

Teens and Parents

Pray It! Study It! Live It![™] resources
offer a holistic approach to learning, living, and passing on the Catholic faith.

Dedication

This book is dedicated to all the families of the young people I have worked with over the years . . . parents who trusted me with their sons and daughters . . . parents who journeyed with me as my own faith grew . . . parents who kept encouraging me, especially when my life took some unexpected turns. I did my best to teach your children, but I am quite sure I learned more from them than they ever learned from me. Naturally, I also learned from you. Thank you.

Continued blessings to:

- St. Bede Parish and Maxwell Air Force Base, in Montgomery, Alabama
- St. Stephen Parish in Saginaw, Michigan
- St. Leo Parish, St. Mary Cathedral Parish, and the Diocese of Grand Island, in Nebraska
- Our Lady of Lourdes Parish, The House of Peace, and the Archdiocese of Milwaukee, in Wisconsin

“I want you to know, beloved, that what has happened to me has actually helped to spread the gospel” (Philippians 1:12, NRSV).

Author Acknowledgments

Thank you, Mom!

God loves nothing so much as the person who lives with wisdom.

She is more beautiful than the sun, and excels every constellation of the stars.
(Wisdom 7:28–29, NRSV)

Thank you, Leif Kehrwald and Fr. Bob Stamschror!

I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. (Philippians 1:3–5, NRSV)

Thank you, Bishop Ken Untener!

Go in peace, daughter, and may I hear a good report about you as long as I live.
(Tobit 10:12, NRSV)

Teens and Parents

Sessions for Growing in Faith Together

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Introduction

Leif Kehrwald had this to say about parents of young people when he served as a youth minister in the late 1970s and early 1980s: “[Parents should] drive, bake cookies, and write checks when we need money, but otherwise get lost. We know teenagers better than you do” (*Youth Ministry and Parents*, p. 18).

After some years of experience, Leif changed his opinion:

It never occurred to me that parents could be our partners in fulfilling our vision of evangelization and faith formation for those kids. It’s no secret that parents are crucial to the faith formation of their children and teens; therefore I contend that parents are crucial to effective youth ministry efforts. Put quite simply a working partnership with parents will yield a substantially more vibrant and effective youth ministry program. (P. 18)

You likely do not share Leif’s original, negative opinion about parents; if you did, you probably wouldn’t have chosen this book. I don’t share it either; if I did, I probably wouldn’t have written this book. And naturally, Leif himself no longer subscribes to it; if he did, he probably wouldn’t have edited this book!

Knowing that parents and youth ministers must be partners in the evangelization and faith formation of young people is one thing; applying that understanding to our ministry is another. How do we reflect this partnership in our programming? This book can help your parish take its first steps.

Practical

This book is a practical guide for effective family programming—that is, youth ministry sessions with teens and parents together. This is a how-to book. (For a good resource to explain why this family-based approach is so important, I recommend *Youth Ministry and Parents: Secrets for a Successful Partnership*, by Leif Kehrwald [Winona, MN: Saint Mary’s Press, 2004].)

Flexible

This book is also a flexible guide, as it can be used several ways. It contains five parish sessions, each with its own follow-up home session, and a separate teen-parent prayer service. You can implement the five sessions just as they are. You can offer the parish sessions every other week or monthly, asking the participants to complete each home session during the off week or shortly after the corresponding parish session.

You can also use the parish sessions as stand-alone gatherings for teens and parents. You might use the five parish sessions on five different nights throughout the year, effectively creating a “series” for the participants. The home sessions are optional.

From a seasonal perspective, you can use two of the parish sessions during Advent, two during Lent, and the final parish session and the prayer service at the end of the summer as a send-off experience for parents and their college- or career-bound sons and daughters.

Each parish session consists of several sections, and the sections consist of several activities, any or all of which you can use as stand-alone pieces. If you don't want to use this program in its entirety, I encourage you to use bits and pieces of it in different ways. Almost all parishes have programs that eventually involve both teens and their parents, and bits and pieces of this program may tie in nicely with those programs.

For example, you might have a meeting with parents as a kickoff for your program for Confirmation preparation. Or as a kickoff for the school year, you might plan a gathering of parents for a general “welcome back families” night. You can use any of the prayer experiences or teen-parent activities from the parish sessions in meetings like those. You can also use the activities and prayers in an RCIA program, if you have any families with teens. Many of the activities are general enough that they would work with adults of all ages.

The one-page prayers from the home sessions are appropriate in a variety of settings—from youth-group meetings to faith formation session openers to parish committee meetings.

Structure of the Parish Sessions

This book is a PRAY IT! STUDY IT! LIVE IT! resource that offers a holistic approach to learning, living, and passing on the Catholic faith. Each parish session has a STUDY IT! section, a PRAY IT! section, and a LIVE IT! section. Therefore, if you use the sessions exactly as they are written, you will provide formation (STUDY IT!), a prayer experience (PRAY IT!), and an overview for how the participants can take the theme of the session even deeper into their lives after the session ends (LIVE IT!).

You will mostly likely hold the parish sessions in a parish hall, meeting room, or large classroom. You or someone you work with in parish ministry will facilitate the sessions and serve as the program coordinator. For the purposes of this manual, I will assume that you are taking on the role of program coordinator.

Each parish session is structured in the following way:

1. STUDY IT!
 - opening activity
 - main content
 - snack break
 - going deeper
2. PRAY IT!
 - transition and explanation
 - prayer experience
3. LIVE IT!
 - overview of home session
 - informal organizing of families into groups for home session

If done in its entirety, a parish session will last between 140 minutes and 220 minutes, depending on how much time you want to spend. Recommended times and more detailed explanations of the session breakdown are offered in the paragraphs that follow.

Study It!

This is the longest part of a parish session. If you conduct all the activities included in this section, moving them along at a good clip, you will need 100 minutes. If you want to extend the conversation time, you should plan for upwards of 150 minutes. You may decide to skip some of the activities to shorten the time, depending on what your schedule allows.

Opening Activity (20–30 minutes)

Prepare the opening activity and have it ready to go on tables before the teens and parents begin gathering in the meeting space. It will give them something to do right away and will minimize the sometimes awkward “waiting around for things to start” moments. As the participants wander in, get them involved, chat about the activity, bring several families together in conversation, and then move on to other families that are just arriving. Take time to review the activity and hear from everyone before you introduce the main content of the session.

Hospitality is key. In addition to your own welcoming presence, involve a few other volunteers with the ministry of hospitality—greeting, showing people to tables, inviting them to have something to eat and drink (snacks are important!), and explaining the activity handouts on the tables.

Main Content (50–75 minutes)

As you probably expected, this is the part where you introduce the main content of the session. Think of yourself not as a master teacher but rather as a broker of specific information and a coordinator of the process. In many ways, the teens and their parents will teach each other by the stories they tell, the questions and answers they provide, and the insights they share.

The method for conducting this section varies with each session, but it is always engaging, including large-group activities, small-group activities, discussion within actual family groups, and discussion within mixed family groups (for example, two teens and two parents, all from different families).

Snack Break (10–15 minutes)**Going Deeper (20–30 minutes)**

This section provides a chance to talk about further application of the information, knowledge, and skills explored up to this point. It involves ways to go deeper personally, as well as ways to go deeper as a family unit.

Pray It!

This section will take at least 20 minutes, but you could easily extend it to 30 minutes.

Transition and Explanation (5–10 minutes)

This is just a quick transition that sets the mood for the prayer experience. You can move to a different space to enhance the transition, or you can make the transition mentally and emotionally by just reviewing the theme of the prayer and helping the participants prepare to pray.

Prayer Experience (15–20 minutes)

The prayer follows a traditional format with four movements:

1. **Call to Prayer.** Lighting a candle, making the sign of the cross, and so on.
2. **Word.** Reading from the Scriptures and reflecting.
3. **Ritual.** Participating in a symbolic activity that demonstrates deeper meaning of the Word.
4. **Closing.** Sending forth or blessing.

Live It!**Overview of Home Session (10–20 minutes)**

The LIVE IT! part of the parish session provides an overview of what the families will do in their follow-up home session. The first time you explain this to the participants, it may take about twenty minutes, because families are probably not used to getting together for spiritual sharing. But after your initial explanation, the

LIVE IT! part of each parish session will probably take only 10 minutes to complete. All you will be doing is distributing the handouts and reviewing what the home session will be like.

Informal Organizing of Families into Groups for Home Session (10–20 minutes)

After your overview of the home session, the families will need time to gather in small clusters, according to friendships or geographic neighborhood locations.

It's best for the participants to gather in clusters of three or four families. Larger clusters make sharing more difficult. Even two large families can be enough if the number of participants totals four or five teens and four parents.

Facilitate this process at the first parish session or at a family orientation meeting (more about this later). Grouping families may be somewhat challenging; teens and parents may experience some initial awkwardness as they confer and then invite others to join them. Some families might feel ignored because their sons or daughters do not have many friends in the parish or because they are new to the area. You might provide a handout with a basic diagram of your geographic area, with your parish in the center. Write in the names of the families in places that roughly correspond to the locations of their homes—either north, south, east, or west of the parish. The handout will provide a starting point for those families who don't know where to begin.

Structure of the Home Sessions

Each home session involves using at least three handouts: (1) a process handout that outlines what happens during the home session, (2) the prayer, and (3) the optional report and wrap-up handout, which the families can fill out during the home session and then return to you, the program coordinator.

The home sessions are much more enjoyable if they take place at someone's home and a meal is provided, either by families taking turns or by each family bringing a dish to pass. The meal builds community and provides a comfortable atmosphere for faith sharing.

Each home session is structured in the following way:

1. STUDY IT!
 - share and discuss
2. PRAY IT!
 - read a prayer
3. LIVE IT!
 - share and discuss
4. Report and Wrap-Up (optional)
 - reflect and plan

If done in its entirety, a home session will last between 45 and 105 minutes, depending on how much time the families want to spend. Recommended times and a more detailed explanation of the home session breakdown are offered in the paragraphs that follow.

Study It!

The STUDY IT! section of the home session usually involves some preparation.

Share and Discuss (20–60 minutes)

Each participant comes to the home session prepared to share something—a life experience, a question he or she tried to answer, or a topic he or she researched. The participants share in mixed groups, the teens discussing things with the adults who are not their parents.

A chatty group of families could go on for an hour; a group that is more shy might be finished in 20 minutes. It really depends on the personalities of the folks involved and how comfortable they feel. It's also true that initial meetings do not last as long as subsequent meetings; the more often a group of families meets, the less awkward everyone feels.

Pray It!

The PRAY IT! part of the home session involves a simple prayer, one that is short enough to fit on one side of a piece of paper but unusual enough to keep the attention of a young person.

Read a Prayer (5 minutes)

Determine which teens and which parents are willing to be readers, and assign each person a section of the prayer to read. This part of the home session takes no longer than 5 minutes.

Live It!

The LIVE IT! section of the home session involves a discussion in family groups about an issue raised by the prayer and how it relates to the initial conversations in mixed groups.

Share and Discuss (10–20 minutes)

Families gather together and share something from their discussion, such as a family decision or personal insight or something funny someone said. Whatever the participants want to share is the right thing to share, as long as they do so with respect and care.

Report and Wrap-Up

This optional part of the home session will give you an idea of how well the home sessions are going.

Reflect and Plan (10–20 minutes)

Someone serves as a recorder while the teens and parents complete these sentence starters, which are provided on a handout:

- Something I now understand is . . .
- Something that surprised me is . . .
- Something I am going to do from now on is . . .

Someone from the family group takes responsibility to either send in the report and wrap-up sheet or bring it to the next parish session.

How to Get Families to Participate

This is not the typical way faith reflection and formation is done in parishes—no doubt about it. But maybe it should be. Teens open up better in a setting with their friends, and parents begin to network more with other parents once these friendships are formed. Some teens who would never want to pray or talk about spiritual matters with their parents at home will do so more willingly in a setting with other teens they know and like.

So how can you start such a unique program? Here are some strategies.

Word of Mouth

Start talking about this program with teens and parents you think might be most interested. Ask each family to invite one or two other families. Don't be afraid to start with a small group of families. You might even do a test session with a cluster of families you know well and are comfortable with. Try both a parish session and a follow-up home session. Because of the relationships already built in, you will likely have a very positive experience with this test. The people who try it and like it can become your parish spokespeople—both the teens and the parents!

Announcements

Announce the start of this new program when the parish announces all other programs—at Mass, in the bulletin, at parent meetings, at youth meetings, and so on. If you call it a pilot project, it will sound more interesting, and both you and the families will feel less pressure to succeed right away. Families are more forgiving when they understand they are part of an experiment.

Introduction to an Alternative Program

You can use these sessions as an introduction to a new family faith formation program, a program that is an alternative to traditional faith formation classes. Once you have tested all five sessions, you will understand this model and how it works. With a little bit of imagination and creativity, you will be able to take any textbook series and reformat the content to fit the model of a teen-parent session.

I know of at least one parish that has done exactly that. The youth ministry coordinator at this parish offered a traditional faith formation program as well as a family-based model. At first, only about 20 percent of the families in the parish chose the family-based model. But now, just a few years later, 80 percent of the families are participating in the family-based model, and only 20 percent are still participating in the more traditional program. Think of the difference it will make if 80 percent of your parents attend faith formation sessions along with their sons and daughters!

Family Orientation Meeting

Hold a short, informative meeting so that families can learn about the program, particularly the home sessions, before they sign up. Families may come as established clusters, or as “free agents” looking for a match.

Have some snacks and beverages available so the environment is comfortable. Ask some of your ambassadors, those who attended and enjoyed the test session, to talk about why they like the program and why they recommend it. Review the two parts of the program, the parish sessions and the home sessions, and let the teens and parents ask questions.

Provide the dates of the parish sessions, and give the family clusters the option of scheduling all their home sessions ahead of time, or doing them on a month-by-month basis.

Closing Prayer

In addition to the five parish sessions and their corresponding home sessions, a special prayer service designed specifically for high school seniors and their parents is included in the program (see appendix B). You can use this prayer with families that have teens who are preparing to graduate high school and move on to college, jobs, or travel.

Taken as a whole, or in bits and pieces, you will find this program to be practical, flexible, and family-friendly. That’s just how all of our parish programming should be.

As the basic community of believers, bound in love to one another, the family is the arena in which the drama of redemption is played out. The dying and rising with Christ is most clearly manifested. Here, the cycle of sin, hurt, reconciliation, and healing is lived out over and over again. In family life is found the church of the home: where each day, “two or three are gathered” in the Lord’s name; where the hungry are fed; where the thirsty are given drink; where the sick are comforted. It is in the family that the Lord’s injunction to forgive “seventy times seven” is lived out in the daily reconciliation of husband, wife, parent, child, grandparent, brothers, sisters, extended kin.¹ (Ad Hoc Committee on Marriage and Family Life, *A Family Perspective in Church and Society*, p. 22)