



ANTIOCHIAN ORTHODOX CHRISTIAN ARCHDIOCESE OF NORTH AMERICA

Department of Youth & Young Adult Ministries

Summer 2023 Convention Report

Vision: For all young people of the Antiochian Archdiocese to grow and mature *into the measure of the fullness of Christ* within parish communities of loving, co-striving clergy, parents, mentors, and peers. (Ephesians 4:13)

Mission: To offer a holistic, Christ-centered ministry for our youth and young adults as well as resources and training for our clergy and laity in order to build up our parishes into communities of co-striving love - *according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love.* (Ephesians 4:16)

Background: The Archdiocesan Task Force for Youth and Young Adult Ministry was created in May of 2021 and tasked with analyzing the ways in which the Archdiocese was ministering to her youth and young adults. A clergy and lay representative from each of the following departments were appointed to work with Fr. Nicholas Belcher in this effort: Youth and Parish Ministries (Erin Ghata, Fr. Philip Rogers), Christian Education (Anna-Sarah Farha, Fr. Nicholas Long), Camping (Khalil Samara, Fr. Christopher Shadid), and Young Adult Ministry (Wayne Parr, Fr. Michael Nasser.) The Task Force operated from the spring of 2021 until transitioning to a united Department of Youth & Young Adult Ministries with four distinct ministries working in full cooperation beginning in the spring of 2022. For a timeline highlighting the initiatives of the task force and department, please refer to Appendix A.

The Board of Trustees at its fall meeting in 2022 blessed the creation of this unified department. The goals for our first year as a department were:

1. Create a Christ-centered, substantive approach to our ministries.
2. Increase strategic collaboration between our four ministries.
3. Offer training and resources to clergy, parents, and youth workers.
4. Institute an archdiocese-wide youth protection program.

Challenges: The task force began its work at a time when the pandemic was still creating difficulties for in-person ministry. The time away from church life and the stresses of the pandemic had a tremendous effect on our youth and young adults that have been far-reaching – mental health challenges, societal divisions, rapid cultural shifts away from church teachings, social isolation, to name a few.

The archdiocese, in response to the pandemic, moved towards a “zero budget” process to prioritize expenditures during that time of financial insecurity. The new department has not operated from a budget per se during this time but worked cooperatively within this system to request only what was deemed as essential.

From an institutional perspective, the new department structure was blessed during a time of leadership transition in our archdiocese. The initial plan was to hire a full-time executive director to fully implement the new initiatives that the task force had planned. Before moving forward with such a significant new hire and the expense and wide scale effort to institute a youth protection program without the blessing and support of a new metropolitan, the department scaled back some of the goals planned for Year One.

Updates: While the department took a scaled-down approach in fulfilling its goals for Year One, here are some of the notable initiatives undertaken by our ministries (please see appendices for a more comprehensive listing of our activities):

- Feedback from the youth and youth workers regarding youth ministry was to focus less on the institutional aspects of Teen SOYO and more on relational ministry. In order to meet that desire, the youth ministry team moved away from elected offices and towards an NAC board consisting of an officer from each diocese. Meetings and training have emphasized spiritual formation and scriptural engagement as well as leadership development.
- To meet the desire of our youth for more service opportunities, the ministry has created a new initiative called TRUST (Teens Responsibly Undertaking Service Together) to empower/trust the youth to create service-minded ministries.
- With the success of the pilot curriculum for Sunday schools and Camps on the gospel of Matthew, the Christian Education Ministry worked with a talented team of educators in partnership with noted author Fr. Stephen De Young to create an expanded curriculum for Genesis that was launched in the fall of 2022. The theme of the curriculum was *Like the Stars of Heaven*, and based on feedback, increased the number of grade-levels and included interstitial, thematic lessons as well.
- To continue our holistic approach, the theme of the parish life conferences and convention was taken from the book of Genesis and used in our Creative Arts Festival. The book of Genesis is also the focus of the Bible Bowl. The summer camps throughout the Archdiocese also received a Genesis-themed curriculum that acts as a capstone to reinforce what was learned during the school year.
- To help with what the department has referred to as “training the trainers,” and in response to the mental health crisis in our society, the youth ministry team hosted a Peace of Mind Mental Health First Aid training in Houston this past March. Twenty-one parish and diocesan youth directors and camp directors took part in learning how to discern signs and symptoms of mental health challenges and best practices for how to respond in crisis situations.
- In January, Youth Directors and Camp Staff came together for the annual Orthodox Youth & Camp Worker Conference to continue their professional development. The Antiochian Village will host this conference in 2024.

Goals: The department plans to continue building on the goals we set for this year and bringing our overall vision into a reality. Here are some important next steps in realizing that vision between now and our next convention:

- Hiring of a full-time Executive Director to oversee the four ministries and move our strategic vision forward.
- Implementation of a multimedia strategy with an increase in resources for parents, clergy, and youth workers.
- New Sunday School curriculum based on the epistle to the Romans this fall. An additional curriculum for parents is in the works as well. This additional curriculum will help parents engage in learning along with their children.
- Annual Vacation Bible School curriculum to launch for the summer of 2024.
- Resumption of the Orthodox Institute for Church School Teachers & Directors in 2024.
- New online submission platform for the Creative Arts Festivals in use for summer 2024.
- Create programming focused on vocational formation and ministry engagement of young adults.
- Reinvigorate young adult leadership groups at the parish, diocesan, and archdiocesan levels.
- Increase college preparatory program for high school seniors throughout the Archdiocese based on the Arch Week program at Antiochian Village.

- Engage in a comprehensive study of our Camp facilities across the archdiocese and draft a plan for maximum growth of our camp programs.
- Build a network of support for parish priests and youth workers and create opportunities for collaboration and sharing of best practices.

Vision for the Next Five Years: We envision a fully integrated and fully functioning department that has professional, paid staff at the archdiocesan and diocesan levels. We believe that we need the institutional work of the department to reach the diocesan level in order to incarnate the vision at the parish, family, and individual levels. In order to expect levels of training and excellent work, these dedicated staff and clergy should be compensated and held to high standards.

Our belief is that youth and young adult ministry is primarily about parish and family life as much as it is in offering programs, camps, retreats, social activities, etc. Our intention is to work with clergy, parents, youth workers, teachers, parish councils, choirs, chanters, festival chairs, everyone to build up our parishes as the Body of Christ - to create an environment where our young people can grow and mature in their Christian lives. Our hope is that our young people experience that loving environment in every parish and every ministry of our Archdiocese in the next five years.

Asking the prayers and blessings of His Beatitude Patriarch JOHN X and His Eminence Metropolitan SABA for these efforts to be blessed by our Lord and bear good and holy fruit in our Holy Archdiocese, we remain,

Yours in the service of Christ,



Fr. Nicholas Belcher
Chairman of the Department
Youth & Young Adult Ministry



Anna-Sarah Farha
Director of Christian Education Ministry



Erin Ghata
Director of Youth Ministry



Fr. Philip Rogers
Youth Ministry Spiritual Advisor



Khalil Samara
Director of Camping Ministry

Appendix A: Timeline of the work of the Task Force & Department of Youth & Young Adult Ministries

2021

- **May:** Task Force for Youth & Young Adult Ministry is established. *Encyclical for the Year of Youth* is promulgated by the archdiocese.
- **July:** Task Force holds in-person Planning Retreat in Memphis, Tennessee.
- **July:** Diocese Youth Directors participate in the Effective Christian Ministry Course.
- **Summer:** Series of listening/focus group type meetings over Zoom with various constituencies - young adults, Christian education diocesan coordinators, youth directors.
- **Fall:** Series of Zoom meetings with the metropolitan, bishops, and clergy of the various dioceses to introduce the work of the Task Force.
- **Sept-Oct:** Task Force conducts survey for parents, clergy and youth.
- **Fall:** Initial goals for the Task Force presented to the Board of Trustees: (1) collecting data (surveys, focus groups, etc.) (2) creating a holistic approach to our ministries and (3) maintaining traditional programs while introducing pilot programs.
- **November:** Staff hired to part-time and full-time positions for various ministries of the task force.
- **December:** Semester-long gospel of Matthew Curriculum released for Church Schools for the spring.
- **December:** Results of survey released.

2022

- **January:** Annual Camp & Youth Worker Conference at Antiochian Village.
- **Winter/Spring:** CircuitTree, a unified camp registration database, implemented for all camps.
- **February:** Fr. Nicholas & Erin Ghata offered youth ministry workshops at Diocese of Los Angeles & the West Clergy Seminar.
- **May:** Task Force presents findings after first year of data collection and pilot initiatives and an initial plan for a united Department of Youth & Young Adult Ministries.
- **Summer:** First integrated theme for Creative Arts, Bible Bowl, Camp Christian Ed, Church School Curriculum and PLC implemented.
- **Summer:** New Leadership Structure for Department and Teen SOYO leadership.
 - NAC Board comprised of one teen officer from each Diocese.
- **July:** Inaugural Arch Week program for high school graduates held at Antiochian Village.
- **July:** Revamped Teen SOYO Officer Leadership Training at Antiochian Village with study of the Epistle to the Philippians.
- **July:** Fr. Nicholas Belcher offered a two-hour workshop at the Archdiocesan Clergy Symposium: https://www.ancientfaith.com/specials/2022_antiochian_clergy_symposium/the_state_of_our_youth1
- **August:** *Like the Stars of Heaven* curriculum for the book of Genesis released for Church Schools.
- **August:** Special Olympics Sports Camp sponsored by Teen SOYO at Antiochian Village.
- **October:** Plan for unified Department of Youth & Young Adult Ministries formally presented with new structure that includes an executive director.
- **November:** Genesis Part II curriculum released with thematic lessons to accompany the initial synoptic lessons of the fall semester (Imaging God, Priesthood of Man and Woman, Justice in Genesis, Sacrifice, Birthright and Inheritance.)

2023

- **January:** Annual Camp & Youth Worker Conference in Titusville, FL. Fr Nicholas one of the keynote speakers.
- **February:** Teen SOYO Midwinter Meetings at Antiochian Village with additional spiritual emphasis.
- **March:** Peace of Mind Mental Health First Aid Training (offered through the Assembly of Bishops) attended by Diocese Youth Directors, Camp Directors, Christian Ed team members and parish youth workers.
- **March:** TRUST (Teens Responsibly Undertaking Service Together) initiative piloted by NAC SOYO and to be rolled out for Archdiocese participation Fall 2023.
- **April:** New Leadership Structure for Department and Teen SOYO leadership
 - Amendment of SOYO constitution and shift to officer applications
- **April:** Genesis Curriculum for Camp programs released.
- **Spring:** Camp Service book being updated and edited to include Apolytikia for all camps.
- **Spring:** Metropolitan SABA elected and enthroned. Initial meeting of Fr. Nicholas with His Eminence to discuss the department happened on May 5. Department staff meeting with His Eminence scheduled for June 8.
- **Late Spring:** Book of Romans Curriculum developed for 2023-24 school year.

Appendix B: 2021 Survey Participation

Clergy	Sunday School Teachers	Parents	Teens	Young Adults	Youth Workers	Total Responses
251	209	825	197	407	93	1,982

Appendix C: 2022 Creative Festivals & Bible Bowl & Oratorical Statistics

2022 Bible Bowl Team Registrations

	Chars/NY	LA	Miami	Ottawa	Toledo	Wichita	Worcester	Totals
Pre-Teen	2	3	1	3	3	1	1	14
Jr.	0	3						3
Teens/Sr	8	4	5	8	6	8	6	45
Adult	6	5	6	9	6	3	0	35
Total	16	15	12	20	15	12	7	97

2022 Oratorical Contestants

	Chars/NY	LA	Miami	Ottawa	Toledo	Wichita	Worcester	Totals
Junior Division	1	3	0	1	5	1	3	14
Senior Division	5	1	1	2	6	5	3	23
Total	6	4	1	3	11	6	6	37

2022 Creative Festivals Participation

	Chars/NY	LA	Miami	Ottawa	Toledo	Wichita	Worcester	Totals
Arts	141	93	102	52	116	131	25	660 entries
Photo	23	0	6	5	17	5	0	56 entries
Poetry	47	17	20	19	55	17	5	180 entries
Writing	21	8	25	13	39	24	5	135 entries
# of Parishes to submit at least 1 entry	12/49	12/64	14/42	9/19	17/49	13/51	7/11	84 out of 285 parishes

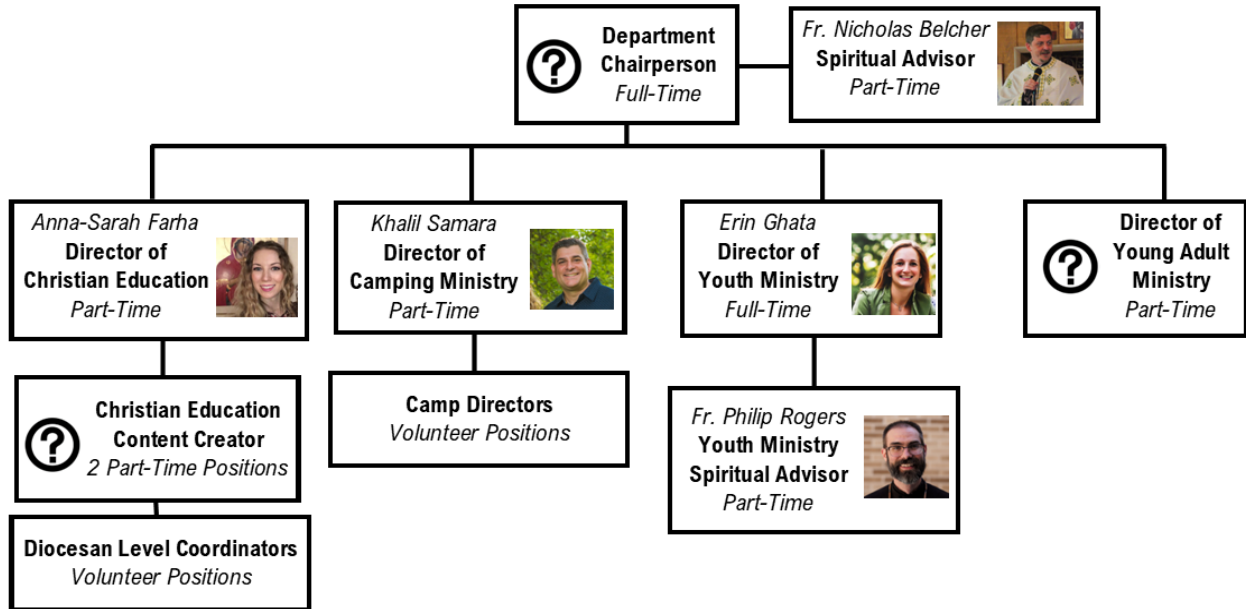
Appendix D: 2023 Camp Statistics

*as of May 25	Total Campers Enrolled	Open Spots	Campers on Waitlist	Percentage of Total Archdiocese Campers
Antiochian Village	1096	22	51	40.8%
Camp St. George	70	0	5	2.6%

Camp St. Innocent	23	50	0	0.9%
Camp St. Mary of Egypt	145	0	42	5.4%
Camp St. Nicholas	287	86	10	10.7%
Camp St. Raphael	407	31	49	15.2%
Camp St. Thekla	339	7	5	12.6%
Camp Transfiguration	253	35	15	9.4%
Village Up North	65	0	11	2.4%
Total Campers	2,685	231	188	100.00%

Appendix E: Department Staffing Chart

2023 Department of Youth & Young Adult Ministries Staff



Five Year Vision: 2028 Department of Youth & Young Adult Ministries Staff

