

Mentoring Youth for Ministry

Kate Cuddy

In your role in the parish, you might assist members of the choir in developing their musical skills and help them interpret liturgical pieces. Or perhaps you are responsible for forming and coordinating the readers, extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion, and hospitality ministers. You may bring members of these groups together periodically to delve deeper into their ministry, study the Scriptures, and to pray.

More than likely, though, you are doing much more in your position, whether it is paid or volunteer, than facilitating individuals in their ministry. If you are forming liturgical ministers and nurturing talents and skills, surely you also act as a mentor to those you guide. Mentors help others find their direction by providing advice, sharing knowledge and experiences, and teaching in a way that helps individuals discover their talents and skills. Some of our efforts as mentors are conscious, such as when we steer a person to a liturgical document to help them understand a liturgical principle. At other times, we are mentoring when we are unaware we are doing so. When we are cooperating, providing insights, and listening to others on the pastoral team, the liturgy committee, or in liturgical ministry, our mentees are taking in our interactions. They are learning the value of collaboration and respect for others. It is important to reflect periodically on how we mentor those we serve and assess our strengths in this area. It is especially important for us to consider the ways in which we serve as mentors for young people. As we mentor them in a ministry, we could be forming a lifelong liturgical minister.

MAKING A PROFOUND DIFFERENCE

When I look back on my life, I am grateful for those who mentored me in the areas of music and ministry. My first, and perhaps most profound, mentor was my high school band director, who affirmed my musicianship as a talented thirteen-year-old novice. His belief in my ability to grow in competence and confidence filled me with awe. With his assistance, the others in the band and I learned by doing and achieved competence in areas because he raised the bar for us. The experiences I had as a teenager with him and others like him are, undoubtedly, part of the reason that I wanted to teach and walk side by side with young people. As a working weekend musician, Jack was a great model for us, provided us with opportunities and challenges, and seemed to enjoy the time spent with us. We were encouraged to practice every day, and many thousands of hours later, I still practice daily.

I am astonished at the number of people who have mentored me in various parts of my career. In my twenties, an arranger/producer taught me the importance of sight reading and a blended vocal sound as I began a career that included playing and singing in the recording studio. Within the same decade, three loving individuals taught me so much about the musical



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When we encourage and affirm, youth will feel more at ease in ministry.

prayer of the Catholic liturgy. Through the decades, I have sat at the table with learned colleagues who came together as staff to break open the Word. I will always be grateful for their presence, wisdom, and witness in my life.

Some of the mentors in my life did so as natural teachers and others as interested and supportive friends. Some came into my life as gifts of light whose witness was so strong and powerful that I could not be unaffected by their presence, goodness, and spirituality. It is important that liturgical ministers are open to their role as mentors and recognize the mentors they have encountered. If you have not done so, you may want to take some time to reflect on who encouraged you in ministry and how they did so.

David Haas, composer and founder of Music Ministry Alive, has pointed out the factors needed for an individual to be a good mentor. He has noted that a mentor is interested in what can be done for someone else. A true mentor, he said, is willing to be present and available, possesses both knowledge and wisdom, is a good listener, and can provide direction and help others identify their dreams.

THE POWER OF AFFIRMATION

Through my years of teaching and directing choirs, I have known some wonderful young people. Many of them came to trust me and understood that I believed in them. Since I have been blessed with many invitations to share music at events, I desired to provide opportunities for young people that would bring them to believe in their worth. But providing a venue for young people to minister is not what makes a difference in their lives. Talent and skill are nurtured through a mentor's care.

The importance of encouraging and affirming young people came back to me in a flood of memories recently when I accompanied a vocal music teacher and her students to a regional competition. I specifically remembered my approach with a group of young people I directed who were given the opportunity to lead the

music at a Mass in a large hotel ballroom during a conference. For that Mass, we sang a Leon Roberts' piece that many would have deemed too difficult for teens to learn, a Marty Haugen song, and an anthem. At a rehearsal prior to that Mass, I faced a challenge when some of the students lost focus during a visit from an individual from the Office of Worship. In addressing the situation, I used humor and observation—just as an earlier mentor had done for my peers and me. I told several of the young people that they looked like the earnest ball player who had just been benched and then I explained how portraying surrender and attentiveness to the liturgy helps others do the same. The students took these words to heart and modeled participation in the liturgy as they sang the prelude and the Mass.

It is easy to forget the power of affirmation. When I spoke to those students in a positive way, they were encouraged in their ministry, maintained their dignity, and prayerfully sang during the liturgy. I witnessed a similar transformation at the competition that I attended with my friend. One of the students was a large young man with an incredible voice who seemed uncomfortable in his skin. When the performance was over, and the clinician began to work with the group, I whispered to him that I was impressed with his falsetto. Once he absorbed that compliment, he stood taller and the tension left his body. He smiled and sang his heart out from that moment on. Those of us in leadership roles need to consider how a few encouraging words can lead individuals to own their strengths. Affirming this young man's gifts did not cost me any time or trouble, and yet, for years, it may benefit this man and those who encounter his music. We should ask ourselves how often we provide positive feedback to those in our care.

As liturgical leaders and mentors, it is essential that we realize the importance of connecting with and committing to those we are forming in ministry. These connections can be made in large and small groups as well as on a one-on-one basis. Our commitment to our fellow ministers will nourish a sense of belonging in them and will help them to be open to our enthusiasm for their talents as well as our affirming and challenging words.

Our work as mentors to young people can shape a philosophy of life and spirituality. Often, we hear that mentors can form leaders, but just as valuable is forming individuals to be team players. Those you mentor watch as you interact with the pastor and parish staff, other liturgical ministers, and members of the liturgy committees. All who serve as mentors need to ask themselves if they are cooperative, if they are receptive listeners, if they treat others with dignity.

We will make a difference in the ministries of young people as we issue personal invitations to ministerial gatherings. An invitation can help a young person feel more at ease with a group of proclaimers who are breaking open the Word, a diocesan gathering of music ministers, or a session exploring a liturgical document. Often, young people have many commitments but reaching out to them may help them make the ministerial gathering a priority.

Affirming contributions and making ourselves accessible is important to young people. They will especially be encouraged when we listen to their stories and share both in their laughter and sorrow. I have spent time on the phone with a young woman grappling with questions the night before her Confirmation, and

with my students, prepared the funeral liturgy of their friend. Over the years, I have had many opportunities to share with young people the magic I believe they possess when they take leadership roles in the liturgy. Sometimes I fleshed this out by pointing out how many people who feel broken come to Mass seeking healing and what a difference their heartfelt song or reading can make. I have sought to help them understand that, in their ministries of hospitality, proclaiming the Word, as an extraordinary minister, or in song, they are Christ to others. Often, the youth will come to know this as members of the assembly tell them what a difference their ministry makes.

Such affirmations can come easily to the mentor who is vulnerable enough to compliment ministers. It is harder to be honest about areas that need improvement with those we mentor. Still, honesty is important if individuals are to improve. In approaching a difficult subject, whether it deals with focus, pedagogy, or communication, we need to remember that the main task of a mentor is to lift others up. A way of doing this while confronting difficult areas is to begin by affirming the individual. That affirmation can ease a discussion about a challenging area. If you have ever observed clinicians at a music contest, their discussion moves from strengths to reflecting on areas that could be improved. As mentors to liturgical ministers, we support individuals as they consider how they can serve God and the assembly more faithfully. While considering the effects of a mentor, we may want to ask the following questions:

What if our observation is the first time someone has felt truly recognized?

What if our affirmation puts to rest issues at home that were having a negative effect on outlook and attitude?

What if our acceptance was a gift beyond imagining?

What if our passion for our topic was catching?

What if being able to laugh at ourselves helped another understand perspective?

As you reflect on these questions, you may well realize that your observations could be the first ones that have affirmed a young person's gift. The comments a leader in a liturgical ministry offers may assure an individual who has doubts. Attitudes can change and perspectives can be renewed. ♦

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