

What Is a Code of Ethics and How Do Youth Ministry Leaders Use It?

The National Federation for Catholic Youth Ministry (NFCYM) developed and approved a Code of Ethics for use by all youth ministry leaders. This Code of Ethics should be used to educate those working with youth, their families, and church about acceptable behavior and ethical standards. A code of ethics is one of the ways sociologists (at least) decide whether or not a particular occupation is a formal profession or not¹. As Catholics, we have a natural code of ethics in the Ten Commandments, the Beatitudes and the precepts of the church. As lay ecclesial ministers serving as youth ministry leaders our Code of Ethics formalizes our commitment to the young people, their families, and the church we serve. It is in the signing of this code that lay ecclesial ministers advocate professionalism within their field and the church and show unity within their behavior codes while working with young people.

“The very exercise of developing a code is in itself worthwhile; it forces a large number of people . . . to think through in a fresh way their mission and the important obligations they as a group and as individuals have with respect to society as a whole.”²

The Code of Ethics for Youth Ministry Leaders was developed in 2003 by the NFCYM to accompany the *National Certification Standards for Lay Ecclesial Ministers* at the request of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' Commission on Certification and Accreditation. This Code of Ethics gives us a beginning point from which to seek an integration of our faith, our ministry, and our life. The standards and competencies work to bring professionalism to the field of youth ministry; the Code of Ethics promotes faithful, competent, and accountable lay ecclesial ministry. This Code of Ethics may be used in conjunction with existing diocesan policies, protocols or codes; it is not intended to supersede them.

As Catholic youth ministry leaders our Code of Ethics allows us to profess the dignity and sanctity of all individuals, define acceptable behavior, and establish a benchmark for self-evaluation. The Code is divided into seven sections, each calling us to live out in both words and actions our role as lay ecclesial ministers to the young church.

- **Ministerial Role:** This section defines our role as ministers, to work collaboratively, to represent the teaching of the Catholic Church faithfully, to be competent leaders through education and training, and to respect the diversity and spiritualities within the faith community.
- **Inclusion:** This section recognizes the dignity of each person, calls us to serve all people without regard to gender, creed, national origin, age, sexual orientation, marital status, socioeconomic status or political beliefs, and ensures that all persons have access to the resources, services, and opportunities they require with particular regard for persons with special needs or disabilities.
- **Accountability:** This section looks at the youth leader's accountability to the pastor, or duly appointed representative under the authority of the diocese/bishop, to serve the faith

¹ <http://www.fastmpr.com/CODEST.HTM> Patricia Parsons M.Sc.,A.P.R. is Associate Professor and Past Chairman of the Public Relational degree program at Mount Saint Vincent University.

² DeGeorge, Richard T. *Military Ethics: A Code of Ethics for Officers*. Washington: National Defense University Press, 1987

community by carrying out their ministerial functions, and to exercise stewardship and integrity in all matters placed in their trust.

- Confidentiality: This section calls youth leaders to respect privacy while also understanding and supporting the legal and moral rights of parents, and the role of civil and ecclesial law in reporting neglect, abuse, or physical harm.
- Conduct: This section reminds us the power inherent in our ministerial position and therefore our need to respect the ministerial relationship, maintain appropriate professional boundaries, and model healthy and positive behavior.
- Referral and Intervention: This section obligates us to be aware of the signs of physical, sexual and psychological abuse and neglect—while knowing our limitation with respect to paraprofessional counseling—and our responsibility to make appropriate referrals and/or reports to civil and ecclesial authorities by following policy and procedure for reporting abuse, suspected abuse, or neglect.
- Parish/Diocesan Policies: This section makes us aware that we must comply with all applicable parish, organizational and/or diocesan policies with special attention to sexual misconduct, safety, transportation, parental permission, and medical emergency policies.

How are We Called to Use this Code of Ethics?

This Code of Ethics serves as an awareness tool for all who work with young people and their families. The code establishes a framework for professional behavior and responsibilities that let both the church and community know that we care about and protect our young people and strive to impart our Catholic faith with professionalism. These suggestions are a starting point for how this Code of Ethics could be used.

Some Practical Suggestions for Using the Code of Ethics

- Use the Code of Ethics as a model for writing your own parish or diocesan code of ethics.
- Adopt this code as your parish or diocesan code of ethics.
- Revise your current parish or diocesan code as necessary to incorporate any points not already covered by your code.
- Use this code along side of your own parish or diocesan code.
- Develop and conduct regular “prohibitive behaviors” or “appropriate behaviors” workshops for all those working with youth in your parish or diocese. At the end of the workshop, have each participant sign and date this Code of Ethics (or other similar existing parish or diocesan code) and place it in their volunteer or professional ministry personnel file.
- Incorporate training on various points of the Code of Ethics into your regular parish or diocesan workshops or training sessions on an ongoing basis.
- Include the Code of Ethics in a parish or diocesan youth ministry handbook to be given to parents and youth ministry leaders in your parish or youth ministry leaders in your diocese.

The National Federation for Catholic Youth Ministry strongly recommends that all lay ecclesial ministers serving as youth ministry leaders, regardless of their employment status within the church, adopt this code (or other similar existing parish or diocesan code) by signing, dating, and placing it in their personnel file at the parish, organization, or diocese

where they minister. It is important to note that lay ecclesial ministers are both paid and volunteer ministers working under many titles and roles who practice ministry with our young church. This Code of Ethics should be available to all persons working with youth as a sign of unity and dedication to the protection and dignity of both individuals and the larger church.

A copy of the *Code of Ethics for Youth Ministry Leaders* is attached to this article. Please take the time to read it, share it with all others that work in youth ministry, sign it, and place it in your personnel file.

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