

Youth Ministry Brainstorming Example #1

This is purely hypothetical and does not reflect any actual persons or parish.

The three main components of youth ministry in Our Lady of This Hypothetical Example parish consist of teaching factual information about the faith, organizing service projects in the community, and growing in mission by witnessing faith to peers.

For the past several years, youth group meets weekly during the school year and biweekly over the summer months. School year meetings follow a set schedule of gather, learn, game, plan, pray, dismissal. Summer meetings are much less structured and often consist of outdoor game or movie nights with snacks.

Youth ministry is a voluntary activity, but it is generally expected that teens preparing for Confirmation will attend youth group. This is not only an expectation of the parish, but also of the Diocese.

The Director of Youth Ministry was approached by an autistic teen, “Dee,” and her parents, explaining that Dee would like to make her Confirmation but the present format is too overwhelming for her to attend. She is very interested in learning about the faith and would like to interact with other Catholic teens her age, but does not do well with large gatherings or physically demanding activities. Table games are usually okay. Dee does not use AAC but does not often speak up in groups, finding it difficult to express what she is thinking in the fast-paced setting of the group. She has been diagnosed with an auditory processing delay, dyspraxia, and dysgraphia by her school support team. Dee has an IEP which allows extended instructional time and relaxed assignment deadlines.

Activities where snacks are served pose difficulty for Dee, as she has multiple food sensitivities which trigger migraine headaches and nausea, and most commercially produced snacks contain ingredients she cannot eat without becoming ill. Moreover, Dee is uncomfortable with the attention drawn to her when she politely declines food in public, as well-meaning adults often comment on her thinness and try to persuade her to not be “picky.”

Dee would very much like to receive the sacrament of Confirmation, but does not feel able to attend youth group or preparation classes. She also does not know how she can attend the mandatory Diocesan-wide all-day retreat held for all teens preparing for Confirmation. The venue is quite large, the food is catered, and the nine hour participation time would almost certainly be overwhelming.

Our Lady of The Hypothetical Example staff want to be supportive of Dee’s needs, yet do not know how to proceed with Dee’s Confirmation preparation if she cannot meet the mandatory Diocesan requirements.

Questions for discussion

1. **FACTUAL INFORMATION:** What alternate methods can be used to teach the factual information component to candidates like Dee?

Dee says she learns better when she is self-paced and self-directed. Group discussions are overwhelming and stressful. She is easily frustrated by writing assignments. Can the material be offered in a way that Dee can learn about each topic on her own? What methods can be used to check Dee's comprehension and to ensure completion of required topics? What can Dee do when she has questions about the material? Suggestion: Identify a staff pair with whom Dee can maintain contact, either 1:1 in person or via email/messaging, and establish a regular correspondence to touch base and explore weekly topics within the conversation.

2. SERVICE PROJECT: What alternatives are there for service projects in which Dee can participate?

This would be a great question to ask Dee herself. Can the existing youth service projects remain an option, asking Dee how she is best able to contribute? Is there work to be done behind the scenes which is better suited to Dee's processing and communication style? Keep in mind that prayer is an act of service, and an excellent way to contribute! Most importantly, make sure to integrate Dee's contribution into the overall project in such a way that the other participants are aware of the work Dee is doing, and likewise, make Dee aware of what the others are doing. This is particularly important if Dee's role is less visible or being carried out individually, rather than with the larger group. "Behind the scenes" is not the same as "anonymous."

3. FELLOWSHIP, MISSION, AND WITNESS Remind Dee (and parish staff) that personal connection with one or two people at a time is just as valid as connecting in large groups (See Matthew 18:20!). If Dee is excused from large gatherings, it is most crucial to make sure she is nevertheless well-known to the rest of the youth group/Confirmation class, and vice-versa. Be creative in how this objective is carried out. One idea could be partnering participants in groups no greater than three (pairing is ideal, but odd numbers may require triads) who pray for one another. Weekly prayer prompts can follow the catechetical topics being covered while still encouraging students to add their own petitions. Methods of prayer can be related to different methods of communication. Likewise, all manner of communication between student-partners should be considered valid, including messaging. (An excellent resource to consider when implementing a model like this is Dr. Lawrence Sutton's *How to Welcome, Include and Catechize Children with Autism and Other Special Needs*, published by Loyola Press).

Over-arching points to remember:

- Trust Dee to let you know what is and is not working.
- Assume that Dee knows her needs best.
- Realize that autistic people's engagement can seem to fluctuate from day to day, or from week to week. Sensory and processing loads often vary based on several factors outside a person's control. Physical energy also depends on several factors which vary widely from

day to day. An autistic person's ability to do something well today does not guarantee that same capacity every time, which causes just as much frustration and distress for the autistic person as it can for others. Patience, empathy, compassion and flexibility are key for everyone looking to support Dee.

- Do not confuse silence or need for solitude with dislike of classmates or not wanting to be included. Dee is just as much a member of the community as her classmates and should be treated as though she belongs, even when she cannot be physically present. Reinforcing this will ensure Dee's connection to her peers and will dispel common stereotypes about autistic people being aloof or anti-social.

- Do not excuse Dee from attendance without making an effort to include her in some way in the activity from which she is being exempted. If, for instance, Dee cannot attend a large gathering, consider asking Dee ahead of time if she has any messages or prayer requests to share with the group, and then share any messages or prayer requests of attendees in kind with Dee, either in real time via messaging or immediately after the meeting, so that she knows she is remembered and included.

- Brainstorm well in advance with Dee (and her parents) about what she will need to participate in the actual Confirmation ceremony. Be prepared to approach Diocesan staff with the details about Dee and accommodations she needs, and allow extra time for staff response and planning. Keep in mind that neurodivergent students often have other family members who themselves are neurodivergent and might need accommodations in order to attend as well.

Notice that there are no special curricula or programs brought in just for Dee. Instead, the existing framework is used in a way which includes Dee by creatively responding to her particular sensory, physical, and processing needs.

Flexibility, creativity, collaboration and curiosity will be key as the community experiences firsthand how hospitality toward even one person yields good fruits and many unexpected benefits to everyone involved.