender-specific, and are offered twice a year in both English and Spanish. The parish website describes CRHP as “a process designed to bring members of the parish closer together with Christ. It is an avenue for spiritual growth and friendship.” Some 3,200 St. Ann’s parishioners have gone through the program, which is followed by an invitation to consider opportunities to serve at the parish. Described one parishioner, “The big part about CRHP is...you now say, ‘I have now discovered my new time and talents with the Lord. What am I going to do now in the parish?’ Well, they go out to become ushers, they go out to sing in the choir. All the different organizations.” Young adults and parish leaders alike spoke about the role of CRHP in renewing their spiritual lives and opening their eyes to ways that they could lead at St. Ann’s. Said one interviewee, “There are so many stories of people who were nominal Catholics at best who went on the CRHP weekend and that really provided for them a profound encounter with Christ and the sacraments but also with the community [of St. Ann’s].” Many young adults and key players in youth programming first volunteered at St. Ann’s after participating in CRHP. Reflected one parish leader, “I don’t know where this parish would be had we not started this program.”

St. Ann’s is also unafraid to entrust important leadership responsibilities to young adults. Two of the key leaders at the parish (in youth ministry and in music ministry), individuals frequently cited as the reasons why parishioners joined and stayed at St. Ann’s, were initially hired when they were just 25 and 24,

respectively. They were also given the space to innovate in their ministry and apply a dynamic energy to their faith expression. Additional parish leaders in Hispanic ministry, Natural Family Planning, and the “Twenty-Something” ministry are now in or just out of their 20s. Ministries have grown and grown up with young adult parishioners at St. Ann’s.

There are trade-offs to entrusting the leadership of the parish and its ministries largely to lay people. Young adults active in Twenty-Something, for example, expressed a desire to have more interaction with parish priests. One 28-year-old male suggested that “if [a priest] could just come for ten minutes once a week, that would be great.” Young parishioners also recognized that it would be impossible for their pastor—currently the only full-time priest assigned to St. Ann’s—to make rounds to every ministry, even over the course of a year. And given the priest shortage facing the Catholic Church more broadly, their verbalized desire for additional parish priests will likely remain unfulfilled. The enabling leadership structure of St. Ann’s, therefore, is in many ways a direct response to an unmet need for additional ordained leaders.

Conclusion

What’s working at St. Ann’s Catholic Parish in Coppell, Texas? Yes, the enormous, Spanish mission design architecture is stunning. The music during worship services could compete with any band on contemporary Christian radio. And the thousands of people who call themselves members are friendly, welcoming, and diverse. But less obvious, and perhaps more important for explaining why the parish has so effectively engaged 18 to 29 year-olds, is St. Ann’s creation of a ministry space bridging youth and adulthood, its commitment to a “new dynamic orthodoxy,” and its strategic efforts in empowering lay leaders. From these lessons, other congregations—both large and small—have much to learn.

Notes

- 1 Quoted in Herbert, Lisa. 2001. St Ann's Church Finds Room to Grow. *Dallas Morning News*, July 12, 2001, p. 3M.
- 2 www.stannparish.org
- 3 With the exception of the three days leading up to Easter.
- 4 www.therealpresence.org
- 5 Fergusun, Lisa. 2005. Defining Dynamic Orthodoxy. *Franciscan Way*, Autumn, p. 14.
- 6 See Finke, R. and R. Stark. 1992. *The Churching of America, 1776-1990: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy*. Rutgers University Press: Rutgers, NJ; and Stark, R. and R. Finke. 2000. *Acts of Faith: Explaining the Human Side of Religion*. University of California Press: Berkeley, CA.