

Believing and belonging: The shifting territory of youth ministry

by [Richard A. Kauffman](#) in the [October 4, 2003](#) issue

Youth culture in the U.S. is being reinvented every three years, according to Robert J. McCarty. Keeping up with youth culture is like mapping territory that is constantly changing, he says.

A Catholic with an evangelical zeal for youth ministry, McCarty has observed the shifting youth territory for a long time. He's been in Catholic youth ministry for 30 years, 14 of them in the Archdiocese of Baltimore, and the last six with the National Federation for Catholic Youth Ministry, where he is the executive director. In that capacity he consults with youth directors and Catholic schools throughout the country, and serves as an adviser to the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

McCarty believes this generation of American youth may well be one of the most spiritual ever, but they tend to be "believers," not "belongers." They are interested in spirituality and issues of faith, but are indifferent toward institutionalized religion. "The challenge for the church is, what is it that we can do communally that responds to the spiritual hungers of young people?"

McCarty believes that kids in a virtual age are looking for companionship and connection. As documented by Patricia Hersch in *A Tribe Apart*, many youth are living in environments where adults are largely absent. As a result they create their own value and social systems. "This has tremendous implication for youth ministry. How do you connect kids to healthy, caring adults?" asks McCarty.

His answer is to create small-group settings in which youth can relate to adults. He talks not about "youth groups," but about "youth groupings"—small faith communities in the larger faith community which bring adult mentors and small groups of youth together around common interests, or involve them in service projects together or engage them in the life of the larger parish, not just in activities that isolate youth from the rest of the church.

“When somebody says, ‘How many kids are involved in your youth program?’ my only good answer is, ‘All of them; you just never see all of them at one time.’”

McCarty admits that this approach requires more adult volunteers. The key is to involve more adults who each do less. If you ask an adult to be involved with youth every Sunday night for a year, they’re inclined to say no. But if you ask, “Can you volunteer to teach three sessions on a particular topic?” they’ll say: “Of course I can.” The other key is to be clear about what is expected, giving the adult volunteers job descriptions and timelines.

Moving youth from being believers to being belongers is one component of youth ministry. Getting them to behave as Christians is another. Here too adult mentors are important as models of Christian discipleship. “It’s not enough to say to a kid, ‘You need to be a follower of Jesus,’ unless you can say, ‘Here’s what it looks like, and here’s how disciples act,’ and then ground that in scripture. You have to help the kids develop the skill to live out discipleship.” Skill-building in discipleship is crucial—learning how to pray or how to worship corporately, for instance.

McCarty thinks adult mentors also need to challenge simplistic views of faith. Some kids think that if they have faith in God, bad things won’t happen to them or those they love. They need to know that faith won’t keep people from dying or getting sick or keep relationships from breaking up.

So there is a cognitive dimension to faith. Youth need to learn how to use scripture, and they need to be taught to think theologically and critically. McCarty wonders how many Catholic kids could make a judgment about the war in Iraq. “Does it fit the criteria of a just war?” he asks, drawing on the classical Catholic means for discernment about war. Making moral decisions is a faith skill, says McCarty. Even learning how to forgive is a faith skill that can be learned.

McCarty envisions youth ministry happening in four venues. One is traditional youth programs. Another is involvement in the life of the parish as a whole. (He sees some kids involved at the parish level who never show up for youth programs, and he thinks that is just fine.) The third venue is family programs—retreats for families, for example, where parents and youth interact with each other in informal settings. Youth ministry also involves ministries to the parents of teenagers. His own parish conducted a three-session seminar for parents of teenagers on how to survive the teenage years and how to communicate with teens. Simultaneously, they held a

seminar for teens on how to survive their parents.

The final venue is civic and service activities. Youth, says McCarty, are interested in social ministry. "Teenagers right now have the highest rate of volunteering of any age group in our society. Part of it is due to some schools making service hours mandatory, but I'm finding, across the board, that kids are doing service way beyond what they're required to be doing, because they want to do it." They're interested in the common good and idealistic about making a difference.