

I wanted to write a letter to better explain our changes to the Prayer and Action Program for this upcoming summer. We have decided to shift the grade requirements to incoming freshmen through incoming seniors and move the incoming college freshmen to college week.

I really enjoyed the few people who reached out to discuss the changes. There have been people on both sides of the decision. Some have concerns, and some are excited about the change. Both have been great conversations that I have really enjoyed.

I wanted to give you more insight into the thought process between the changes. It has been on my heart for many years from when I started taking groups as an adult. I was part of taking groups through the change of age requirements and saw the pros and cons then, and now I see it through a different set of lenses. I now view things as a director of the diocesan program, a father of children that age, and someone who constantly works with this age group. I also see it as someone who must ensure that every adult and child is protected and safe to the best of our ability.

A lot has changed in our young people's world since we changed and moved the age up. Social media was not nearly the phenomenon and force it is today for our young people. Facebook was just getting big, and in fact, 2009 was the first time they added a like button. A short time earlier, you had to have a college email to register, and young people were not on it. Myspace was declining, and Instagram had just been born. Snapchat and Tic Toc were not around yet. Not every kid had a smartphone like they do today, with only 27% of adults having one in 2010. KSHSAA was about to make the change to open athletics up in the summer so that coaches could work with their kids all summer. Pornography, while always a problem since the age of the internet, was not yet in every kid's hands through their smartphone like it is today. Young people are encountering much more at a much younger age. In 2010, the average age at which boys viewed pornography was ages 11-13, and the access was through their family computer. Today, the average age has dropped to 9-11 (some studies show even lower), and access is now available through their smartphone. Studies in 2010 estimated that around 30-50% of teenage girls (ages 13-18) had viewed pornography at least once, though regular consumption was much lower than that of boys. Today (2020s): More recent studies indicate that 60-70% of teenage girls have viewed pornography, with a growing number engaging in regular viewing. Their world is much different than just a few years ago. Satan has been incredibly aggressive with this age group, and we have to match or surpass his intensity in our evangelization efforts.

We know that the death of anything is the fear of change. Over the last few years, we have seen shifts in numbers and trends, and we need to adapt the program to these changes.

- 1) Due to KSHSAA sports activity in June, we have seen a sharp decline in our June weekends, and not as many of our athletes are attending as we once had. Almost all high school teams now schedule their week-long camp in June. During one of the June weeks, we have had a week with 6 or 7 people the last few years. The largest group impacted by KSHSAA's change was our upperclassmen, whose coaches are less likely to let them miss anything in the summer.
- 2) The amount paid to high school students for summer jobs has impacted our numbers, especially at the higher grades. I have heard from many CYO directors that they can't get their upperclassmen to attend because they have jobs and need to save up money for

college. I experienced the same things as a CYO director and understood the pressure on them to work and save money. I got it and understood that need.

- 3) The weeks of July are packed, which is great but can cause problems for the team and host site.
- 4) Our college week has dwindled to five registered last year and six the year before. Again, many of them are college kids trying to survive and save money while working multiple jobs.
- 5) Graduating seniors comprise less than 10 percent of the summer registrations. At least half of our CYOs did not have a graduating senior attend with them.

We have also encountered some research happening all over the church, both globally and nationally, indicating that the most critical age to engage kids is now at the middle school level. Too many are gone before they can be in our high school CYO or attend Prayer and Action.

A recent research study supported by NFCYM indicates that the middle school years are now the most crucial. The research shows that if a person doesn't commit to Christ and their faith before age 14, it becomes increasingly less likely that they will with each passing year. On average, questions of disaffiliation begin at age 10. This is why we are working to beef up our 6<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> grade programs by building numbers at Jr. CYO Camp and bringing in Holy Fire this upcoming October. We have even begun to explore offering a junior high version (day long) of Prayer and Action.

That 14-year-old age group also fits nicely into the incoming freshman group, allowing us to engage them with this powerful program and get them on the path to discipleship before they enter high school. They will also head into high school with some friendships with older high school kids who are active in their faith to look up to.

If you have gotten to know me well, you know that I am not driven by fear but by faith, and I am not afraid to change things up and see if we can be more effective in our ministry. I would much rather be out actively trying things than sit by and see the writing on the wall but change nothing.

Will the changes bring challenges and adversity? Absolutely, but we will address those and find solutions as we adapt and grow. There are also some amazing fruits that could come from changing. We could see an uptick in numbers and a big jump in our college week program. It would be great to have more young people getting a chance to experience God through this amazing program.

We may see new data and trends three years from now and decide that it is time to make more adaptations. That, to me, is the nature of ministry. Satan will not stop trying new things to reach our young people, nor can we.

I am aware of the maturity of incoming freshmen. I know that we will have to adapt and deal with that. I also know that they may be the group that needs us the most, and it is because they are difficult and immature that they need us the most. I often tell my assistant coaches in practice that the kids who don't cause us trouble don't need us. They are going to be just fine with or without us. It is the difficult kids who need someone tough enough to fight them and challenge them to grow that need us to help them choose a different path.

With that, I am asking you to take a leap of faith with me and see if we can't adjust a bit and take a chance to help more kids this summer as we attempt to reach an age group that is one of the most

critical right now. We also need to grow our college program as we shift the 10 percent who attended as graduating seniors to join the five/six or so who come back after they have been in college.

We are not alone in opening things up to incoming freshmen. Since KSHSAA opens up the summers, we see incoming freshmen being absorbed as high school students the second they graduate.

Steubenville allows incoming freshmen.

Benedictine BCYC allows incoming freshmen.

Camp Wojtyla allows incoming freshmen.

Notre Dame allows incoming freshmen.

Many of our CYOs welcome incoming freshmen into CYO as soon as school is out.

They go with their CYOs on mission trips or other trips

All our sports teams take incoming freshmen to camps

Incoming freshmen go to leadership camps, stuco camps, and music camps

Prayer and Action is one of the few programs not getting this age group engaged as incoming freshmen.

Again, If we see signs or data that show us we need to keep looking for a different solution, we will do just that and go right back to the drawing board, trying something else until we figure out the right way. I am also not afraid to admit I am wrong if that is the case. I will gladly eat the humble pie as we continue to look for a better way.

### **Safe Environment Concern**

There is one more significant concern that I can not wrap my head around, which I see as a potential danger to the safety and protection of our youth. Currently, we have 18-year-olds sleeping with minors in our current setup. I know they are participants and can thread the needle of our safe environment program, but both groups are at risk if something happens or an accusation is made. I am also unsure if that would hold up in court since we define this as a high school youth program, and we have 18/19-year-olds who are no longer in high school sleeping with 15-year-olds.

The general consensus is that a young person is a full adult on graduation day. KSHSAA lets them play through the end of May due to state tournaments, but as soon as that ends, they are done with anything high school-related. The same goes for weight rooms and other school activities.

Some of our young people will be headed directly into the military or workforce the day after graduation. Some will be headed to college and won't move out until the fall. All of them are looked at as full adults and no longer high school students. None would identify themselves as a high school student after they graduate.

We as adults do many things to protect ourselves, such as making sure we always have a second adult in the room when we meet with a student, keeping the door open so people can see what is going on inside, and documenting everything. I won't even walk into our locker room without another adult with me. I know we are all one accusation away from our lives being ruined, and I work hard to protect myself and follow the safe environment program.

I think it is safer for our graduated seniors to attend college week with other adults 18 or older. Then, we can eliminate the problem of adults sleeping in the same room as minors problem and take that risk away from everyone. If we moved the 30 graduating seniors we had up with the five current college students last year, we would have a much better week for all involved. It would also give those incoming freshmen some older role models living out their faith and a chance to meet people from around the diocese who will be attending college with them.

I appreciate it if you made it through this long letter. I just wanted to explain in more depth why we are trying this. I know there will be challenges, and I will be right there with you as we work through them. Change is always hard, especially when we changed the program in the past for a good reason. But times have again changed, and we have a new set of challenges that we need to adapt to and adjust our ministry.

Unfortunately, the only constant in life is change.

If you have any thoughts or concerns—I would love to talk to you about them. Please call my cell phone (785-639-2399) or set up a meeting with me. I would love to come out and meet with you.

Thanks for your time

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Bill Meder". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.