Parish Leader Guide

Starting and running a parish youth group with the Carlo Acutis Association

1. Introduction

Thank you for considering starting a youth group in your parish. Young people need community, friendship, faith and a place to belong, and by stepping forward you are helping to create a space where they can grow into confident, joyful disciples of Christ.

This guide walks you through what you need to do as a Parish Youth Leader, supported by the Carlo Acutis Association (CAA). You do not need any previous experience of youth ministry, only openness, willingness and the support of your parish priest and school. CAA will walk with you at every step.

2. The role of a Parish Youth Leader

Parish Youth Leaders are parishioners who feel called to support young people and help their parish build a safe, faith-filled community. Your key responsibilities include:

- supporting the parish priest in youth ministry;
- building a small leadership team of volunteers;
- making sure safeguarding requirements are met before any session runs;
- planning and running sessions, with support;
- welcoming young people and families;
- following parish, diocesan and CAA guidance;
- keeping in touch with the school and parish;
- encouraging a joyful, prayerful atmosphere;
- asking for help when you need it.

You are not expected to do everything yourself. Youth ministry is always a team mission.

3. The Trinity model: parish, school and community

Every successful youth group grows through three connected pillars.

Parish

- The parish priest provides spiritual direction and pastoral support, and has the final say on the group.
- The Parish Safeguarding Representative makes sure safeguarding arrangements are in place.
- Parish space is used for sessions and prayer.

School

- Schools share information with families.
- Teachers and chaplains encourage pupils to come along.
- Joint activities strengthen Catholic identity and formation.

Community

- Volunteers help with supervision, tuck shop and activities.

- Parents support communication and practical arrangements.
- Young people bring energy, ideas and leadership.

Your role is to bring these three together in a simple, natural way.

4. Getting started

Step 1: Speak with your parish priest

Share your wish to start a youth group, and talk through the need, the likely age groups and possible session times.

Step 2: Contact the Carlo Acutis Association

Email info@carloacutisassociation.com. CAA will support you from the start with mentoring, safeguarding guidance, templates and policies, programme ideas and a step-by-step launch plan.

Step 3: Find three to five volunteers

These volunteers will help you supervise, run games, set up and welcome families. You will need enough adults to meet the ratios for the numbers you expect.

Step 4: Complete safeguarding checks

Before they start, every adult volunteer must complete:

- an enhanced DBS check through the parish or diocese;
- the safeguarding training the diocese requires;
- the Code of Conduct for Leaders agreement.

Your Parish Safeguarding Representative will help you with these.

Step 5: Adopt your paperwork

Adopt the Parish Youth Group Constitution, the Safeguarding Policy and the Terms of Reference, and appoint your Chair and Designated Safeguarding Leads (DSLs).

Step 6: Contact the school

A short message from the school builds trust with parents straight away. The school does not run the group, but it can help promote it. CAA provides an invitation letter your parish priest can send through the school.

5. Safeguarding essentials

Safeguarding is at the heart of everything. The Safeguarding Pack sets out all the requirements, but these are the essentials:

- at least two DBS-checked adults present at every session;
- minimum ratios: one adult per six children under 9, one adult per eight children aged 9 to 12 and one adult per ten young people aged 13 to 18;
- youth volunteers aged 16 to 17 do not count towards ratios;
- never be alone with a child;
- all communication goes through parents and carers;

- every session is planned and risk assessed;
- photos and videos need written parental consent;
- behaviour and pastoral concerns are recorded on the Incident Form;
- safeguarding concerns are reported to the DSL on the same day, and concerns about an adult go directly to the Parish Safeguarding Representative or the diocesan safeguarding office.

The CAA Safeguarding Officer can offer advice at any time, alongside your parish and diocesan safeguarding contacts.

6. Building your volunteer team

Youth ministry is a shared ministry, and your volunteers are essential. They may include parents, parishioners, teachers, young adults and youth volunteers aged 16 or 17.

Each volunteer has a clear purpose:

- **Adult leaders:** supervision, support and boundaries.
- **Youth volunteers:** games, activities and being role models, always under adult supervision.
- **Tuck shop helpers:** simple but invaluable support.
- **Prayer leaders:** chapel reflection and gentle formation.
- **Secretary:** registers, communication and consent forms.

The Terms of Reference describe each leadership role in full.

7. Planning your first term

A simple three-month plan works well for a new group. Each session should include:

- welcome and registration;
- a fun activity or game;
- group discussion or a creative activity;
- a short prayer or reflection, including Scripture where it fits;
- tuck shop or social time;
- a clear ending and safe sign-out.

Good themes to begin with include friendship and community, who Saint Carlo Acutis was, saints and heroes, prayer and reflection, fun debates, creative challenges and service and kindness.

8. Launching the youth group

A strong launch helps families feel confident and excited.

Through the school

- School newsletter.
- Parent mailshot, using the invitation letter from the parish priest.
- Posters or digital screens.

Through the parish

- Sunday newsletter.
- An announcement by the priest at Mass.
- Posters in the church porch.
- Parish social media, following the photo consent rules.

What to share

- Age groups and times.
- Venue address.
- A short safeguarding statement.
- What children can expect and what to bring.
- Contact details for the group.

9. Running sessions

Before the session

- Volunteers arrive twenty minutes early.
- Rooms are set up and safety checks done.
- Ratios are checked against the number of children expected.
- Register and tuck shop are ready.

During the session

- Keep to the supervision ratios.
- Keep activities safe and inclusive.
- Use clear boundaries and positive encouragement.
- Let young people express themselves freely.
- Keep prayer time gentle and accessible.

After the session

- Sign out each child safely to a parent or carer, or as agreed in writing.
- Record any incidents.
- Tidy the space.
- Reflect briefly with volunteers.

Weekly consistency builds trust and growth.

10. Communicating with families

Parents want to feel confident in the group, so keep communication regular, calm, clear and respectful, always through official channels and never directly with children. Useful tools include a WhatsApp group for parents and leaders only, a parish or group email account, school communications and printed flyers for special events.

11. Working with the school

Schools help the youth group grow by sharing information with families, encouraging pupils to come, allowing short talks where appropriate and supporting feast day or formation activities. The School Partnership Guide explains the partnership in full, including how to handle pastoral information carefully.

12. Reviewing and growing

After the first term:

- review what worked well;
- adjust timings, games or activities;
- find new volunteers;
- invite more young people through the school;
- add variety with debates, craft or service projects;
- start developing youth volunteers from older members once they turn 16.

13. Support from CAA

CAA accompanies new groups rather than inspecting them. In your first year you can expect guidance before launch, regular mentoring and quarterly accompaniment visits, and after that an Annual Accompaniment Review to celebrate what is going well and plan ahead. CAA works in conjunction with Kenelm Youth Trust and the wider diocesan family, and can help you connect with other parish groups.

As a Parish Youth Leader, you have access to:

- the Safeguarding Pack;
- the School Partnership Guide;
- the Parish Youth Group Constitution and Terms of Reference;
- programme, session and planning resources
- templates for communication with families and schools;
- mentoring, advice and encouragement.

You are not doing this alone. Contact us at info@carloacutisassociation.com.

14. Final encouragement

Starting a youth group is an act of hope. Young people need places where they are loved, listened to and supported, and your willingness to serve can make a life-changing difference to them.

In the words of Saint Carlo Acutis: “The Eucharist is my highway to Heaven.”

May this guide help your parish build a youth group that brings young people closer to Christ and to one another.

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