

BUILDING MINISTRY & YOUTH FORMATION: THE JESUS YOUTH WAY

The Youth in today's world are confronted with a series of challenges – A few of the key challenges are the increasing influence of money, contemporary media, the cyber world, relativism, fundamentalism, identity crisis due to migration, constantly evolving trends and so on. While all of these are challenges no doubt, it is also true that we are witness to the rise of the emergence of youngsters with definite conviction in matters of faith and living a moral life. These are - youngsters who bring a change in their life situations and not succumb to the challenges they face in this modern world they live in. I wish to speak here with a grateful heart about how the Jesus Youth movement has been a blessing through its initiatives in building youth ministry and imparting formation to the laity.

A FEW BASIC PRINCIPLES OF JESUS YOUTH MINISTRY

- A call above everything else to be holy, because that is God's desire for us. Saint John Paul II exhorted the young people during the Jubilee World Youth Day in Rome, 'to be the saints of the new Millennium.' The challenge is to make our families / movement / Church a 'factory of Saints.'
- To be a witness, which is the foundation of missionary life. I quote here the words of Pope Paul VI "Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses." [Pope Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi* 67]
- A call to be 'Servant Leaders' – Leaders at the service of the people.
- To imbibe the qualities of a good secular leader in becoming a better Christian leader with a heart that always seeks the will of God. Scripture says – "For it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose." (Philippians 2: 13)
- To aid in this journey to a fuller life as a witness and to live a life of integrity, the Jesus Youth movement offers a pathway known by its members as the 6 pillars. These are:
 - a. Daily Prayer
 - b. Word of God
 - c. Sacraments
 - d. Fellowship
 - e. Preferential option for the Poor
 - f. Evangelization



GLIMPSES OF JESUS YOUTH WAY OF BUILDING MINISTRY AND YOUTH FORMATION

1. Accompanying them

The path to becoming a missionary disciple goes through a four step process that begins with a *personal God experience, be integrated into a community, undergo Formation to become a Disciple and a missionary, and to then be sent on Mission to produce fruit.* Accompaniment happens through each of these steps through systems like mentoring, eldering, pastoring, and following up through small discipleship groups or cell groups.

2. Homes becoming schools of formation - Open houses

The Challenge of youth ministry is *'to create a SAFE PLACE where young people can HEAR others tell their (life) stories until they find the COURAGE to tell their own story and, in this context, DISCOVER God's salvation story'.*

We have many families with 'open homes' with doors wide open for youngsters. These families have welcomed youngsters from different walks of life into their homes and given them a place of refuge ranging from a few days to months in some cases. Today many of these youngsters have done very well for themselves, and living in different parts of the world have one thing in common – they also have 'open houses' where we see so many youngsters come and hang around as they have found a 'safe place' to share, to hear, to rediscover God's plan for them, and to be brought to the heart of the Church and her mission.

3. Encouraging Initiatives

All small and large projects in the Jesus Youth movement are the outcome of the inspiration of individuals who were encouraged to follow the stirrings of their heart.

We believe potential leaders need to be challenged, not just taught. We have always tried to create a platform for new initiatives, *giving our young leaders this assurance - 'You are allowed to make mistakes' -* and we have stood by them even in their failures. There are hundreds of examples and one such instance is the child support project – a project to support 3000 children by paying for their education. Launched in the year 2009 as a part of our Silver Jubilee, this project was initiated by a small group of young IT professionals working at Techno Park in Kerala, India.

4. Giving Exposure

We believe that one of the best ways of developing leadership is by giving them exposure, thereby *challenging them to go 'beyond borders'.* We have a project named 'Cultural Exchange Program' wherein young people from the different tribal areas of India are brought together to Kerala for a one-month live-in experience with Jesus Youth families and are given an exposure to a Jesus Youth lifestyle and mission. Over the past 20 years we have had 2500 youth go through this program. Many of them are in active leadership in the movement. The Teen's ministry has organized mission projects named "*Chalo*" to various parts of India over the years to get a first-hand experience of how to live as a missionary and evangelize the culture in these places.

5. Growing in Ministries

With the vision of sharing the faith and building a witnessing community, we have developed various ministries for our members. A Jesus Youth ministry is usually the initiative of an individual or a small fellowship and normally tries to share Jesus in a particular context, using one's talent or life situation. These initiatives gradually grow into ministries of Jesus Youth. While helping young people to come together and grow in fellowship, these ministries also prepare youth to embrace the Gospel in their daily life and to proclaim that Gospel to others. There are a number of ministries focusing on different areas such as: i) Formation, ii) the context of life, iii) Talent and iv) Outreach.

RexBand – is one of our ministries, which has grown as one of the best Catholic bands in the world now. This band has had the privilege of performing in six WYD's. We had 4 Jesus Youth bands; MasterPlan and Inside Out from UAE, Acts of the Apostles and Vox Christi from India which performed in the 2019 WYD in Panama.

6. Leadership Learning Programs

For the personal growth of members, in addition to the regular fellowship groups, there are a wide range of formation programs, with particular emphasis on a life of holiness, missionary enthusiasm and personal effectiveness. *At the international level, the International Council has been organizing learning programs for the past 14 years in Thailand in which leaders and animators from around the world are brought together for 2 weeks of intense learning on various topics and helping them become better leaders and youth animators.* Apart from this there are several learning programs organized at the regional and national level.

7. Equipping leaders through Vision widening events

Many of our conferences and big events are also seen as great opportunities in developing and equipping leaders. Most of our programs are organized by the youth themselves and through the process of doing and learning, they also grow in maturity. There are several national and regional conferences that happen across the world. There were more than 20,000 people who have participated in the Coral Jubilee celebrations that happened in 2021. We are expecting to gather 15,000 people for the National Conference in India during October 2023.

8. Voluntary commitments

We believe youth is a time of great generosity and young people need to be challenged to take short-term and long-term voluntary commitments. One of our key projects – the Fulltime Volunteers Learning Program, is a year-long training for young people and has two stages. In the first stage, a thirty-day in-house sessions trains them in the essentials of Catholic Evangelization and this is followed by a second stage where the volunteers are placed in college campuses, city youth groups and in diocesan missions across the world. The volunteers are provided with regular guidance, mentoring and feedback. Over the last 30 years, more than 1800 youngsters have taken such one-year fulltime mission. (Among these, many of them are now Priests and religious sisters. There are a good number of them who are currently studying in seminaries). Now we have three such trainings – in English and Hindi for Indian participants and another one in Thailand for International participants. We also have short-term commitment projects like mission nurses, parish volunteers, campus volunteers etc.

9. Networking – be connected

Close interaction, collaboration and networking among individuals, ministries and fellowship groups is a strong characteristic of Jesus Youth. We have cell groups, prayer groups, Households and so on for such purposes.

10. Reaching out to the people in need

Jesus Youth has responded in several ways whenever there have been necessities. “*Nalla Ayalkkaran*” is project that was initiated because of the floods that happened in Kerala, India. There have been several outreach camps organized for street children, in old age homes etc. Every time such camps are organized, the youngsters have returned with life-changing experiences.



Conclusion

The challenges that youth face in today’s world while real are also quite complex. This in turn affects how movements such as the Jesus Youth can effectively build youth ministry and prepare young people for mission. The task of forming missionary disciples at the service of the Church is at the heart of every initiative of the Jesus Youth movement. While training plays an important role in the formation journey, equally important are the process of accompaniment, the presence of selfless families who open their homes to young people, the freedom given to make mistakes and learn from them, providing encouragement and unconditional support, providing opportunities for outreaches, and other interventions as mentioned.

With Saint Francis as our patron, and through the intercession of Mary Queen of Apostles we remain committed to the mission of Christ and His Church to spread the Gospel to the ends of the earth.