



**CATHOLIC
HOME
MISSIONS**

Expanding Youth Ministry in Montana



Confirmation candidates discern and create personal "Manifesto" banners as part of their retreat.

By Beth Griffin

Any teen can tell you that critical mass is necessary for a fun youth group experience. After all, why would you want to go to yet another activity with the same few kids you see every day at school or sports?

But parishes in mission dioceses are often challenged by demographics and distance to reach the magic number that allows youth participants to find enough variety to be comfortable. The Missoula Youth Ministry Collaborative in Montana is a clever and thoughtful response to the conundrum. Four diverse parishes within a 10-mile radius in the Diocese of Helena developed the Collaborative to support their youth ministry and evangelization efforts. The Collaborative uses local funds and a portion of a Catholic Home Missions grant to the diocese.

Shai LaFleur is the dynamic coordinator of the Collaborative. She arrived in Missoula in 2017 to be the youth minister at St. Anthony Parish. Brian Johnson, now her supervisor and the director of faith formation at St. Francis Xavier Parish in Missoula, says, "Shai's significant skills and commitment to high school youth ministry were evident, and local pastors began to talk about how to retain her and grow her gifts."

While serving at St. Anthony, Shai completed a master's degree in theology from Notre Dame University with help from Catholic Extension. Shai worked with the diocesan director of youth and young adult ministry along with four pastors to develop the multi-parish Collaborative. The former part-time director of youth ministry at one of the parishes stepped aside to facilitate the new approach. He and his teenage children are now among the biggest supporters of the Collaborative.

"We've had a positive response to the Collaborative, and it's easy to understand why," says Shai. "Before this, a parish youth group might have had three or four kids, and you might interact with people from only one other family. Now teens from different schools and parishes can connect."

There is also the element of fun. Shai organizes activities around things participants like to do together outside youth ministry. "We use resources in the community like pumpkin-carving and Easter-egg coloring," she says.

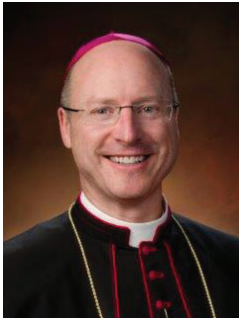
...continued on page 2

Neighbors

ISSUE 3 2021

A QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER FROM MISSION AMERICA

FROM THE CHAIRMAN



Dear Brothers
and Sisters in Christ,

Successful youth ministry requires enthusiastic and imaginative leaders who are able to engage the hearts and minds of the high school age students they serve. This is especially true in Catholic Home Mission-funded dioceses, where small populations and distance can hinder efforts to bring together enough young people to create youth groups

that are engaging and supportive places.

Young people who participate in youth ministry efforts in a lively environment—one in which they experience God’s love through prayer, works of service, and friendship with others—are not only the future of the Church but also current evangelizers and witnesses in their schools, social groups, sports teams, and other extracurricular activities.

In this issue of *Neighbors*, it is a pleasure to introduce you to Shai LaFleur, the coordinator of the Missoula Youth Ministry Collaborative in the Diocese of Helena in Montana. By bringing together youth from four parishes, the Collaborative has become a place where young people from diverse school backgrounds come together for faith formation, spiritual support, and social activities. With both dynamic leadership and enthusiastic young people, the Collaborative community helps strengthen its participants to live and share the Gospel with their peers, friends, and family members.

With the assistance of Catholic Home Missions, the Diocese of Helena’s Missoula Youth Ministry Collaborative is a notable example of successful youth ministry that not only prepares high school youth for Confirmation and serves as a social activity, but truly strengthens them in God’s love and prepares them to be joyful witnesses now and in the future. Your generous support of the Catholic Home Missions Appeal makes inspiring stories like this one possible in dioceses across the country.

Sincerely yours in Christ,

Most Reverend W. Shawn McKnight
Bishop of Jefferson City
Chairman, USCCB Subcommittee on Catholic Home Missions



Making pizzas for the annual Superbowl pizza fundraiser

...continued from page 1

“But we’re not just playing laser tag. We reflect on how these activities glorify God or where we find God in them. It takes a little spiritual muscle work on their part.”

“I’m here to help the teens see how God is in every part of their lives, to ask, ‘How is God in this with you? How can you bring God to others?’” Shai says.

Shai recruits participants with her presence. She shows up at sporting events. She staffs a weekly morning coffee cart at three local public schools and regularly pops into the Catholic high school, often attending Mass or eating lunch with students. She speaks in the parishes.

She also instructs the Confirmation candidates from the parishes in the Collaborative.

“There are so many kids in Missoula who aren’t at the table,” she explains. “We’re open to any kids who want to come, but we’re mostly focused on rooting Catholics in their faith.”

She is not recruiting from the ranks of other groups, but she does reach out to teens who are not in any group at all. “If our group is not a good fit, we urge them to try others,” she says.

“The Missoula Youth Ministry Collaborative gives kids a place to connect, regardless of their parish, school, or other activities. It gives Catholic Missoula a place to connect: the public school quarterback and the homeschooled teen might not meet in another context,” Shai says.

“The Collaborative helps build the Catholic community in Missoula. It’s a sustainable system that is not dependent on a single priest, parish, or family,” she says.

“A lot of kids come here not knowing they have a community that loves them and a God who loves them,”

“A lot of kids come here not knowing they have a community that loves them and a God who loves them. [...] One teen told me [that] when everything else in his world is falling apart, Confirmation class and youth group are his safe spaces.”

Shai says. “One teen told me [that] when everything else in his world is falling apart, Confirmation class and youth group are his safe spaces.”

“It’s amazing for me to see how much the teens have grown in their ability to reflect and in their understanding and confidence that God loves them and [that] they are uniquely made to spread that love to others in a specific way,” she says.

Parents are generally supportive of the Collaborative, even when they are not closely involved with their parish themselves, Shai says. “I have a lot of conversations with them. The kids’ faith inspires them to become more faithful, but there are still obstacles and some can’t make that leap of faith yet. I need to be better at inviting parents into the process.”

Shai helps youth group members connect with a campus parish or Newman Center after they graduate from high school and go on to higher education. “It’s a natural transition for many, and I try to get them plugged into a campus ministry program wherever they are. I try to make sure that each has a buddy, either a student or adult, as a Mass partner, who can hold them accountable or walk to Mass with them,” she says.

“It doesn’t always work out,” she acknowledges, “but a part of this is trusting that you gave them the tools to live and grow in their faith.”

Fr. Pascal Kasanziki, the pastor of St. Anthony’s, says the Collaborative provides a forum to reengage with parents. “We live in a world where sometimes parents have lost their attraction to the Church,” he says. “But when their kids start to engage in youth ministry, it’s an opportunity to reevangelize the parents.”

He also says the program provides pastors an opportunity to collaborate within the deanery and cooperate with the laity. “The laity are the first evangelizers of the youth,” he says. “They live in the neighborhood, they go to events together.”

“The Collaborative brings young

people to engage in the social issues of the Church,” Fr. Pascal says. “Christianity is not just about your relationship with Jesus but your relationship with others, too.”

Jesuit Fr. Craig “HT” Hightower, pastor of St. Francis Xavier Parish, says the Collaborative brings the teens together as one, rather than siloing them into parishes or underscoring rivalries among high schools. He says the activities, such as raking leaves for elderly neighbors, teach students to be participants across the board, and they demonstrate what is possible when parents and teens are willing. HT says commitment to sports teams and school clubs sometimes seems to preclude youth group participation. Nonetheless, he says the consistent presence at Collaborative activities of a standout student athlete from a major team demonstrates to others that engagement is doable. “It eliminates some of the homegrown excuses parents have,” he says.

Because the Catholic community of Missoula includes different expressions of worship, HT says the Collaborative experience is a healthy way for students to see a variety of ways to do things. “Kids raised in one parish can be shocked when they go elsewhere and see Mass celebrated differently. We can show that there are multiple ways of celebrating Mass faithfully and they are all good,” he says.

Shai’s leadership is a strength of the program, HT says. “I don’t have to worry about what theology is being proclaimed. I don’t have to be an omnipresent micromanager. I trust her to balance the charism and theological expressions of four different parishes,” he says.

Fr. Jozef Perehubka, the pastor of St. Ann’s Parish in Bonner, says youth ministry in his parish and its mission are challenged by small numbers. Most parishioners are retirees or seasonal residents. “Shai’s first job was to find the youth and then gather them together,” Fr. Jozef says. The Collaborative is a visible example of the Church’s outreach to youth, he says.

Like so many programs, the Missoula Youth Ministry Collaborative was effectively sidelined during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is now working to restore the engagement and participation it enjoyed during its first three years.

“We are coming out of COVID with a plan, a budget, a commitment to success, an experienced and capable full-time staff, and a lot of optimism about God’s ability to use us to reach youth and families,” Brian says. “I shudder to think where we would be if we had not been consistently investing in high school youth ministry already. Perhaps it would never restart in our community.”

Brian says, “Thanks to Shai and the multi-parish collaboration, I am confident. We have built something very durable here that is important for the good of Catholic youth and families long-term. It’s a sight to behold Shai’s joyful leadership as a lay woman with an MA in theology, in touch with her vocation as a youth minister.”

Bishop Austin Vetter of Helena says, “Catholic Home Missions’ support of Shai’s work helps to build a youth program that strengthens their faith in Christ. It impacts our youth, their families, our parishes, and our priests who need quality help. I’m grateful to Catholic Home Missions, and I know the impact will be a lasting one.”



Students help with yard cleanup for elderly parishioners during our annual Y.E.S. (Youth Engaged in Service) Day



Strengthening the Church at Home

SUBCOMMITTEE ON CATHOLIC HOME MISSIONS

Office of National Collections

United States Conference of Catholic Bishops

3211 Fourth Street NE

Washington, DC 20017-1194

Non-Profit
Organization
U.S. Postage
PAID
Permit No. 61
Hyattsville, MD

ISSUE 3 2021

IN THIS ISSUE



SUBCOMMITTEE ON CATHOLIC HOME MISSIONS

Chairman

Most Rev. W. Shawn McKnight

Members

- Most Rev. Liam Cary
- Most Rev. Thomas A. Daly
- Most Rev. Robert D. Gruss
- Most Rev. Daniel H. Mueggenborg
- Most Rev. John Stowe, OFM Conv
- Most Rev. James A. Tamayo
- Most Rev. Elias Zaidan, MLM

Staff

- Mary Mencarini Campbell
- Kevin Day
- Kenneth Q. Ong
- Elena Baydina

www.usccb.org/home-missions

READ ABOUT HOW

parishes in Missoula, MT, in the Diocese of Helena have responded to the challenge of building a lively and engaging youth outreach program in their mission diocese.

LEARN MORE BY READING

the most recent CHMA Annual Report, past issues of the newsletter, and 2021 promotional materials for examples of CHM's accountability and transparency practices at www.usccb.org/home-missions.

Our work is supported by the annual collection taken up in U.S. parishes. If you missed your parish collection, you may send your donation to: USCCB Office of National Collections | P. O. Box 96278 | Washington, DC 20090-6278. Please make checks payable to USCCB-Catholic Home Missions Appeal.

Copyright © 2021, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Washington, DC. All rights reserved. Photos courtesy of Shailyn LaFleur.

