

Youth ministry offers new digital connections for isolated teens

Emilie Spak's weekly routine was upended by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Her piano lessons, karate lessons, visits with friends and trips to the gym have all been postponed by precautions against the coronavirus. The one constant Spak still has is her youth group at St. Thomas More Parish, giving the 17-year-old some much needed faith and familiarity in these uncertain times.



Emilie Spak

"It's great that I still have this to rely on," said Spak, who has been a part of the youth group, alongside 14 other teens, for three years. Instead of gathering at the church, the group now meets in an online video chat every Sunday to discuss faith and to pray together.

"It's helped me stay strong in my faith life. There are a lot of things that could have encouraged me to fall away, but having this weekly group with friends, who I can share this part of my life, with has really kept me strong."

While public Mass is suspended and events are cancelled, the 25 youth ministers in the Edmonton Archdiocese are doing their part to keep young Catholics connected to their faith and to each other.

"I've been having a lot more conversations with students who want to know God better," said Jeanette Manser, youth ministry coordinator with Red Deer

Catholic Schools. "Some are feeling down and lonely at this time. One girl joined us for our livestreamed Mass last week who said she rarely attends Mass. But she was feeling very down because of the pandemic, and found tuning in with us really nice and uplifting.

"The kids are definitely missing being together, but there's been blessings in disguise too."

Manser hosts weekly meetings with students on Tuesday and co-hosts a livestreamed Mass for students on Sundays. On her Instagram feed, Manser shares lessons from Alpha, a Catholic catechesis program, and invites students to a weekly livestream of prayer and music. Earlier this month, she hosted an online retreat for students who were preparing for Confirmation at Easter.



Jeanette Manser

As many as 80 students from Grades 7 to 12 have participated in Manser's online events. With many of them cut off from their friends and activities, her students are seeking faith now more than ever.

"We've had a lot of kids that wouldn't normally join my activities in person, because of peer pressure or worries over what friends might think," said Manser. "Because of the pandemic everything else in their lives is not as much of a distraction. It's cool to see them joining together looking for the faith and sense of community this ministry can offer."

Athena Pare, 17, has found comfort, friendship and a deeper faith thanks to Manser's online ministry.

"The group has made me much more comfortable with my faith. Not only to better understand the Mass, but how to make my faith a lifestyle," said Pare, who

attended a weekly youth group at Notre Dame High School in Red Deer before the pandemic.

“Through putting everything online, it’s really helped me fill my days and get through the week. We rarely leave the house right now, so having that time to talk to others and connect with them, it adds some familiarity into our routine that we really need.”



Athena Pare

Online ministry has comforted many students, but it has also presented challenges. Mike Landry says it’s tough to replicate the bonds built through meeting in person.

“When school was open, we had Mass every Tuesday morning. We had Bible studies at lunchtime. People would stop by the chapel to pray and talk. Now I have to try and recreate that experience as much as I can,” said Landry, the youth minister and chaplain with Evergreen Catholic Schools.

“So there’s a sense of loss for me. I can’t get their immediate reactions from the things I share. That feeling of journeying together is not something you can create as strongly online.”

Landry has been working in youth ministry for more than 20 years, and he stepped away from using social media as a primary source until the COVID-19 pandemic forced him to adapt to the digital world. Now he has embraced it.

In the past month Landry has started a TikTok account, and increased his production of weekly videos for his YouTube channel. Landry records short commentaries on the Gospels, livestreams Mass for Holy Trinity Parish in Spruce Grove, and sings praise and worship songs.

Since Landry's ministry went online, he's gained more than 200 YouTube subscribers, 400 Instagram followers and 83 followers on TikTok. He also hopes to start a weekly video chat for students in the future.

Pare agrees it's tough to replicate a sense of community online. She knows many of her peers feel isolated at this time, but she is using that to her advantage.

"I've made sure to keep up with nightly prayer, because there are people in my life who definitely need prayer right now," she said. "What I miss most is hearing people laugh, having the chance to hug them and see them smile. Seeing that online is just not the same. So I decided to start asking others if they need prayers and to pray for me.

"It's definitely another good way to stay connected to our faith."

Correction: This article has been updated to better reflect Mike Landry's use of social media in online ministry