*This new monthly series looks at the many programs that are financially supported by the Diocesan Services Appeal in the Diocese of Palm Beach. Donations to the DSA stay local, financing 47 Catholic initiatives within our five counties. The funding protects the most vulnerable among us, from the unborn child to the elderly, provides food for those who are hungry, sustains our Catholic schools, supports seminarians preparing for the priesthood and much more. The first installment in the series explores youth ministry.*

WILLIAM CONE of the Florida Catholic staff

PALM BEACH GARDENS – Faced with the challenge of figuring out how to reverse the exodus of young people from the church, Catholic leaders are exploring new models of ministry. A centerpiece of their efforts “is to recognize that the young church is not the future, but the church of today, and they need us now – today, more than ever,” said Andy Baker, youth and young adult ministry coordinator for the Diocese of Palm Beach.

“Young people, by virtue of their own baptism and sacraments, are fully initiated Catholics, and as so, have every right and responsibility that every Catholic has,” he said. “And so, at the parish level, we need to recognize the importance of their participation and help them fulfill their baptismal promises.”

Since being hired a year and a half ago, Baker has been working on changing the way parishes view youth ministry. He is especially alarmed by the statistics showing that about 80 percent of Catholic youth leave the church after the sacrament of confirmation.

However, by focusing on the needs of youth through relational ministry, welcoming and helping them feel like they belong to their parish community, he firmly believes that those statistics can be turned around.

The top two reasons young people give for stepping away from their faith community are that they lack a sense of belonging to the parish and they were unable to find a committed adult mentor, someone who could walk with them and help address their questions and doubts.

Baker has learned the pitfalls of creating a blanket policy for youth ministry because every parish in the diocese’s five counties is different.

“Every parish is unique and has its own culture and traditions,” he said. “Therefore, our vision for ministry has to be flexible, so that every parish can use our diocesan vision to create a unique parish-based vision for youth that focuses on relational ministry as a cornerstone.”

With that in mind, Baker will be working with all of the parishes in the diocese, and has connected with nearly half in the past year to begin or enhance youth ministry. About seven parishes are in a six-month to one-year discernment process to examine their unique situation.

The process is steeped in prayer and requires the commitment of the pastor and ministry leaders, he said. It includes the recruitment of a team, discernment of mentors, building relationships with parents and learning from teens how the church can meet their needs. Working directly with parishes, Baker said, they aim to answer the question, “How do we build a culture for youth and families in this parish?”

The parish that is one of the furthest along in the discernment process is Holy Name of Jesus in West Palm Beach. Gina-Marie Loree, director of faith formation and youth ministry, said they began working on changing their youth ministry before Baker started in his position. But he has increased their momentum and articulated a vision for improvements, she said.

For example, Holy Name has transitioned to a small-group ministry, with about 22 adult mentors leading groups of eight to 12 teens. Still in the early stages of development, with two adults leading each group, Loree said the program has begun to grow.

“The small groups meet every one to two weeks, and we’re trying to develop large-group ministry from that as well, meaning more social events for the whole group as we can,” she said, acknowledging a few complications due to the pandemic.

Loree said Baker came to Holy Name several times last summer to talk to a group of adults who were interested in growing the parish’s youth ministry. He gave them the inspiration for how to do that with three words: Belong, Believe, Become.

“Building relationships with our youth first, meeting immediate needs with mentors sharing deeply their Christian witness so that they know they belong to the parish,” she said. “Through Belong, young people come to Believe in Jesus Christ and the truths of our Catholic faith, which ultimately results in them Becoming missionary disciples.

“By bringing that model to us, what he was able to do was help us, Holy Name, take what we wanted to do and take it to the next level,” Loree said.

She said one of the mentors asked her recently about the program’s next steps. Her response was to tell the woman that her hope is the young people will stay beyond confirmation. Loree explained that the same mentors will stay with the teens through 10th, 11th and 12th grades, with more adult leaders needed to take on the younger teens.

The goal is to get young people into the program earlier, preferably about sixth grade, and keep them engaged through high school, she said.

“Will it take us a long time to get there? Maybe, probably. But it’s something that we’re working toward,” Loree said.

She is grateful for help from Baker and the diocese to get Holy Name’s youth ministry moving forward.

“I don’t think we would be here had it not been for their push because I really think it helped to have their backing,” Loree said. Diocesan support helped convince her pastor, Father Antony Pulikal, that they were headed in the right direction, she said.

Baker said that’s all part of his efforts to build relationships in parishes “with boots on the ground.” Gaining the trust of those who are the main stakeholders is a huge part of his work.

“My ministry is to the ministers of the parish,” he said.

His job is helping parishes see the need for youth and young adult ministry, and then accompany them toward active ministry. Besides administrative duties, Baker’s ministry has a spiritual component, helping parish youth and young adult ministry leaders stay connected to their faith.

“I want to make sure they are spiritually fed and ready to take on the challenges of parish ministry,” he said.

*Thanks to the generosity of Diocesan Services Appeal donors, powerful youth ministry is supported by the Diocese of Palm Beach. The faithful’s participation in the appeal is a vital part of the diocese’s ability to provide these services. For more information about the diocese’s youth and young adult ministry, contact Baker at* *jbaker@diocesepb.org* *or* *561-775-9559**. For details on the DSA and how to donate, go to* [*www.diocesepb/DSA*](http://www.diocesepb/DSA)*.*