



## **What does a parish for young people look like? What we know and what we don't know so far.**

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### **Spray painting story - slide of spray painted shed and wall**

We have teens at Nativity who are doubtful about Jesus and church. They certainly didn't behave themselves on this retreat. What are the main reasons they are resistant toward church? Here are the main reasons we see among young people for staying away from church:

**Religion is at the root of wars, terrorism, and disagreements.** God's name has been tossed around as a reason for atrocity.

**Church is not relevant.** Just because the Gospel is always relevant doesn't mean that you are.

**The premise of Christianity is that you need a savior.** You can't do it on your own. You have to admit your vulnerability to accept his help.

**You've been hurt by church people.** It can be as serious as abuse or as seemingly small as being ignored, but either way, your church experience is made (or not) by church people. Young people hate hypocrisy more than anything.

I'm going to share what a parish for young people looks like from our perspective in North Baltimore, Maryland in 2019. Your parish is different, and that's why you're the expert. We're going to think through four steps for making a parish appealing to young people:

1. What gets young people in the door.
2. What engages them once they're inside.
3. What keeps them coming.
4. What changes their lives.

But here's the bottom line: **They don't care what you know until they know that you care.** We have the greatest news in the world to share with them! While we were still sinners, Jesus died for our sins and invites us to an incredible, fulfilling life and eternity with him in Heaven. We want to share that, but our brokenness gets in the way. Everything that we do has to show that we care about our young people as individuals and that we care enough to share the risen and living Lord with them. **They don't care what you know until they know that you care.**

The first step to caring about young people is knowing who they are. We need to identify our target audience. When we plan our programs for teens and write messages, we have someone in mind. He is Timonium Tim's son. We call him Timonium Timmy.

Timmy is a typical overscheduled teen. He probably attends a private or highly competitive public school and experiences pressure to get good grades. Timmy is likely an athlete or involved with any number of clubs and activities. He's likable, easy-going, and fairly popular. He loves his friends and follows the lead of his more popular friends. Timmy is what you call a digital native: He has never known a world without technology. He is constantly plugged in (especially to his cell phone) and actually doesn't know how to unplug. In part because of this, Timmy is overwhelmed by culture and things of culture--sex, partying, pressure to succeed. Timmy is close to his parents, but they don't know everything about him. He mostly shares his successes with them but not his struggles. Timmy is a cradle Catholic, but he doesn't come to Mass every week, instead attending with his parents occasionally and usually for holidays. Timmy doesn't pray often or even know how to pray even though he might attend Catholic school. Still, Timmy believes in God. His belief is abstract--he doesn't see a need for God in his life or at least doesn't have room. When he makes space to authentically encounter God, he experiences the mercy, love, and belonging he didn't know he needed.

So that's Timmy. And Timmy has those barriers we mentioned earlier: **Religion is at the root of wars, terrorism, and disagreements. Church is not relevant. The premise of Christianity is that you need a savior. You've been hurt by church people.**

Now the first instinct is to fight those thoughts with more thoughts. We can just tell Timmy that these things aren't true! Then he will get it. What's far more powerful than us telling Timmy is creating an experience that moves him. He needs to belong before he believes or behaves. That's a reversal from past generations. He needs to belong before he believes or behaves. **He doesn't care what we know until he knows that we care.**

Even though our teens this year caused trouble on retreat with the spray painting, we still believed if we could show Timmy we cared about him over the long run, he would come around. So how do we show Timmy that we care? Here's what we think is attractive to Timmy:

**A movement FOR something.** Timmy doesn't want to be against sex before marriage, drugs, violence, and mistreatment of others. Timmy wants to be FOR something. He wants to be FOR something that gives his life meaning and gives him a sense of belonging.

**Moments, experiences.** He can be moved emotionally, psychologically, and spiritually. Moments like retreats give fuel to the fire. There was a noticeable change in our teens at retreat from spray painting to praying on their knees. I'll talk about that this afternoon too.

**Being around people who are like me.** Like attracts like. Timmy needs to see people who are like him at the front doors, serving him, sitting around him. That means people at his age and stage of life. Why would he come to a church that only has old people?

**A relevant message.** This is where things get challenging. We have to speak to Timmy and his life situation. He is unconvinced that Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life. The truths we preach are eternal, but how we communicate them evolves.

You'll notice that this is all just getting to know Timmy. We think that's really important, and it's always evolving. Timmy is a moving target. In the initial two or three minutes he walks through our doors, he's probably going to form an opinion about church and in a bigger sense about God. So we think all this work up front is incredibly important. Now hopefully we've gotten him in the door.

**So what engages Timmy once he's inside?** The answer to this one is actually more traditional than you might think. I'd argue that it's goodness, truth, and beauty. And we think these three ancient philosophical concepts translate to three areas of the weekend experience we try to create at Nativity:

1. Goodness - Ministers
2. Truth - Message
3. Beauty - Music

Goodness comes across through the people Timmy encounters. For students, it's the people greeting him, serving him pizza, running games, leading worship, communicating a message, leading a small group, praying for him, even attending his sports or extracurricular activities.

Truth is expressed in the message. God is unchanging. Timmy needs that stability in the form of a savior. With all the anxiety and pressure he's under, he needs Jesus more than ever. We just have to figure out how to tell him that in a way that it sticks.

Beauty can be understood many ways, but one of the best is through music. Use every means you can to make it excellent. There was a time when everything that we now consider normal for church was considered outrageous. Projecting sound artificially? That was outrageous once. Using electricity instead of candles? Outrageous. Using lighting like they do in theater? Outrageous. There was even a time when certain instruments would have been considered outrageous. I mean, the piano and the organ weren't around for Jesus. Those were introduced later. So it's not such a huge leap for us to use screens, instruments, mics, and technicians to make the Mass or our youth groups excellent. They communicate beauty, and that's vitally important.

All of these elements, again, show Timmy that we care about him. **Timmy doesn't care what we know until he knows that we care.**

At this point, Timmy might have come back to church, but now we need to get him to stay in church.

### **What keeps Timmy coming?**

I'd say three things: The first is relationships.

**Relationships** help Timmy belong. In fact, we think relationships are the number one thing we want Timmy to get out of his Confirmation experience as a high schooler -- relationships with his peers, leaders, and parish so he can have a relationship with God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and with the greater Church.

The second thing after relationships is **relevancy**. It's hard work to stay relevant. The gap between how quickly you change and how quickly everything around you is changing is irrelevancy. Jesus went to the well to meet the Samaritan during the middle of the day. He went to the homes of tax collectors. He spoke in parables people could understand. He was relevant. We need to be relevant too.

The last thing that entices Timmy back is **connections**. One of the steps we ask Timmy to take is to serve. Our teens and young people connect by serving in creative tech, kids, cafe, small groups, and all over. They want to do it. We need to give them opportunities, empowerment, and encouragement.

Relationships, relevancy, and connections keep Timmy coming back, but the ultimate goal for Timmy and for all of us is life change. We want to become more like Christ. **What changes Timmy's life?**

**Long obedience in the same direction.** Our lives change when our habits change. We want to cultivate great habits in Timmy. We try to make his next steps clear and simple, not easy but clear and simple. There aren't any quick fixes, but there is freedom and life change with long obedience in the same direction.

**Continued exposure to Jesus.** We come back to the resurrected Jesus as the basis of our faith. Everything changed when Christ rose from the grave. Timmy needs a savior. That's what we came back to when our teens misbehaved at retreat, and it's what we need to hear again and again. We care about Timmy, but infinitely more, his savior cares about him. **He doesn't care how much we know until he knows how much we care.**

Now, even if Timmy's life is changed, and you are succeeding at everything we've talked about today, you will still have teens who don't know Christ. You'll still have frustration and failure and struggle. We live in an imperfect world. There's a holy unrest, a burden we carry because there are so many young people who don't get it yet. They need Jesus so desperately, as we all do, and we want to share him, yet they aren't always ready to listen. You know who else experienced that sense of helplessness and rejection? Jesus! He's there with you when you struggle to capture young people. He knows your struggle well, and he is proud of you. Right now, in so many Catholic churches, teenagers are written off as being incapable of putting down their devices and having real relationships. Right now, teens are suffering from crippling anxiety because their lives lack proper grounding in Jesus Christ. Right now, at

this moment in our lives and in the Church's history, God is calling us to something more. Right now, you have an opportunity to change lives and bring your teens into a relationship that will last forever. Don't lose sight of that responsibility, don't lose hope, don't lose faith, don't lose patience. We are right there with you.

"Faith is taking the first step, even when you don't see the whole staircase." - Martin Luther King, Jr.