



November 1, 2023

Dear Friends in Christ:

May the Lord bless you! First and foremost, thank you for your trust in me as the director of our joint Youth Group, composed of adolescents from both Holy Name and St. Philip Neri-Blessed Sacrament parishes. Your teens are dear to me, and I aim to grow their faith, connection to the Church, and fellowship with each other and their parishes.

In my 24 years in ministry with adolescents, I've never organized a junior high and senior high "Youth Group" together. Most parish youth ministers will serve junior high and senior high students separately. While junior high and high school students may be generally categorized as "youth", anyone who works with teens knows that there's a big difference between a 12-year-old seventh grader and an 18-year-old high school senior. Of course, every youth group is different and what works for one church might not work for another, but hopefully, with prayer and planning, we can continue to build an apostolate that serves the youth in our community, no matter how it's structured.

With this approach in mind, **beginning December 6th, 2023, our Junior High "Youth Group" will meet once a month on the FIRST Wednesday of every month. Our Senior High students will meet the other Wednesdays of each month.** The time will remain the same: Each Wednesday will begin at 7:30 pm and end at 9:00 pm (Please see attached calendar).

There are many reasons for this approach. It's no secret that junior high and senior high school students think and learn differently. Younger students often require a little more thorough teaching, while older students can often piece things together without having everything directly explained. Energy level also differs between the groups: Attending to enthusiastic junior high kids is a different scenario than working with more mature high schoolers.

Choosing opening games/activities can be more challenging when groups are combined. Some of the games the younger students love, the older students are tired of, or think are childish, and some of the more complicated activities/team building can be harder for the younger kids to connect with and to maintain their focus.

Similarly, junior high schoolers and high schoolers might not feel comfortable expressing themselves completely around each other. High schoolers are probably aware of the mentorship role they play to younger students. They know they are being watched and listened to by younger eyes and ears and might not feel comfortable being real and vulnerable about their struggles for fear of how that will impact the junior high schoolers. Junior high schoolers, on the other hand, might feel intimidated by older students and hold back for fear to avoid embarrassing themselves in front of the high schoolers. This might also discourage kids from either age group from inviting their friends.

Also, junior high schoolers and high schoolers, in many ways, are experiencing different stages of life and could benefit from teaching, structure, and support that is tailored to their particular needs. For instance, a relationship series might be appropriate for your high schoolers, but not for your junior high schoolers. Or your junior high schoolers might really benefit from a longer games and activities period than our older students. Splitting up our groups allows us to serve and love our students in the way they best need it.

Of course, inter-age-group mingling is important and healthy, and that is why we will still be scheduling activities like amusement park excursions, or service projects that all the youth, both junior high and high schoolers, can attend together. I will also be visiting and teaching the junior high students in their religion classes at both schools and our Religious Education program, along with helping with preparation for the Sacrament of Confirmation in several ways. This will give me the opportunity to build relationships and model discipleship outside of our regular Wednesday night "Youth Group".

So as a reminder, **beginning December 6th, 2023, our Junior High "Youth Group" will meet once a month on the first Wednesday of every month. Our Senior High students will meet the other Wednesdays of each month.** The time will remain the same. Each Wednesday will begin at 7:30 pm and end at 9:00 pm.

We pray that this doesn't cause additional issues for you as parents, however we believe this will be the best for all our youth, both junior and senior high.

God bless you,

John Gencarelli
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PS: We still don't have a core of committed adult volunteers to assist me in this outreach. Students, both junior high schoolers and high schoolers, depend on adults they can trust, and consistency is one of the most important elements for gaining that trust. I am praying that God will send me the most capable volunteers. This volunteer position is very important to us and to the youth of our parishes. I have expectations of our volunteers. I'm not looking for chaperones, but leaders and mentors. Volunteers that are willing to be formed for ministry with adolescents and leadership. I am new to the parishes and to you and do not know everyone's gifts. Are you a parent who desires to lead your own teens and others into a deeper relationship with Jesus, to keep them united to the Church in the awkward years of growing older? If so, I need your help. Please let me know if God is nudging your heart to serve in this way and I can explain more.