



## Youth Ministry during COVID-19: From Panic to Confidence

*By Yssa Licsi*



***Youth Ministry Coordinator for the Archdiocese of Saint-Boniface, Yssa Licsi has been very busy since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. How do you maintain activities that support young people and young adults in parishes, while dealing with lockdowns and the cessation of in-person activities? The answer lies in seeking out creative solutions using the Internet and other technologies. And having faith in your abilities.***

Interview by Daniel Bahuaud, Communications Coordinator at the Archdiocese of St. Boniface

### **It can't be easy, doing youth ministry in the middle of a pandemic...**

**Yssa Licsi:** During the very first lockdown, it was extremely difficult. Young people like to get together in person. Contact is essential. I dare say that in-person meetings are *the* way to lay the foundations of any youth ministry. Being forced to isolate yourself at home when you are thirsty for personal contact, that's tough. We all missed the youth evenings, conferences, prayer vigils and get-togethers like the **Theology On Tap** talks held in bars. When we couldn't have them anymore, it was borderline panic.

But young people are dynamic and creative. And they know the tools that allow faith to be communicated online. The resilience of youth ministers in our parishes allowed us to adapt. It's curious, but there has even been an increase in the number and variety of activities since the beginning of COVID-19. And a growth of faith.

### **How *have* you adapted to COVID-19?**

**Y. L.:** By remaining open to new ways of doing things. And by adjusting my project timelines. I had always planned, for example, to create an Instagram account for the young people of the diocese. From the first lockdown, it was obvious that this platform had to be used immediately as a forum for dialogue. The need was acute.

Then we all got acquainted with Zoom, which we used to organize virtual meetings and conferences. I first used Zoom when participating in the national *Singles For Christ* young adult conference. On top of Zoom, we began to use YouTube and the Open Broadcast Software application. I really learned a lot. This experience was invaluable when the Tri-Diocesan Conference on the Catholic Family was organized in April 2020, because there was a strong youth component. The 2021 conference was virtual too. By that point, we had all become more confident, and ambitious.

For instance we managed to film a *sitcom* for youth, all while respecting provincial COVID restrictions. And our musical group, Soli Deo Gloria, recorded a concert using the Garage Band app. No one met in person, but the result was extraordinary!

**You also organized several online diocesan activities for young people.**

**Y. L.:** On Good Friday, we held a Way of the Cross. Seventy young people were able to attend in person at Mariy, Mother of the Church Parish. But so many others couldn't, on account of the provincial COVID orders. For those people, we organized a livestream on the Parish YouTube channel. Youth and youth groups participated via 162 computers, tablets or phones. The virtual Way of the Cross was so successful we're going to make it a yearly event.

My colleague Koreen Hrizai also held a diocesan conference online for catechism teachers. Bishop LeGatt was our main speaker. For that, I learned to film and edit video, as well as prepare slides. Abilities that will serve me in very good stead in the future.

**So the lessons learned during COVID-19 aren't going to be forgotten...**

**Y. L.:** That's right. Not just on the diocesan level, but in parishes too. Because of the pandemic, more and more young people have committed themselves to supporting catechesis, youth ministry and the webcasting of Masses in their parishes. They have shown great leadership and, as a result, have a greater presence in their churches. It's inspiring.

**This leadership is currently manifesting itself with your "Mental Health 101" project...**

**Y. L.:** Yes. Many young people have felt the effects of isolation during the pandemic. So we prepared a virtual workshop for them, with the help of youth ministers, catechists, parish councils and priests. The goal is to equip young people to better address their mental health challenges. Parents, too, need tools and ways to address the subject with their children.

One of the goals of the project is to address the issue of mental health in a way that takes into account the faith of our young people. We managed to obtain the collaboration of the Canadian Mental Health Association. CMHA wants to take into account the benefits of a spiritual component for one's mental health, and has found a Catholic with whom I can work. I've also sought the participation of young Catholics who are working in mental health and social work, in order to obtain tools that will allow young Catholics not only to learn about the help that can be offered by various mental health and social services, but to integrate faith into their treatment. The project should launch in September. I can't wait! I feel blessed to be able to be a part of it.