

Constantly connected but not belonging, youth can find answers in faith

It's a rapidly changing world for young people – where anxieties, apathy and social isolation abound.

Fostering a relationship with God in the midst of that can be a daunting task, but it's one the Western Canadian Association of Catholic Youth Ministers is set on addressing.

“Youth is a time where you're confused about life, your identity and sometimes it feels like you don't have anywhere to turn to,” 22-year-old youth minister Alicia Chichak said at the association's annual gathering in Edmonton's Providence Renewal Centre, Jan. 16-19.

“So much of youth ministry is creating a space where young people can just get together and talk, to be that safe space for them where they can experience comfort, be who they are and work through their struggles. Through that, they also come closer to God.”

It's a view shared by the 28 youth ministers from Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba at the gathering. Others from B.C. and the Northwest Territories also took part in the conference via video chat.



Youth ministers and diocesan representatives discuss strategies and plans to make youth ministry relevant to young people today. Kyle Greenham, Grandin Media

Their main concern was how youth ministry can better tackle the issues young

people face.

In presentations by Rev. Kris Schmidt and author Leah Perrault, the guests noted how attachment to personal devices, a sense of continuous boredom, and a lack of close relationships are rising concerns for youth today.

“When I was young we did know our neighbours. We had extracurricular activities, part-time jobs, set places we would always meet. That is less and less common among young people growing up now,” said Lisa MacQuarrie, coordinator with the office of youth evangelization at the Archdiocese of Edmonton.

“Young people today really struggle with finding places they belong to. Although they are constantly connected to each other by social media, they often lack strong personal friendships and people they feel they can rely on.”



Amber Wsiaki

But these are obstacles that a strong faith can conquer, said Amber Wsiaki, a youth minister at the Parish of Saints-Martyrs-Canadiens in Winnipeg.

“I work with a lot of 12- to 17-year-olds. At that age, church is typically something they have been forced to go to,” she said. “So one thing I’m trying to help them understand is that their faith is ultimately a choice, and it’s one worth choosing.”

“By meeting other young people, hearing their testimonies about how a relationship with God has made them grow as a person, discover who they are and make connections through that experience – they see their faith in a much different light.”



Alicia Chichak

As assistant director for Camp Oselia, a three-week summer camp for young Ukrainian Catholics in Edmonton, Chichak agrees friendships are key to helping young people connect with the Church.

She believes social media can be a tool of evangelization, but only with the support of real world connections made at summer camps or church events.

“Once you have an established community of young Catholics, social media really helps to reinforce it and bring people together,” she said. “But that community has to already be there, otherwise social media is not a helpful resource. Depending on how you use it, it can also be a way to really isolate yourself from others.”

Youth ministry itself has been a source of faith for Chichak, and she hopes the ways her ministry has grown her relationship with God will inspire others.

“I’ve been involved with youth ministry for eight years, and it’s really made me who I am,” she said. “Just realizing that I can help bring people closer to God, be that light of God for others, and help people see and understand God through me – it’s such an honour to be able to do that.”



Braden Kuntz

That sentiment was common among many of the youth ministers. It was his own experience at a Catholic camp in Regina that led 28-year-old Braden Kuntz to begin his career in youth ministry.

“The first time I attended the leadership camp run by the Archdiocese of Regina

really changed my life,” said Kuntz, who now works in the Archdiocese of Regina’s office of youth ministry. “Being at camp, surrounded by people who loved and cared for me unconditionally – at a time in my life where I felt really unlovable – it had a profound impact on me.

“After the experience I decided my life needed to be different. I wanted to do everything I could to ensure no young person ever went through struggles alone. It’s a lofty goal, but it’s what’s kept me going these past seven years.”

Since its founding 30 years ago, the Western Canadian Association of Catholic Youth Ministers has grown to include 22 dioceses and more than 100 members. When asked the greatest benefit to their annual gathering, all the ministers agreed – it’s the sense of community that it brings them.



Archdiocese of Regina youth ministers Braden Kuntz (left), and Chelsea Dumontier discuss budget and strategy plans at the Western Canadian Association of Catholic Youth Ministers. Kyle Greenham, Grandin Media

“If you’re working in a parish by yourself, it’s easy to feel alone,” said Kuntz. “Coming to something like this, you meet other people in this field and we can share in the challenges and the joys of doing this work.”

“Some of my closest friends I’ve met through this organization. Some are no longer here, but I still feel at home.”