

Young Adult Initiative

2022 REPORT



Saint Meinrad



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PREFACE

I am very pleased, on behalf of Saint Meinrad, to present this study on youth and young adult ministry. It is the result of years of hard work in looking at the data and, more importantly, the stories of young people in the Church, their parishes and their homes. As we know, there is no more important work for us to undertake in the Church today than the pastoral care of and concern for young adults. This is the future of our Church.

The commitment of young people to parish life is critical, of course. It is in this environment that they gather what they need – catechesis, opportunities for service, and, most importantly, the Eucharist. Fortified by these things, they are then invited to fulfill the mandate of Christ to take the Good News to the whole world.

There is more, however, as this study demonstrates, and that is the need to continue to fortify Christians in the world, in their homes, schools, workplaces and neighborhoods. Catholic identity in these places is critical and it is a central part of that mandate of Christ.

This report gives us so much insight into the lives of Christians today and it also offers those of us within the institution challenges that, hopefully, we will find the courage and creativity to meet. Again, many thanks for the wonderful work in this study and many hopes for the future.

VERY REV. DENIS ROBINSON, OSB
PRESIDENT-RECTOR
SAINT MEINRAD SEMINARY
AND SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY

FOREWORD: GOOD NEWS!

PAUL E. JARZEMBOWSKI

When people speak about young adults in relation to the Catholic Church, too often, we gravitate towards the bad news: record disaffiliation, religious polarization, mental health crises, or secularization. While all these things are indeed happening, their prominence in our ecclesial conversations can eclipse some really wonderful news.

The good news is that, with a tangible commitment to and investment in young adults, Catholic parishes can be sanctuaries towards which young people gravitate, find refuge, and grow in their faith and vocational mission.

The Saint Meinrad Young Adult Initiative showed us that, while our faith communities may be struggling, they have the power within them to respond to the negative trends that get most of the airtime in our concerns about younger generations we frequently discuss. Too often, in the face of these overwhelming realities, there can be a powerful temptation leading Church leaders to give up and walk away from its plans for ministry with young adults, especially when faced with possible setbacks and a crippling fear of failure.

And yet, the results of this capstone study, wonderfully unpacked by Ministry Training Source, revealed that a lasting investment in leadership development can yield different results. Saint Meinrad Seminary and School of Theology made such an investment, aided by the generosity of the Lily Foundation. They spent valuable time and resources to accompany pastors, ministry leaders, and young adults through a patient process of developing pastoral outreach efforts to those in their twenties and thirties.

It took investment. It took intentional, pastoral accompaniment. It took time, patience, and perseverance. And it took strong leadership at the local level.

In my years of work across the national and international landscapes of the Catholic Church today, I have seen both incredible success stories and devastating experiences of failure when it comes to ministries with young people. It often comes down to these four key components: investment¹, accompaniment², patience³, and leadership⁴. The case studies in the Saint Meinrad Young Adult Initiative prove these timeless principles yet again.

Even in the face of a global pandemic, which impacted many of these parishes' efforts with young adults, almost anything was possible when the communities invested in the work, accompanied the process, patiently took time, and formed strong missionary leaders.

1 cf. Pope Francis, *Christus Vivit* 233: "We are called to invest in (young people's) fearlessness."

2 cf. Pope Francis, *Christus Vivit* 243: "The community has an important role in the accompaniment of young people; it should feel collectively responsible for accepting, motivating, encouraging, and challenging them."

3 cf. Pope Francis, *Christus Vivit* 297, 299: "Because time is greater than space, we need to encourage and accompany processes... And when you arrive where we have not yet reached, have the patience to wait for us."

4 cf. Pope Francis, *Christus Vivit* 244-245: "Many pointed to the shortage of qualified people devoted to accompaniment... (we) recognized the need to train consecrated persons and laypeople, male and female, accompany young people.... There is also a special need to accompany young men and women showing leadership potential, so that they can receive training and the necessary qualifications."

There are familiar adages I often hear in my work across the country and one of them is bemoaning young adults' "lack of commitment" to the faith. However, in all my years of pastoral ministry, I have found this to be a false presumption. Young people are, by and large, over-committed, over-extended, and overwhelmed. However, when those same young adults seek us out at their moments of return or at any point along life's journey, what they often encounter is a lack of commitment on the part of churches to invest in, accompany, be patient with, and form young adults for leadership and mission. Our aversion to commitment must change if we truly want to engage younger generations.

The parishes in this project took such a risk. They stuck with that risk while navigating, and sometimes stumbling through, uncertain terrain. They took the time to see it through, even when it would have been easier to give up. They made the effort to develop leaders, in particular young leaders, in collaboration with the Saint Meinrad Young Adult Initiative.

Full disclosure: not every parish experienced phenomenal success after five years (for a variety of reasons); however, many did have the chance to reap the benefits of the risk they took and of the commitment they made on behalf of young adults. This reminds us that this work is indeed a risk, but like any investment, it has incredible potential for fruitfulness.

It reminds me of what Pope Francis said about the Church's ministry with young people:

Because time is greater than space, we need to encourage and accompany processes without imposing our own roadmaps. For those processes have to do with persons who remain always unique and free. There are no easy recipes, even when all the signs seem positive (Christus Vivit 297).

He continued with a note to those of us who look to engage with young adults: "If you are to accompany others on this path, you must be the first to follow it" (*Christus Vivit* 298). In other words, if we are going to ask young people to commit to following the Church, the Church must also commit to accompanying young people.

Saint Meinrad made such a commitment in this endeavor. The pastors and parishes who participated in the Initiative made such a commitment in advancing ministry with young adults. And, as a result, more young people made a commitment to journeying with Jesus Christ through the community of the Church. Now that we have this study in our hands, the challenge has been given to us: Will we make a similar commitment, equipped with the insights of this study and the guidance of the Holy Spirit, who enlightens our path ahead?

It is my hope that the fruits of this study go well beyond the churches who participated in it. It is my hope that the fruits of this initiative will have a lasting impact on every individual or community who reads its words and takes up the challenge to commit to the investment, accompaniment, patience, and leadership of young adults. That will be good news, indeed.

Paul Jarzembowski serves on staff for the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) in Washington, D.C., overseeing the U.S. bishops' engagement with laity ministry, ecclesial movements, youth, and young adults. He is the author of Hope from the Ashes (Paulist Press, 2021), on evangelization, pastoral care, and accompaniment of individuals through Catholic moments of return such as Lent. He was the lead staff for the USCCB engagement with the XV Synod of Bishops on "Young People, the Faith, and Vocational Discernment," and its post-synodal exhortation, Christus Vivit.



CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION



Young people can help keep (the Church) young. They can stop her from becoming corrupt; they can keep her moving forward, prevent her from being proud and sectarian, help her to be poorer and to bear better witness, to take the side of the poor and the outcast, to fight for justice and humbly to let herself be challenged.

— CHRISTUS VIVIT, 37

The Beginning...

Saint Meinrad Seminary and School of Theology announced its desire and commitment to address the challenge of the younger generations' disaffiliation with formal religion through a press release in December 2016. It stated:

Pastors long to connect with a coveted demographic – young people in their 20s landing their first full-time jobs and charting independence while searching for community. Yet, few church leaders have the insights or tools they need to reach this emerging generation of adults, who are often absent from church life despite their deep concerns about faith.

Saint Meinrad Seminary and School of Theology, St. Meinrad, Indiana, has received a \$1.38 million grant from Lilly Endowment to begin an initiative intended to improve parish outreach to young adults and better engage them with the Catholic Church.

Recognizing the core mission of the Church to evangelize and initiate people of all ages into the faith and community, Saint Meinrad Seminary and School of Theology read the signs of our times and acknowledged the truth that the U.S. Catholic Church was losing more young people than she was gaining. This was a somber and concerning reality.

Numerous studies on young adults and religion over several years conclude that today's young adults are looking to *"belong, connect and contribute to the well-being of the world. But they want to have significant involvement in how that happens within religious communities. Rather than be ministered to, they want to be part of shaping their experiences in the Church."*

Church disaffiliation is not unique to the Catholic Church. Christian denominations nationwide are experiencing this reality also. In 2016, Lilly Endowment Inc. responded with \$19.4 million to fund 12 Christian congregations and organizations in their "Young Adult Initiative." The goal was to explore

1 <https://lillyendowment.org/stories/reaching-young-adults/>

how to intentionally move young adults from the “outside” looking in, to the “inside” inviting others to connect and belong to the Church.

In Catholic parlance, this process of missionary discipleship and the art of evangelization is a core ministry. Parishes work to incorporate this process in various styles of ministries with young adults. But with so many different styles of ministry, Saint Meinrad wanted to learn what were the best practices in the field. When Lilly Endowment presented its grant opportunity, the leaders of Saint Meinrad saw a way to advance its mission and strengthen the Church by providing young adults “a reason to remain active in the Church and to invite their friends to join in parish life,” – Saint Meinrad’s Grant Application.

Saint Meinrad believed the answers discovered through this initiative would help strengthen parishes by focusing on outreach to the laity and “calling all of its members to more active participation in ministry and evangelization.” They hoped to address the challenges many parishes faced in integrating young adults into parish life by providing both human and financial resources. Innovation was the original goal of Lilly Endowment’s grant, and any innovation Saint Meinrad would learn would be shared with the whole Church.

The initiative began by accompanying selected parishes through self-reflection, self-assessment, and self-audit. There was a desire to help parishes identify the strengths of their faith communities and build upon those to foster better outcomes. Providing authentic support and integration of young adults was dependent upon parish communities identifying, reaching out, and listening to young adult realities. They had to listen, and this is exactly what the parishes in the Saint Meinrad Young Adult Initiative (YAI) strived to accomplish.



Five years later . . .

Saint Meinrad began its assessment of the initiative in May 2021, asking Ministry Training Source to “tell the story of the YAI.” In designing the research process, the overall goal was to share the stories of these parish leaders and communities and to identify what they have learned in this four-year intensive process. Using a mixed methods approach, the researchers sought to listen to the parish stories through:

- » A parish-wide survey
- » Interviews with the pastor and main YAI contact
- » Focus groups with YAI core teams and young adults from the parish

The final part in the research process was to survey parish leadership who had been involved in the process (including pastors, parish staff, and current and past core team members). Subsequently, two focus groups comprised of YAI parish contacts were conducted, inviting them to collectively reflect and share their challenges, successes, and learnings.

After analyzing this tremendous amount of data, it was evident that each parish’s YAI experience was unique, and yet quite similar. They were unique due to characteristics such as: size, age and ethnic makeup of the community, accessibility of young adults, resources including leadership for the ministry to young adults, and history of the communities’ experiences in this ministry, etc. Regarding the initiative, their uniqueness was seen in how the grant funds were utilized and how much was used, the makeup of their core teams, embracement of resources from Saint Meinrad, understanding of a grant, and more.

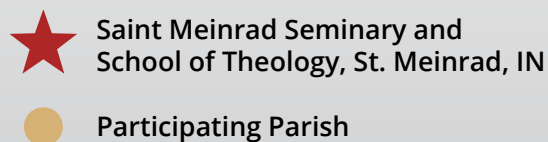
Despite each community’s uniqueness, similarities arose that the researchers identified as common or “universal challenges.” All parish leadership must address these universal challenges to effectively minister to the young adults in and around their communities. The findings of this research are articulated as five *Universal Challenges of Young Adult Ministry within the Young Adult Initiative*:

More details on these findings are explained in Part One Chapter Five of this report.

Please note there is no claim that these are the *only* universal challenges of the Church’s ministry to, by, for, and with young adults.

1. The Definitions of Success and a Parish's Key Aims for the Ministry
2. The Diverse and Transitional Nature of Ministry with Young Adults
3. The Spectrum of Outreach and Accessibility to Young Adults
4. Fostering a Parish Culture that Leads to Integration of Young Adults into the Parish
5. Finding the Right and Consistent Leadership for Ministry with Young Adults

This research is a story of parishes within a 250-mile radius of St. Meinrad, Indiana, a small midwestern town. The researchers believe these stories can be a place for pastoral leaders to further the conversation about intentional evangelization of young adults and authentic integration of young adults within parish communities.





“

“Right before COVID there was a lot of enthusiasm and desire, great ideas, and innovative ideas coming forth. I thought we talked about getting name tags and stuff like that for young adults and new people that come in the parish. And “Amber” and “Bernadette” talked to the parish group hospitality. It was very enthusiastic and started going. And then it’s like, okay, we’re in quarantine. We can’t do anything.”

— Core Team Member

ON ENGAGING YOUNG ADULTS THAT RETURN HOME AFTER COLLEGE:

“What’s been nice is we can engage them virtually, so easily now, because of the pandemic, right? It’s a lot easier to do that, it’s a definite reality.”

— Parish Contact

“And then, COVID happened”

If there was one universal phrase heard from every parish, it was “and then, COVID happened.” In March of 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the world. As it did with everything else, the Young Adult Initiative was greatly impacted. It would be easy to point to all the events that had to be canceled, applaud the use of Zoom, and lament the sudden change to a more virtual style of ministry until in-person events returned, but just like other elements of the initiative, a lot was to be learned from this experience.

Some parishes adjusted quickly, while others took their time hoping a shutdown would be short-lived. Many were grateful for the example of Saint Meinrad and the Young Adult Initiative staff’s encouragement or reminders of non-gathered ministry and that the purpose of the YAI was to be innovative.

The pandemic hit just as many parishes began feeling comfortable within the YAI. The parishes had recently received their third allotment of funds, and many of them had spent the previous two years testing a few ideas while simultaneously listening, evaluating, and visioning. Many parishes spoke of their plans for the Spring and Summer of 2020 that had to be canceled or greatly changed. While this could not be measured, there is no doubt that many core teams, contacts, and pastors had to wonder what could have been, based on our conversations with them.

As in most other areas, returning to in-person worship and engagement at the YAI parishes has remained slow with a few exceptions. Ultimately, our discussions with the parishes focused very little on the pandemic directly, and conversations were about the innovations and ministries the parishes still provided during the entire YAI, including during the pandemic. These innovations and practices are shared throughout this report, but as one reviews the data, it must be measured and understood within this context.

HOW TO READ OR USE THIS REPORT

This report on the story of the Young Adult Initiative is divided into three parts:

- » **Part One** provides an overview of the research process used to assess and tell the YAI story, including major findings.
- » **Part Two**, especially the findings in the form of universal challenges, is told through a series of vignettes or short scenarios. The research findings are told in a story form that invites reflection and learning.
- » **Part Three** of the report provides the relevant data from the various data sources.

A NOTE FROM THE RESEARCH TEAM

Understanding the Young Adult Initiative, the participants, and the conducted research is crucial to best comprehend the overall findings, which is shared throughout Part One. After understanding the findings, they are articulated through a storytelling format in a series of vignettes found in Part Two. Reflection questions for each vignette are provided to aid in interpreting the stories. Everything stated as a fact or finding within the YAI is supported through the data reports that can be found in Part Three. Whenever possible, the researchers attempted to cross-reference data to make it easier to compare the quantitative and qualitative data with the findings.

It is the researchers' hope that everyone who reads this report can identify some learnings that reflect their own experiences and provide innovative options for approaching this integral ministry with young adults.



There is not a breakdown of this data by parish due to the confidentiality of those participating in the research.

Identification of the parishes through the vignettes and the data reports has been removed to protect confidentiality of all respondents. Every name beyond what is found in Chapter Two should be considered a pseudonym.

Part One: Telling the YAI Story Through the Lens of Research

Following this Introduction, Chapter Two provides the brief stories of the parish communities. The diversity of these communities can be seen in pictures and words. These communities and leaders are to be commended for taking up this challenge and opportunity to intentionally further their parishes' ministry to young adults.

Chapter Three provides an overview of the research sample and methods used in the process of assessing the YAI and telling its story. The various elements and aspects of the Young Adult Initiative are explained in detail in Chapter Four, including assessment of this effort by participants. Finally, in Chapter Five at the end of Part One, you can see the findings of the research articulated as five universal challenges.

Part Two: Telling the YAI Story through Universal Challenges

This section provides vignettes, or short scenarios, to offer reflection on the findings. These vignettes do not represent one specific parish; they are an amalgamation of some of the parishes' YAI experiences and issues they faced. They offer research data that highlights how common these issues were among YAI parishes and insights directly from leaders within the YAI, through anonymous quotes that speak to the issues.

This style of reporting in Part Two is being used to retain the confidentiality of each YAI parish community. It is important to note that all parishes in the YAI had their struggles and successes, and each gained insights through their participation. The use of this storytelling format invites pastoral leaders to step into the YAI story and see how it informs how their parishes address these universal challenges.

Chapter Six: Parish Culture

- » Vignette One: Where Do We Start?
- » Vignette Two: Change is Hard
- » Vignette Three: They Called Me by Name!

Chapter Seven: Leadership for MYA

- » Vignette Four: One Size Does Not Fit All
- » Vignette Five: Together is Better!
- » Vignette Six: Father, Can You...?
- » Vignette Seven: Transition: Is it Inevitable?

Chapter Eight: Understanding and Addressing the Needs of Young Adults

- » Vignette Eight: Getting to Know You
- » Vignette Nine: The Young Adult Melting Pot
- » Vignette Ten: Buying-In
- » Vignette Eleven: No More Guilt



The Five Universal Challenges:



Definitions of Success and a Parish's Key Aims for the Ministry

Identifying goals, how to measure success or improvement, and the ability to self-reflect led to more honest conversations about where a parish had been, where it hoped to go, and how it could best get there.



The Diverse and Transitional Nature of Ministry with Young Adults

There is no "one-size-fits-all" approach to ministry with young adults due to their ever-changing nature due to going through several life stages within their young adult ages, i.e., independence, marriage, employment, and parenthood, etc.



The Spectrum of Outreach and Accessibility to Young Adults

Parishes that were rural and urban had difficulty finding young adults within their communities. While some parishes in these settings knew where they were, they either used that to their advantage or could not determine a way to engage them.



Fostering a Parish Culture that Leads to Integration of Young Adults into the Parish

It takes a village, and all must be on board with integrating young adults because anyone could cause a ripple effect within the efforts of the entire parish.



Finding the Right and Consistent Leadership for Ministry with Young Adults

Beginning with the pastors, there were clearly differences of experiences between those parishes that had the support of the parish leadership and those that did not or were regularly changing their leadership.



CHAPTER TWO: YAI PARTICIPANTS



- ★ Saint Meinrad, St. Meinrad, IN
- 1 St. Alphonsus, Zionsville, IN
- 2 St. Bartholomew, Columbus, IN
- 3 St. Cecilia, Cincinnati, OH
- 4 Christ the King, Ferdinand, IN
- 5 St. Clare of Assisi, O'Fallon, IL
- 6 Holy Angels, Indianapolis, IN
- 7 Holy Family, Brentwood, TN
- 8 Holy Spirit, Bowling Green, KY
- 9 St. John the Evangelist, St. John, IN
- 10 Mary Queen of the Holy Rosary, Lexington, KY
- 11 St. Monica, Mishawaka, IN
- 12 Our Lady of Perpetual Help, New Albany, IN
- 13 Sacred Heart Cathedral, Knoxville, TN

When choosing the participating parishes, Saint Meinrad included a diverse set of parishes within the Young Adult Initiative. They did this by balancing urban, rural, and suburban parishes with other considerations, including parish size by households, and parish demographics by race or language.

Some parishes had full-time staff dedicated to young adult ministry, most had staff that split their responsibilities between young adults and another parish ministry, and a couple parishes had ministries organized entirely by volunteers. One final consideration was the desire to have multiple dioceses represented. Out of 13 parishes, there are 11 (arch)dioceses included in the YAI.

Originally, 16 parishes were selected based on the criteria from over 80 applicants. By the conclusion of the YAI, three parishes had ended their participation early.

St. Alphonsus Liguori Catholic Church

ZIONSVILLE, INDIANA
Diocese of Lafayette-in-Indiana
www.zionsvillecatholic.com

Demographic Overview

St. Alphonsus Liguori Catholic Church is in Zionsville, Indiana, and is part of the Diocese of Lafayette-in-Indiana. Zionsville is located just north of Indianapolis in Boone County. According to the latest census information, Zionsville has a population of

30,603 (of those, 27.8% are aged 18-24 and 25.6% are aged 25-44). The religious population of Zionsville is 17% Catholic, 44% Protestant, and 39% other. Zionsville is an affluent community that is 90% Caucasian, with 6% of households speaking a language other than English at home.



St. Alphonsus is one of only two Catholic parishes in Boone County and the only Catholic parish in Zionsville. The parish is made up of 1,749 families (5,339 individuals) and those within the “young adult” age range make up approximately 17% of the members (ages 19-35). The parish has one priest, one deacon, and 17 lay staff members. It has one staff person in the role of Associate Director of Adult and Young Adult Formation. The parish does not have an elementary or preschool, but does allow two homeschool co-ops to use its facilities during the week.

Parish YAI Story

St. Alphonsus Catholic Church eagerly participated in the Young Adult Initiative. With the increasing population in their town, the parish experienced an increase in young families and young adults joining the parish over the years prior to the initiative; however, the parish did not have any targeted ministry for people in this age group. Before the YAI began, the parish hired a staff member to serve as the Young Adult Coordinator to focus the parish’s efforts on this young adult population.

Maintaining a staff member in this position has been a significant challenge for the parish. Over the course of the YAI program, the parish has had three different full-time staff positions related to young adult ministry. This turnover, in addition to COVID-related disruptions, became a hindrance to gaining momentum for the ministry.

St. Alphonsus used two layers of leadership in its young adult ministry: a visionary core team and small group leaders who animated the key goal of building community. When new young adults were identified, the parish followed a well-defined process to welcome and connect the young adults to the parish. Many events were designed as opportunities for building community. These events included Party at Padre’s

(get-togethers at the rectory) and P3 (a weekly event featuring Mass, adoration, confession, and gathering at a pub).

In March 2021, the parish reorganized its young adult ministry. It is now under the broader umbrella of adult faith formation guided by a new Associate Director of Adult and Young Adult Formation. St. Alphonsus is also reorganizing its young adult core team to revitalize and reorganize its approach to young adult ministry in the parish and community.

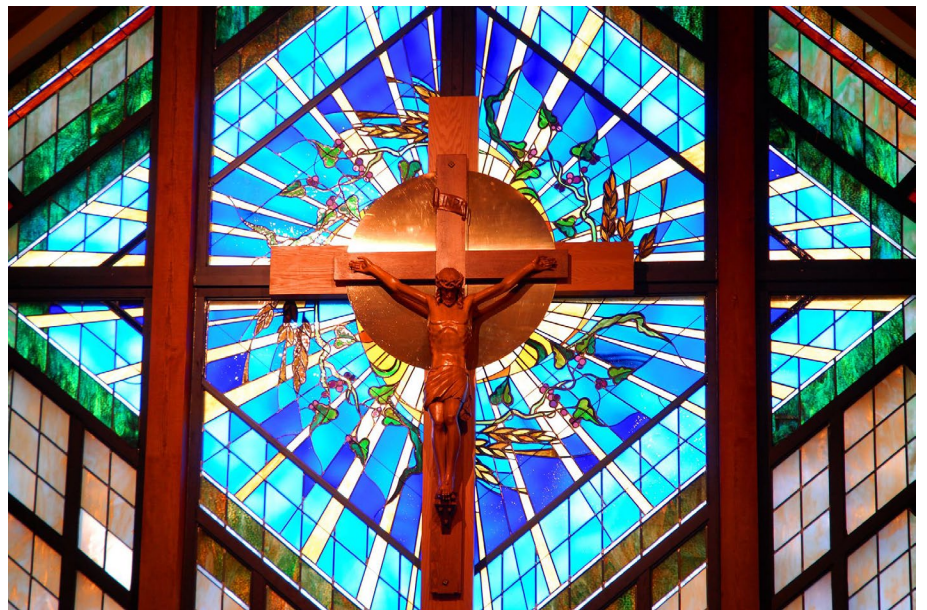
Quote from YAI Contact/Pastor:

"I think the most fruitful thing I've seen is giving young adults a place to ask questions, and an atmosphere where they don't feel like they're going to be judged for what they asked. Then the second half of that is giving them honest answers to those questions, even if it's not what they want to hear, but doing it within relationship."

Contact, Tom Ponchak

"One of the best things that has been told to me is that young adult ministry should not be understood as us ministering to them, but as us inviting them into the fold of the ministry of the parish. So not seeing it as though we're going to minister to them, or this ministry is completely segregated from the rest of the parish, but to see it as an opportunity to bring them into the whole experience of the parish. So that's one of the reasons why I think that it was good to have Tom, who is our adult faith formator, also be in charge of Young Adult Faith Formation, because he's able to really help them to integrate into the rest of the parish."

Pastor, Fr. Travis



St. Bartholomew Catholic Church

COLUMBUS, INDIANA
Archdiocese of Indianapolis
www.saintbartholomew.org



Demographic Overview

St. Bartholomew Parish is in the city of Columbus, Indiana, and is the only parish throughout the entire county of Bartholomew. It is a parish of nearly 1,700 households with an elementary and middle school that has an enrollment of just under 400 students.

According to 2019 population estimates from the Census Bureau, there were 18,832 households in Columbus, and 31,452 households within the entire county. The ethnic makeup of the parish is approximately 70% white, 25% Latino, and 5% other (Indian, Asian, African American), making it more diverse than the overall county, which is nearly 80% white, 8.8% Hispanic, and 6.6% Asian.

Parish YAI Story

St. Bartholomew actively participated in the Young Adult Initiative, taking advantage of many of the resources and services offered by Saint Meinrad. Although the coordinator admits that she “thought we would be further along” and that one of the more important learnings was that “it takes a lot of time,” the parish has made progress toward each of its five key aims. St. Bartholomew has benefitted from a committed and competent YAI Core Team that has made very good use of the resources provided by Saint Meinrad. It has maximized the parish’s investment in young adult ministry and the support of the pastor by developing a unique leadership structure.

The YAI Core Team is led by a volunteer and plans strategically and long-term. The Young Adult Ministry (led by a staff member) works tactically and manages implementation of ministry strategies. There is strong evidence that the YAI Core Team and the YAM Planning Team focus on the centrality of relationships in ministry and work to build a comprehensive ministry that meets a variety of needs.

They have developed a strategic planning process to ensure outreach to the unaffiliated as well as to those who are engaged in the Church. Following the YAI, indicators suggest that the leadership structures developed for young adult ministry at St. Bartholomew would continue to propel the parish forward in ministering to and with young adults.



“

**Quote from
YAI Contact:**

“Find dedicated and enthusiastic volunteers in it for the long haul. Make sure your core team includes a parish staff member. Remember change and progress is slow. It’s all about authentic relationships. Get parishioners and other ministries involved often. The core team doesn’t need to/shouldn’t do it all.”

**— Erin Laswell,
Parish Contact**

St. Cecilia Catholic Church

CINCINNATI, OHIO

Archdiocese of Cincinnati

www.stceciliacincinnati.org



Demographic Overview

St. Cecilia Catholic Church, located in the Oakley suburb of Cincinnati, Ohio, is predominantly Caucasian with a membership of about 1,025 households. The parish's elementary school, however, is much more ethnically diverse with a student population that is approximately 30% Hispanic, 40% African American, and 30% Caucasian. The city of Cincinnati has a population of 303,940, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

The suburb of Oakley has a population of around 11,082. In the last decade, the parish has experienced an influx of young adults into the parish due in large part to the revitalization of the city and an increase in jobs. Many of these young adults are single, young professionals who regularly attend Mass at St. Cecilia. Their pastor indicated that 75% of regular Mass attendees in the parish are young adults.



Parish YAI Story

St. Cecilia Parish was primed for success with the Young Adult Initiative. It is in a Cincinnati neighborhood that already has a large young professional population; thus, the parish has a majority of parishioners under the age of 30. When it began in the YAI, the primary concern was an inability to engage new members in the young adult ministry. They moved to intentionally focus on young adults as a parish and appear to have incredible support from key leaders, including the pastor and a full-time staff member, who have remained consistent throughout the YAI process.

This parish-wide focus and commitment of resources to include and integrate young adults in the parish have led to a broad variety of activities and ministries that appeal to a vast range of young adults. During their time in the YAI, St. Cecilia's participated in the "Amazing Parish" process and developed a procedure where all pastoral activities must first be filtered through the lens of "How is this serving our young adults?"

Some of the events mentioned are parish festivals, different liturgies, Pints with Priests, and "Paint with Bob Ross" night. While the parish mentions a few newcomers, the focus seems to be on those who already have some established understanding of the Catholic faith and devotion. While they experienced disruption due to the COVID pandemic, they moved quickly to online efforts with some success. Importantly, they also realized they could not virtually replicate the community many young adults crave. Despite the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, the parish established a foundation for outreach to this young adult demographic that could be successful long into the future.

“

Quote from YAI Contact:

"Instead of planning events for young adults as something separate from the rest of the parish, we have been incorporating the ideas and insights of young adults into every aspect of parish life."

— Sarah Rose,
YAI Contact and Young
Adult Coordinator

Christ the King Catholic Church

FERDINAND, INDIANA

Diocese of Evansville

www.christthekingdc.org

Demographic Overview

In 2017, the parishes of St. Ferdinand and St. Henry merged and created Christ the King Parish. Christ the King Parish is in southwestern Indiana, just above the Kentucky border, in the town of Ferdinand. Ferdinand is a neighboring town to Saint Meinrad, located less than 10 minutes away. According to the 2019 census data, the total population of Ferdinand is about 2,200. Christ the King serves 1,460 households and 219 children. Christ the King's parishioners are primarily Caucasian.



St. Ferdinand

Parish YAI Story

Christ the King Parish is a church family that has undergone significant change throughout the past few years. These changes include renovations, merging parishes, and changing staff. Prior to the Young Adult Initiative, Christ the King Parish had an awareness of the current state of the Church and the need for intentional ministry toward young adults. However, there was no direct outreach to individuals ages 23-29. Aware of their neglect to this important population, Christ the King entered the Young Adult Initiative.

Throughout the YAI, Christ the King has stressed the importance of this work to the parish community. They also actively listened to their young adults as they discussed where they needed support from their faith communities and did their best to meet those needs. The Core Team at Christ the King also proved to be very adaptive in their implementation of ideas. If something did not work, they recognized it and tried again in a different way.

As it enters a post-COVID world, Christ the King is ready to implement its new ideas for engaging with young adults in person again and continue the work of supporting young adults on developing their personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

Quote from Contact, Kelsey Kelly, when asked about their young adult ministry efforts:

"Our main ministry has been our small groups at our church. The men's group specifically has flourished, and usually it's harder to get men to come to events like this. And it has been beautiful. They're all single, so especially during COVID, they needed community because they lived alone and maybe their family lived far away, so they really didn't see anybody. We even had a participant driving about 45 minutes from a different parish. They basically all meet up on Friday nights, cook dinner together, grill out, and have Bible study. The guy that drove 40 minutes, he shared with our core team, 'I've been looking for this for years, but I could never find community with guys who have the same perspective as me.' I think far beyond this, no matter what happens with our initiative, the guys will continue meeting up. They have established that fellowship now.

"And then the women's group has now grown as well to nine or 10 ladies. We had one woman say, 'I couldn't really find friends that had the same beliefs so I felt I couldn't connect well with them, and I'm relying on this now as my community of people I can go to.' It's just been beautiful to see how there was a need and God provided for it. Even though through the initiative we sometimes feel we haven't really succeeded in the big events, and it's hard and frustrating sometimes, when you see just the little things and hearing people's stories and how now they have a community that brings them closer to God, too, and now they feel closer to God because of that, it helps you say, 'God's working in it, even when it's hard to see in the big picture.'"



St. Clare of Assisi Catholic Church

O'FALLON, ILLINOIS

Diocese of Belleville

www.stclarechurch.org

Demographic Overview

St. Clare of Assisi Catholic Church is in O'Fallon, Illinois. O'Fallon is in southern Illinois and is about 25 minutes

outside St. Louis. The total population of O'Fallon is about 29,000, and St. Clare serves 1,117 households. The parish supports an elementary school with 389 students enrolled. The parish also supports a preschool and daycare that has an additional 69 children enrolled. St. Clare's parishioners are primarily Caucasian, along with some Asian, Hispanic, African, Pacific Islander, Middle Eastern, and Black/African American parishioners.



A military base located nearby brings in many young people. About 25% of the parish are military who are assigned to the area for three years or less. There are also several colleges and universities nearby that bring several individuals to the parish, such as Southwestern Illinois College, Southern Illinois University Edwardsville, McKendree University, and others in the Greater St. Louis Metropolitan Area.

Parish YAI Story

St. Clare of Assisi Catholic Church is a parish in a unique position to minister to young adults in O'Fallon, Illinois, as the average age of the parish is 27. Many of their parishioners are young families; college students; and young, single military men and women from Scott Air Force Base. This unique opportunity of being surrounded by young adults puts St. Clare Church in the perfect position to enter the Young Adult Initiative. Prior to the YAI, they had an active young adult ministry; however, the parish community as a whole did not have a great understanding of the importance of ministry specific to young adults. The Director of Adult Faith Formation and Mission has provided consistent support for young adult ministry throughout the YAI.

Throughout the YAI, the Core Team kept the parish community updated on all their work in hopes of strengthening their understanding of the importance and priority of young adults. The Core Team remained focused on its goal of accompanying young adults on their faith journeys, even despite the COVID-19 pandemic, and saw an increase in young adults involved in other parish ministries.

During the pandemic, they were creative about how to gather and engage young adults online. Efforts included delivering various art kits or beers from the local brewery to young adult houses to create a more common experience during their virtual gatherings. As they begin to move back to a sense of normal after the pandemic, the Core Team is focused on making up for the progress they might have lost when everything shut down.

Quote from Contact, Matt Flynn, on engaging young adults:

"I think our approach to engagement has been more touching on their life in some way. So, if one of our parishioners hears something in one of the homilies about young adults, and their concerns about suffering, and how that relates to God, and they mention that to one of their young adult kids, who has stopped going to church, when their kid brings it up, that's engagement. When we send out a Flocknote text message, and a young adult, who hardly ever, or has stopped coming to church, gets that, and sees that it has a link to a prayer on Catholic Relief Services website, and they, for whatever reason, decide to click on that link, and say that prayer, that's engagement. Or just getting the text message and knowing that we care about them.

"We heard that from a survey we did later on in the pandemic, people just saying, 'We get your messages. We know you care.' So, I think any time we touch a life, that's engagement. Of course, we want to move beyond that, but I think for us, we want to throw a broad net, and we want to know, and remember that these are seeds that we're planting, and they can take years, decades to flourish. And it's helpful when we think, 'Well, we're still engaging young adults.' We don't know what that's going to look like, what's going to come out of that, but we are engaging with young adults."

Matt continues with his thoughts on young adult integration in the parish: *"As a director of adult faith formation, I was never particularly interested in just having a young adult group. How do we have young adults in all aspects of our parish life? In our Bible studies, in our liturgical ministries, in our service, and social justice outreach, as well as coming to social events? Which is an identified need that they gave us in our listening sessions, which is the reason we do them.*

"I think that integration piece has been a part of what we wanted to do from the beginning, and it's something we keep consistently asking about, and trying to move forward working with ministry leaders, educating our parish council, We had a great meeting with our stewardship committee, right before COVID, on how we can give concrete steps and actions to all of our ministry leaders on ways to better work with young adults who are involved in their ministries ... You can't integrate people into the parish if you're not intentionally relating to them, because young adults just won't buy it."

Holy Angels Catholic Church

INDIANAPOLIS,
INDIANA

Archdiocese of Indianapolis

www.holyangelsindy.org

Demographic Overview

Holy Angels Catholic Church is a tight-knit African American parish located in Indianapolis, Indiana. The population of Indianapolis is approximately 876,000, according to the 2019 U.S. Census. The membership of Holy Angels Church is about 259 families and is about 88% African American and 10% multiracial. The parish elementary school reports an enrollment of 150 children, and 30 children are enrolled in the preschool. The current administrative staff consists of Sr. Gail Trippett, CSJ, who serves as the pastoral life coordinator, two priests who serve as sacramental ministers; a DRE; a principal; a parish secretary; a choir director; an accountant; and part-time maintenance staff.



Parish Summary of the Summary

After suffering the death of two pastors consecutively, a previous pastoral associate and a beloved secretary of the parish, the Holy Angels Catholic Church community experienced a period of instability and grief. The demolition of the 110-year-old church during this timeframe added major challenges to the parish as well. A core group of parishioners remained faithful to the mission, while aspiring to rebuild the Church. The Young Adult Initiative presented an opportunity to assist the parish in a renewed outreach to young adults who had all but disappeared from the church pews.

The parish YAI efforts began by using their greatest assets: the parishioners who attend Mass. They spent intentional time talking to parishioners and asking them about any young adults they knew who lived in the community but did not attend church. From there, they were able to extend personal invitations to young adults to participate in church activities. They used those opportunities when the young adults were registering for events to collect their contact information for follow-up and further invitations to YAI activities.

Holy Angels also focused its efforts on college students from the community who attend local universities and colleges by sending care packages and church bulletins to them. One of the main young adult events is the Adulthood 101 classes, which provide young adults with useful life skills in areas such as real estate, financial literacy, and resume writing, etc. To develop this event in partnership with a local university, the parish was encouraged to develop a mission statement for its YAI efforts: “to create vibrant Christ-centered communities to engage the youth of the Church.”

The efforts resulted in an increase in young adults participating in the liturgy through music ministry and choir. Due to the pandemic, Holy Angels encountered difficulty in its outreach to young adults since the main source of connection occurred with parishioners who attend Mass each Sunday. However, the parish was able to initiate a Virtual Bible Study, which was highly successful. The most impactful stories the YAI coordinator shared were stories of young adults who had returned to faithful participation in the Eucharist as a result of the YAI.

Quote from YAI Contact

"Let's share at the detail level. It's like picking a card out of a box and saying, 'Hey, do we want to try this one?' Then this is what we tried. This is what we learned. Whatever the level of intensity that's required for leadership was tried. That would be that toolbox. Just how do you build the toolbox for those leaders, that leadership team, core group to say, 'Here's some tools for your toolbox, and you guys select and go forward from there based on what you feel might work for your parish.'"

Reggie Horne

"The only thing that I would add is getting a resource list, churches and organizations that are fully engaged with young people, so that partnerships can be established in the beginning. Because it's difficult to do this on your own, and you're reinventing the wheel as opposed to having somebody tell you how to do it. But a resource partner church would be helpful where you can bounce ideas off and they can say, 'Let's walk with you through this and see if some of the areas that helped us would help you.' And if not sharing a tried method, it would be a chance to learn together. I would say that would be the most helpful thing, because in the beginning it felt like a blind person just learning how to see, as opposed to having somebody who had sight all along walking with you to help you to understand what this or that means. A partner church that could say, 'You need to put on sunglasses now because it's going to hurt your eyes,' would be helpful."

Sr. Gail Trippett, CSJ

Holy Family Catholic Church

BRENTWOOD, TENNESSEE

Diocese of Nashville

www.holyfamilycc.com



Demographic Overview

Holy Family Catholic Church is a vibrant parish in Brentwood, Tennessee, which is an incorporated town with a population of over 42,000, according to the 2019 U.S. Census. The town is situated just south of Nashville, and is sometimes considered a suburb of the city, although it is its own incorporated township. The parish membership is comprised of nearly 2,800 households.

While the parish does not have an elementary school, it does have a preschool with an enrollment of just under 100 children. The population of the town of Brentwood is primarily Caucasian, with a small percentage of individuals who identify as Asian, and even small numbers of people identified as Latino or African American. The young adult community in this town has experienced significant difficulties over the past few years, such as an increase in overdose and suicide deaths.

Parish YAI Story

The pastor and staff of Holy Family Church understand the sobering statistics of the number of young adults leaving the Catholic Church. At the same time, they recognized that young adults in their own community were suffering from lack of a true community that could lead them to encountering Jesus Christ. Through the Young Adult Initiative, Holy Family Church committed to providing that community to the young adults in Brentwood and neighboring parishes. The parish developed a weekly Wednesday night young adult Mass with a social afterward as the anchor to their ministry. From this event, they expanded into other regular events, such as Bible studies and monthly adoration and praise/worship nights.

About midway through the initiative, the parish conducted a survey of young adults and used the results to strategically plan the ministry moving forward. The Core Team's discussion of survey

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Quote from YAI Contact:

“The YAI was life changing – not only for those of us on the core team, but for the entire parish community. Having a spirit of curiosity, we welcomed the unknown and its challenge to change and grow beyond our notions of who these young adults were. While we worked hard to begin this initiative at Holy Family, it is clear that our ‘yes’ merely helped to pave the way for something much greater than any of our efforts. Young adult ministry has taken on a life of its own and we trust that this will continue to direct our efforts. Its nature is fluid and ever changing and it has been pure grace to recognize this. Accepting this about young adult ministry has changed our perspective with regard to all of parish life.”

— Janis Lovecchio,
Parish Contact

results led to a reorganization of goals to include service opportunities, Praise and Worship evenings, guest speakers at socials, development of small groups for both fellowship/faith sharing, and Bible study. In addition to the successful events and ministries Holy Family has offered young adults, the parish has also welcomed young adults into leadership in all parish ministries and councils.

The fortunate consequence of adding young adults into leadership positions is that the overall parish has developed a posture of listening to young adults and trusting their opinions and ideas. As a result, the entire parish has experienced a revitalization. Over these last few years of the YAI, Holy Family has truly become a home for young adults seeking a sense of belonging.



Holy Spirit Catholic Church

BOWLING GREEN, KENTUCKY

Diocese of Owensboro

www.holyspiritcatholic.org



Demographic Overview

Holy Spirit Catholic Church, located in Bowling Green, Kentucky, is a moderately sized parish with a membership of 1,344 families. According to the 2020 U.S. Census, the population of Bowling Green sits just over 70,000 and is comprised of 25,305 households. The parish supports both an elementary school and a preschool. Holy Spirit's parishioners are mostly Caucasian, along with many Burmese and some Hispanic/Latino parishioners. Seven staff members coordinate parish ministries along with another 38 staff between the school and preschool. Both the city of Bowling Green and Holy Spirit Parish have recently experienced an increase in population. The 2020 census shows an 18.7% increase in the population of Bowling Green since 2010.

Parish YAI Story

Holy Spirit Catholic Church is a parish in a unique position to minister to young adults in the growing city of Bowling Green, Kentucky. At a time when young adults are leaving the Church and leaving home to find employment, these young adults are moving to Bowling Green. Understanding the opportunity in front of them, Holy Spirit entered the Young Adult Initiative in hopes that they could capitalize on this influx of young adults in their community. The parish began the YAI with the goals of transforming the parish into a community that welcomes young adults, understands their needs, and effectively ministers to them.

They spent a lot of time listening to young adults and getting to know them and their needs. They offered ministries and activities such as young adult small groups, Theology on Tap, and Bible study because the young adults distinctly requested opportunities to grow in their understanding of the faith. These ministries were highly successful. They also offered social events, such as a trip to the Tennessee Titans football game or a Hot Rods baseball game, to draw in young adults who might be disengaged

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**Quote from
YAI Contact:**

“The transition that has meant the most for our efforts is that we now have two young adult priests in the area and things have just blown up so much because we have their support and participation. We also now have the vicar of clergy for the diocese in our area and is being brought on-board for everything and excited. And so, our efforts are not only growing in our area, but the excitement is spreading throughout the diocese. It just shows how imperative it is to have that leadership support, especially of clergy.”

— Allison Steen-Baker

from the faith. The parish’s YAI Coordinator recounted how one couple in particular, who did not participate in the Church, or even attend Mass, joined the group for the Titans game. After their experience at the game, the couple became open to the idea of going back to church and even attended Mass a few times.

They quickly realized that the Core Team could not be both the innovators and the implementers of the YAI; therefore, they created a separate Young Adult Planning Team to implement events so the Core Team could focus more on big-picture innovation for the initiative. Then, the pandemic halted most of the parish’s progress. They continued to offer some virtual events such as Bible studies, daily Gospel reflection texts, and online socials and adoration. These efforts kept those who were already engaged connected; however, they found it nearly impossible to evangelize in any way during this time.

More recently, the Core Team has begun to focus on new outreach efforts, such as conducting a parish census to obtain accurate contact information for the young adults in the community. Throughout all of this, the YAI Coordinator has been advocating for collaboration among all of the staff members to be more inclusive of young adults in all parish ministries. This has been a huge culture shift for the whole parish, and they have had both successes and setbacks in this area. Although weary from the pandemic, the parish seems to be set up for success in its young adult ministry efforts through continuous focus on its goals and recognition of each small success it achieves.



St. John the Evangelist Catholic Church

ST. JOHN, INDIANA

Diocese of Gary

www.stjohnparish.org

Demographic Overview

St. John the Evangelist Parish is located in St. John, Indiana. St. John was founded in 1837. The population was 17,426 in 2019. It is located 24 miles southeast of Chicago, and is filled with quiet neighborhoods, quality schools and churches. The present church has 1,370 families that belong to the parish. St. John the Evangelist Parish also has a private school called St. John the Evangelist School. The school contains grades pre-K through 8 and has 340 students enrolled. They have 20 paid staff and a large parish complex.



Parish YAI Story

In the last 10 years, St. John the Evangelist Parish has been undergoing a culture shift from maintenance to mission mode. More specifically, the parish is moving from being a busy church with dozens of ministries and clubs to a church that is focused on a process that promotes hospitality and welcome, catechesis, small groups, service, and worship. This process has not been easy. Changing a culture never is. This evangelical impulse is a primary element of this parish community and is reflected in the overall mission of the parish: Be Disciples. Make Disciples.

The parish has adopted the small group Alpha approach in the entire parish community, including creating young adult groups through the program. During the pandemic, small groups were moved to a virtual option. Also, the staff called all the young adults in the parish multiple times during the pandemic to check in with them.

The parish's participation in the YAI has been driven by a core team made up of staff members with a full-time coordinator for young adult ministry. One outreach strategy the parish adopted was to host a Catholic Life Podcast with topics of interest to young adults. Additionally, the parish, in the midst of the YAI, switched its approach from focusing on running large programs to attract young adults to investigating how to form a community with smaller numbers of young adults. The hope is that these young adults can then be part of the outreach. There has also been a focus on accompanying young adults intentionally on their faith journey.

Quote from YAI Contact Louis Cain on the topic of accompanying young adults

"There is a young adult whom I have had the chance to accompany. He is really desirous of becoming more of a disciple. Up to this point, it has been really difficult for him because he has not had any community to guide him on that path. Even though he would attend Mass regularly, he did not have the support to really make those faith steps. After one community event, he told me how incredible it has been for him to have friends who share the same values as he does. It has been a great blessing to walk with him."



Mary, Queen of the Holy Rosary

LEXINGTON,
KENTUCKY

Diocese of Lexington

www.mqhr.org

Demographic Overview

Mary, Queen of the Holy Rosary is located in Lexington, Kentucky. Membership is diverse, with about a third

of the members being Hispanic, 10% being Congolese, and the remaining being of Anglo descent. This diverse population comes from 2,000 households. Prior to the start of the YAI, the parish had participated in the V Encuentro and a strategic planning process. The parish has a school with 410 students enrolled and 30 children enrolled in the preschool/daycare. The parish has a large young adult community that had been lacking direction and leadership in the parish prior to the YAI.

Lexington is the second largest city in Kentucky, with a population of 250,000 people and home to the University of Kentucky. It is also the see of the diocese with several diocesan staff as parishioners. An additional seven parishes are within a 15-mile radius of Mary Queen. One of these parishes shares a priest in charge of Hispanic ministry with Mary Queen.

Parish YAI Story

Mary, Queen of the Holy Rosary, known by parishioners as Mary Queen, experienced transitions in YAI leadership and team members that challenged its YAI efforts. The parish was innovative in considering and trying new ideas, especially with relationship-building, but struggled with being a bridge to its ethnic communities, as they had originally desired.

One of the successful efforts was to integrate young adults into the music ministry and to lead praise and worship events. When the COVID-19 pandemic began, they worked on updating the database and calling all known young adults to check in with them. They are realistic about their successes and challenges and are already talking about next steps without the support of the YAI.

Quote from YAI Contact:

"We've been very blessed to be a part of this program ... I took a lot of solace in it; if it works, we can keep that for next time. If it doesn't work, let's just try to think about how ... we tweak it. We don't necessarily have to go reinvent the wheel for any of this, but overall, I'm very happy with where we are and our efforts here at Mary Queen. It's leaps and bounds from where it was prior to our involvement in this program."



Our Lady of Perpetual Help Catholic Church

NEW ALBANY, INDIANA
Archdiocese of Indianapolis
www.olphna.org

Demographic Overview

Our Lady of Perpetual Help (Our Lady) is located in the town of New Albany on the southeastern border of Indiana, across the Ohio River from Louisville, Kentucky. New Albany has a population of a small suburb, with 36,670. Our Lady is a predominantly Caucasian parish within the Archdiocese of Indianapolis

and has just under 1,000 families. They have a school with almost 300 students. There are 11 parishes within a 15-mile radius of the parish, mostly in Louisville.



Parish YAI Story

Our Lady of Perpetual Help, more commonly referred to as Our Lady, has been trying to establish young adult ministry for a while. The YAI provided the parish an opportunity to focus this goal and expand from their deanery offerings to a more parish-led approach. This led to a regular Theology on Tap-like program called “Breadsticks, Beer Cheese, and the Bible (BBB),” every two weeks. They also established “root groups.” Another event that was regularly mentioned was “Summer Fun Days,” an event that focused on young parents and children once a week during the summer and had positive results.

They experienced transitions with the pastor after the first year of the YAI, and then in the core team and YAI contact during COVID. They refocused their efforts from “welcoming and hospitality” to finding where the young adults were and getting in touch with them. Instead of focusing on life skills, they were focusing on a path of discipleship with the young adults.

Quote from YAI Contact

“As a parish, you have parish leadership, but the goal is to inspire leadership in your parishioners. So I could see that the initiative was a great way to do that, inspire young adults to lead and grow, and to get other parishioners involved, not just young adults because it’s a mix.”

Evonne Corrales, Parish Contact

St. Monica Catholic Church

MISHAWAKA, INDIANA
Diocese of Fort Wayne-South Bend
www.stmonicamish.org



Demographic Overview

St. Monica is in Mishawaka, Indiana, a neighboring suburb of South Bend, home of the University of Notre Dame. At the start of the YAI, the city was quickly growing, with the parish feeling that impact. The year St. Monica applied to be in the YAI, the city had “over 100 million dollars’ worth of urban housing being built within a mile radius of the parish.” They saw an increase in baptisms and weddings since the arrival of a new pastor, who has remained engaged with the young adult community. At the beginning of the YAI initiative, there were 526 households in the parish community, seven paid staff members, and an elementary/middle school with an enrollment of 237 students.

Parish YAI Story

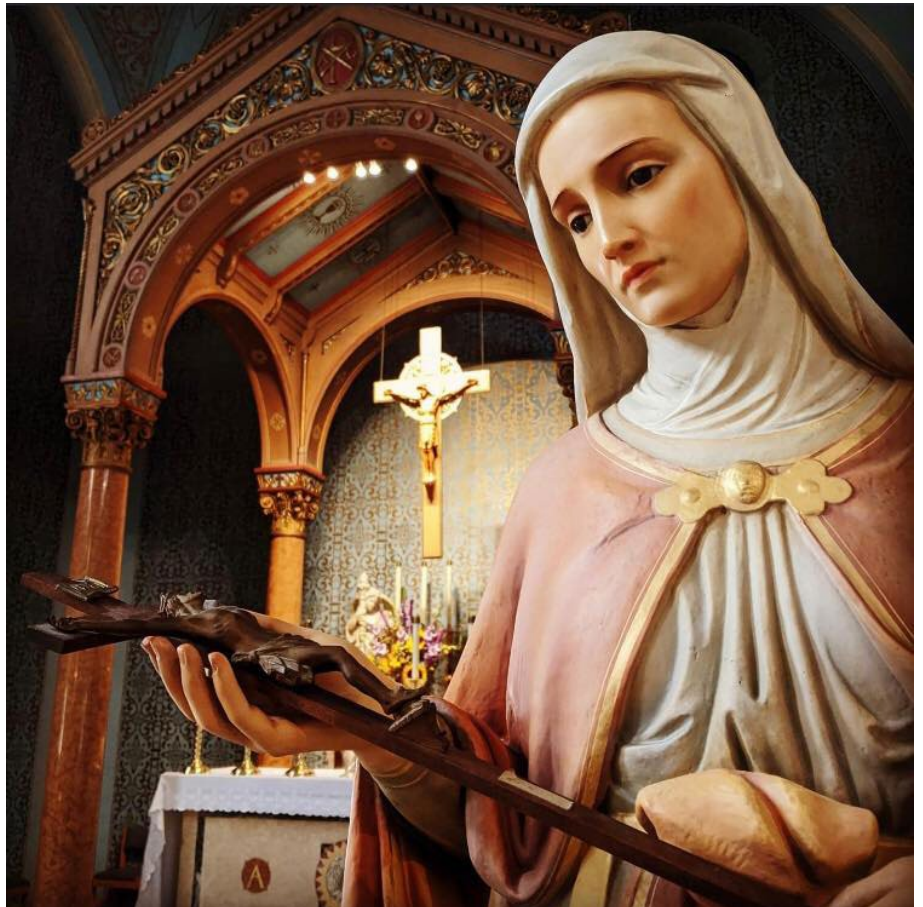
After years of decline, St. Monica Parish recognized the need to embrace the next generation of parishioners and purposefully began a parish renewal focused on attracting and engaging young adults. The parish formed a leadership team of staff members providing direct support to the ministry that has remained consistent. Additionally, a new pastor arrived and embraced the strategy even more, just in time to apply for the Young Adult Initiative after his first year.

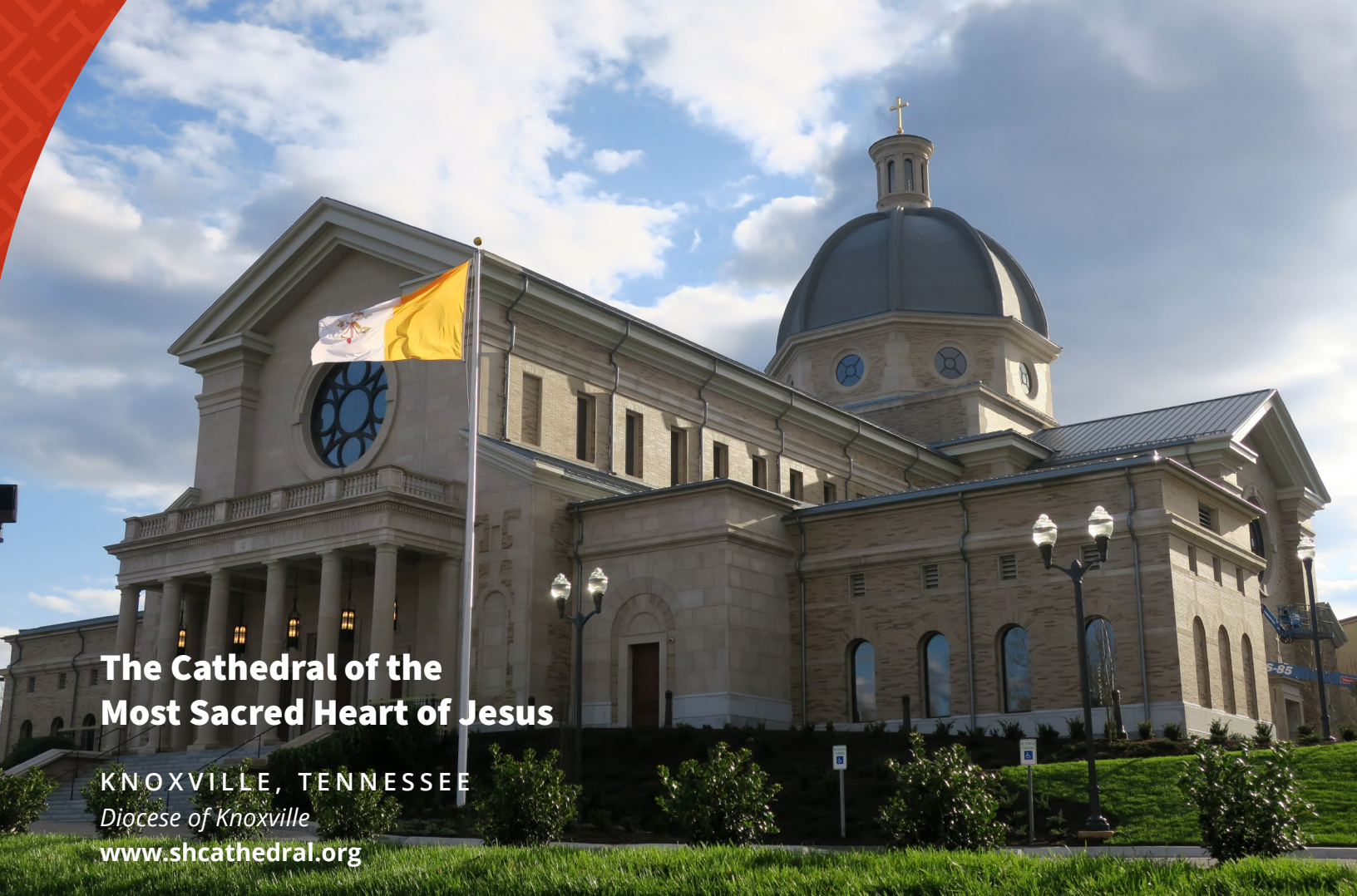
That first year, the parish increased in households by almost 25%. The pastor was not afraid to try new things. From “Parties with Padre” to hosting a workout class at a local gym for parishioners, he was innovative as he tried to engage the young adult community. The parish as a whole embraced the Young Adult Initiative. Older generations chose to get involved in helping with young adult projects, and the young adults were instrumental in helping the parish and older generations stay connected during the COVID-19 pandemic. The parish recognized the impact the YAI had on its community and made plans to maintain the funding and the momentum after the YAI’s conclusion.

Quote from YAI Contact, Antonio Marchi, when asked about their young adult ministry

"The parish is very vibrant and growing now, but that has not always been the case. Throughout its challenges, the parish started asking questions about how the congregation might be sustained in years to come. The effort to grow the young adult population and involvement was really birthed from these conversations. We began with some grassroots efforts that were put together to reach young adults on a community level. Prior to the Young Adult Initiative, those were very successful.

"As we started growing, though, we needed more resources and needed other parishes to bounce ideas off of in order to figure out where the future of the ministry might be going. As the young adult community has developed over the last year especially, we have seen young adults seeking deeper formation in niche sub-groups. There's a mom's group, there's a men's softball team and Bible study group, and several others that get together for prayer and study. People of similar states of life have gravitated towards one another and we are working to support their endeavors to grow in the faith."





The Cathedral of the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus

KNOXVILLE, TENNESSEE

Diocese of Knoxville

www.shcathedral.org

Demographic Overview

The Cathedral of the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus is located in Knoxville, Tennessee, the third largest city in the state. Knoxville has several area Catholic groups that have numerous parishes represented in their membership. These are organic groups, and it is not clear if the lack of affiliation with a parish is a positive or negative for Sacred Heart and other surrounding parishes.

Sacred Heart is the cathedral parish for the diocese. At the time of their application, they had registered 300 new families within the previous two years for a total of 1,590 households. This was an approximate 25% increase. Throughout the time of the YAI, they continued to increase in size and had 2,424 families at its conclusion. They have a school with over 500 students enrolled. Many of their parishioners come from the University of Tennessee or the Oak Ridge National Laboratories. The parish has an active Hispanic ministry, as Spanish-speakers are approximately 40% of their parishioners.

One of Sacred Heart's most successful and active ministries is their PCCW (Parish Council of Catholic Women), and the guilds (small groups) associated with them. These guilds have been supporters and advocates for the young adult ministry at Sacred Heart throughout the YAI. Sacred Heart has a large paid staff of 109 people (school employees are included in this figure), and there are 12 parishes within 15 miles.

Parish YAI Story

Sacred Heart Cathedral is a rapidly growing parish in Knoxville, Tennessee, that has focused its efforts on reaching the unaffiliated. At the start of the YAI, the parish acknowledged having a “very stable Hispanic young adult ministry that attracts approximately 20-30 people.” During the YAI, they opened a new cathedral and added an auditorium for larger events. As the cathedral for the diocese, they had been able to utilize several of the diocesan initiatives for their young adult community, like the Frassati Fellowship.

As the diocese pushed for more parish-based initiatives, Sacred Heart answered the call with open arms, focusing on small groups. They hosted several innovative events like a two-part gathering of brewing beer, and then drinking the homebrew four weeks later. As the COVID-19 pandemic began, the newest coordinator began his tenure at Sacred Heart.

He helped the parish refocus its energies from meeting and inviting to strengthening those people already engaged. This was done in Bible studies that moved online. When events returned to in-person, participants walked away with a coffee mug or tumbler that included an upcoming event calendar, prayer card, and a few other giveaways. The parish as a whole is supportive of the efforts.

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Quote from YAI Parish Leader:

“I really think that because of our participation in the initiative, that we are in a vastly different position and reality of young adult ministry than we were in four years ago; I think it’s created great fruit here.”

— Rector, Fr. David



CHAPTER THREE: YAI RESEARCH METHODS

Introduction to Research

Assessment and learning are critical elements of most Lilly Endowment-funded initiatives, and they were primary goals of the Young Adult Initiative. From the beginning of the project, Saint Meinrad wanted to tell the story of the Young Adult Initiative and the participating parishes. Achieving this goal required the careful crafting of a research plan in which qualitative data was central. The capacity to listen and confirm insights in each step of the plan was integral to building and triangulating data during the process.

With such a small sample, confidentiality was very important. Each parish had successes and failures in the initiative. The goal was not to evaluate the parishes, but to invite them to evaluate themselves based upon their identified starting point and overall goals. Through focus groups and interviews, they shared their successes and failures, the insights gained, and what they would recommend to other parishes.

To maintain the confidentiality of those in the study, data in this report is presented in two ways. First, through traditional research data reporting and findings, and second, through a series of vignettes that represent the various experiences of the study's parishes. The vignettes include study data that informs the experiences of the YAI parishes. The researchers hope this data presentation will engage readers and foster reflection that supports more effective ministry with young adults in U.S. parishes.

Research Goal

To tell the story of the Young Adult Initiative, through implementation of a comprehensive mixed-methods research plan to assess, evaluate, and analyze the outcomes and learnings from the *Young Adult Initiative, We Will Serve the Lord: Strengthening the Domestic Church*.

“Triangulating data” for this project refers to all conclusions being derived from a minimum of three data collection pieces (interviews, focus groups, surveys, reports).

Research Sample

Thirteen parishes participated in all four years of the YAI. These parishes are all within a 250-mile radius of Saint Meinrad and come from 11 (arch)dioceses in five states. These include all five dioceses in Indiana: Lafayette-in-Indiana, Fort Wayne-South Bend, Gary, Evansville, and Indianapolis. In Kentucky, the dioceses of Owensboro and Lexington, and the Archdiocese of Louisville. In Tennessee, the dioceses of Knoxville and Nashville. In Ohio, the Archdiocese of Cincinnati and in Illinois, the Diocese of Belleville.

Data from this study included input from the following:

- » Original YAI parish applications
- » Parish survey of all 13 parishes with 1,359 valid responses of which 253 were young adults ages 18-39
- » Interviews with 11 pastors, 14 parish contacts
- » Focus groups with 13 core teams that included 57 people
- » Focus groups with 68 young adults from 10 parishes
- » Parish Leadership and Core Team Survey representing all 13 parishes with 99 valid responses that included 9 pastors, 36 parish staff members, and 54 core team members and contacts
- » Focus groups with 11 parish contacts
- » Interviews with Saint Meinrad YAI staff

Research Development

To tell both the individual parish and collective YAI story, the research plan included the development of 14 overarching variables and accompanying research questions for exploration. These initial 14 variables were identified in three ways:

1. Through a thorough review of all the YAI documentation relative to the initiative, including semi-annual reports provided by every parish
2. The scoping of the research with two of the YAI parishes to understand their experiences
3. In-depth interviews with the YAI staff regarding the development of the YAI and various elements with the initiative. These overarching variables and research questions can be found beginning on page 136.

Question Development

In developing questions for both quantitative and qualitative methods, each question was linked back to the initial 14 variables and corresponding questions.

Data Collection Methods

Parishes from the Young Adult Initiative were examined through mixed-methods to develop a cohesive story of the parish's participation in the project and ministry with young adults, as well as to tell their collective story in the YAI. Additionally, data was gathered on each of the 14 variables and related questions through sources of data collection listed below. The mixed-methods were as follows:

1. Examination of the written documentation from parishes by reviewing and coding application materials, progress reports, Core Teams' minutes, materials on Ryver, and any program materials to create an initial parish summary.
2. Conduction of a parish-wide survey implemented by each parish with a special section for young adults. This survey was developed to understand each parish's view of the ministry and of young adults in their parish. Additionally, there was a special young adult section to examine the views of young adults about the parish, their needs, and hopes for ministry.
3. Interviews of key parish leadership including initiative contact/coordinator, the pastor, and/or parish staff members involved in the YAI to explore their understanding of ministry with young adults and their parish's experience of the YAI, including innovations and challenges.
4. Facilitated focus groups with the core team members from each parish to explore their understanding of ministry with young adults and their parish's experience of the YAI, including innovations and challenges.
5. Facilitated focus groups with young adults from each parish to examine their experience and engagement in the parish and with the young adult ministry efforts.
6. Conduction of a parish leadership survey of all past and present core team members, as well as pastors and other parish leaders, to understand their assessment of the YAI and their parishes' challenges and successes.
7. Two facilitated focus groups of parish contacts about their experiences and that of their parishes in the YAI.

Data Analysis

The qualitative data gained from the focus groups and interviews was coded using the original research variables.

The data from the parish survey and the parish leadership including the core team survey was cleaned up to eliminate any incomplete or duplicate responses. Analysis included looking at frequencies for each of the questions and coding the open-ended responses.

Data Reports and Interpretation

The Ministry Training Source Research Team provided five data reports and one statement about the impact of COVID-19 on YAI to the research interpretation team that included national young adult ministry experts. This team met to discuss and identify findings. Due to confidentiality, the entirety of these data reports cannot be shared; however, see Part 3 for the public data reports on the project. The data reports examined in the data interpretation process included:

Data Report 1: Parish Survey

In May 2021, all the YAI parishes were asked to invite all parishioners 18+ to record their experiences and observations of being a participating parish through an online survey.

Data Report 2: Parish Leadership Survey

In August 2021, after all the interviews and focus groups, all pastors, pastoral staff members, current and former core team members, and parish contacts were invited to complete an additional online survey. Includes a supplemental report from the 249 young adults in the survey that provided coded responses to the question, "What is one thing you believe your parish needs to know about your generation?"

Data Report 3: Research Identified Overarching Themes

After reviewing all data, over a hundred variables were identified for consideration. These were categorized thematically, and these 12 themes and their corresponding variables were included here.

Data Report 4: Categories for Comparison

Reviewing the identified themes, and consideration of common concepts shared between parishes. Parishes were grouped categorically in several ways to compare and contrast any benefits or consequences to commonalities. Most of this report can be reviewed beginning on page 169.

Supplemental YAI Innovations Report

The parishes each had various means of innovating in their ministry with and to young adults. All of the data collection methods, except the parish survey, identified many examples of innovation. This data was then coded to identify major categories of innovation.

COVID Impact Statement

A brief reflection on the effects of the pandemic on the YAI, which was also shared in the introduction of this publication.

Appendix X: Fourteen Initial Overarching Variables and Research Questions for Assessing the Saint Meinrad Young Adult Initiative

I. Parish Culture for Ministry with Young Adults: The degree to which the parish as a whole welcomes and engages young adults through openness to change, support, and ownership.

To be evaluated based on assessment of the following questions and variables:

- a. How much do parishioners and parish staff understand and/or support the Young Adult Initiative or ministry with young adults?
- b. How much effort did the Core Team put toward building support and ownership among the parish-at-large, esp. key parish leaders?
- c. How have young adults been intentionally welcomed and integrated into other ministries of the parish?
- d. What are the perspectives that the parish has about young adults?
- e. How does the parish tend to respond to changes designed to accommodate the engagement and integration of young adults into the faith community?
- f. In what ways has the parish culture changed due to the presence of young adults in the community?
- g. What resistance has the Core Team experienced from the larger parish regarding change?

II. Parish Investment: The degree to which the parish invests time, staffing, budget, and other resources toward young adults and ministry with young adults.

To be evaluated based on assessment of the following questions and variables:

- a. How many parish staff members are involved in and/or responsible for young adult ministry?
- b. What is their level of involvement?
- c. What other human or financial resources are allocated to young adult ministry?
- d. What were the parish's support and investments in young adult ministry prior to the YAI?
- e. Have they grown or changed?
- f. How does the parish plan to sustain its efforts in young adult ministry after the Young Adult Initiative (and related funding) has expired?

III. Pastor and Parish Staff Support: The degree to which the pastor and/or designated staff member are informed about and involved in (e.g., offers support, guidance, advocacy, or direction) efforts in ministry with young adults.

To be evaluated based on assessment of the following questions and variables:

- a. Did the pastor choose and directly invite the YAI contact?
 - » How often do they discuss the progress of the YAI and YAM?
- b. How much direction does the pastor give about his desires/hopes for the YAI?
 - » How aligned is his vision with that of the Core Team?
 - » How is his vision for ministry with young adults aligned with the parish staff's?
- c. How often does the pastor or designated parish staff member attend Core Team meetings and give input in planning?
- d. What is the level of communication between pastor and Core Team?
- e. How does the pastor or designated parish staff member help the Core Team address challenges/obstacles in their work, and how does he respond to new ideas for the ministry?
- f. If there was a pastor change, what impact did that have on pastor support for the YAI?
- g. How well does the pastor understand the full vision and goals of the YAI? (e.g., that the YAI is greater than funding given to parishes for young adult ministry)?
- h. How much does the pastor verbally advocate for the YAI to others??

IV. Consistency of Leadership: The degree to which parish leadership, especially pastor, key contact, and core team members, remained consistent throughout the YAI.

To be evaluated based on assessment of the following questions and variables:

- a. How much turnover occurred among core team members?
 - » If so, what impact did it have on the YAI?
- b. Was there a pastor change at the parish?
 - » If so, what impact did it have on the YAI?
- c. Was there turnover in the parish key contact for the YAI?
 - » If so, what impact did it have on the YAI?
- d. Was there any other significant staff turnover or change?
 - » If so, what impact did it have on the YAI?
- e. What did the parish do to address the turnover that took place during the YAI and ensure a smooth transition?

V. Core Team Leadership and Competency: The degree to which the Core Team possesses and/or develops skills, knowledge, and attitudes for effective leadership in ministry.

To be evaluated based on assessment of the following questions and variables:

- a. Did the Core Team meet regularly and develop regular and effective communication patterns?
- b. What leadership structures did the Core Team develop for the ministry?
- c. How did the Core Team expand their (and the parish's) capacity for ministry?
- d. Did the Core Team include demographic diversity reflective of the young adult community?
- e. How well did different generations work together during the YAI?
- f. What impact did that have?
- g. Was the Core Team composed of at least 50% young adults?
- h. Did the Core Team include a diversity of leadership gifts (risk-takers, planners, etc.)?
- i. How did all Core Team members participate in planning and implementing ministry strategies?
- j. What worked effectively?
- k. What challenges existed?
- l. How did the Core Team grow in their understanding of young adults, their needs, and effective ministry strategies?
- m. How did the Core Team grow in their leadership skills?
- n. How well did the Core Team delegate responsibility among and outside of the team?
- o. How empowered did Core Team members feel in their leadership role?
- p. How well do Core Team members understand and embrace the parish's vision and aims for the YAI?



VI. Clarity of goals: The degree to which clear and measurable goals were articulated at the beginning of the project, provided guidance to decisions during the project, and were being used to evaluate the project.

To be evaluated based on assessment of the following questions and variables:

- a. Were the parish's initial goals or aims for the YAI clear to all those involved including the pastor, parish staff, and core team?
 - » Can these leaders name the current goals or aims?
- b. In what ways were the goals or aims based on the needs of young adults?
- c. How have the goals or aims changed or evolved?
- d. How will the team/parish know when they have been successful in achieving their goals/aims?
 - » Were the initial goals or aims measurable?
 - » Were measures developed to track progress?
- e. In what ways did the Core Team exhibit a shift in mindset from young adult ministry being a way to engage young adults in a peer-based ministry to being a way to integrate young adults in the life of the parish community?
- f. How did the Core Team identify and address the gaps between reality and desired outcomes (i.e., where they are and where they wanted to go)?
- g. Did the parish identify a clear target demographic of young adults as their primary audience for this expanded ministry (e.g., young professionals, 20-30 something parents, college-aged singles, etc.)?

VII. Outreach to the Unaffiliated: The degree to which the parish and Core Team embrace and operationalize a focus on reaching out to young adults who are not currently engaged in Church.

To be evaluated based on assessment of the following questions and variables:

- a. In what ways do the parish's goals reflect an understanding of healthy evangelization and outreach (i.e., reaching "outsiders")?
- b. In what ways do the parish's goals focus more on ministering to "insiders"?
- c. Were ministry efforts aimed more toward insiders or outsiders?
- d. Did the Core Team have a strategic process for planning ministry, ensuring that ministry strategies were developed for young adults at all levels of engagement with the Church?

VIII. Use of Saint Meinrad Resources and Services: The degree to which the Core Team made use of and benefited from the resources provided by Saint Meinrad through the YAI.

To be evaluated based on assessment of the following questions and variables:

- a. How much of the budget/grant was utilized?
- b. Were there any issues related to using the money?
- c. How much/how well did the team use Ryver?
- d. Did members of the Core Team attend YAI events at Saint Meinrad?
 - » If so, was it the same group or did members rotate?
 - » If so, what percentage participated in at least one event?
- e. How much did members of the Core Team read or use resources curated by Saint Meinrad and published in Ryver?
- f. Did the Core Team and pastor participate in semi-annual meetings with the YAI staff?
- g. How did the YAI staff help or benefit the work of the Core Team?
- h. How was the domestic Church prayer book helpful to the parish?
- i. What else could Saint Meinrad have done to provide more support or better resources?
- j. Was enough structure and consultation provided by the YAI to help parishes be successful?

IX. Understanding Parish Young Adult Population: The degree to which the parish knows and understands key realities about young adults in their parish community and beyond.

To be evaluated based on assessment of the following questions and variables:

- a. Does parish leadership and the Core Team know what percentage of the population in the area around the parish is comprised of young adults?
- b. How much is known about those young adults in the area, especially within the parish boundary (education level, employer, single/married, with or without children, etc.)?
- c. What percentage of parishioners are young adults?
- d. How did the Core Team adapt their planning for different young adult target audiences or needs?
- e. What does the parish know or believe about young adults and their needs?
- f. How has the understanding of the young adult population grown for the parish during the YAI?

X. Ministry Innovation and Adaptation: The degree to which the parish embraces innovation and/or adapts ministry strategies for greater effectiveness.

To be evaluated based on assessment of the following questions and variables:

- a. How did the Core Team innovate or adapt, especially with the onset of the pandemic?
- b. How did the Core Team adapt or change plans to better serve or reach young adults?
- c. How did the parish and Core Team think “outside the typical box” of young adult ministry?
- d. What lessons were learned, and then applied, for an improved response?
- e. Did the parish “push back” on any ideas or suggestions?
 - » If so, how did the Core Team proceed?
- f. What is one change that has occurred in ministry with young adults?

XI. Accompaniment and Relational Focus of Ministry: The degree to which leaders focus ministry efforts on building relationships and accompanying young adults in discerning life’s transitions and decisions.

To be evaluated based on assessment of the following questions and variables:

- a. Did ministry efforts focus primarily on building relationships with young adults (or on sponsoring programs)?
- b. How did the Core Team foster relationship-building between young adults and other members of the parish and parish leadership?
- c. What accompaniment is provided to young adults experiencing life transitions and vocational decisions?
- d. How did the Core Team ensure that building one-on-one interpersonal relationships was at the center of their ministry efforts?
- e. How did the parish track young adults who were engaged in any ministry outreach?
- f. What relationships were formed among the YAI parishes and their personnel?

XII. Comprehensive Ministry Approach with Young Adults: The degree to which the parish's ministry efforts are multi-pronged, meeting a variety of young adults' needs and providing a variety of contact points with the parish.

To be evaluated based on assessment of the following questions and variables:

- a. What are the different needs of young adults that are addressed by the parish's ministry strategies?
- b. How are opportunities provided for young adults to grow spiritually through prayer, liturgy, and the sacraments?
- c. How are young adults helped to deepen in their knowledge and understanding of the Catholic faith and Catholic Church?
- d. How are young adults assisted in discerning life transitions and vocational decisions?
- e. How are young adults' social needs addressed by the parish's ministry efforts?
- f. How are young adults engaged in service to others?
- g. Is there diversity among participants?
 - » Age
 - » Familial/Relationship Status
 - » Gender
 - » Spiritual Preferences/Faith Depth
 - » Interests

XIII. Ministry Sustainability: The degree to which the ministry with young adults will continue to grow and expand, after the YAI.

To be evaluated based on assessment of the following questions and variables:

- a. Where does your parish want to go in the future when it comes to ministry with young adults?
- b. What elements/variables from the initiative do you need to continue to utilize for this progress?
- c. What support will your parish continue to need in order to sustain the ministry?

XIV. Strengthening the Domestic Church in Young Adult Families: The degree to which the YAI helped strengthen the domestic Church and households of faith among young adults.

To be evaluated based on assessment of the following questions and variables:

- a. How would parish leaders describe their understanding of the domestic Church of young adult families?
- b. How has the parish supported the domestic Church in young adult families?
- c. How was the domestic Church prayer book, *We Will Serve the Lord*, developed as part of the Saint Meinrad YAI, used by the parish?
- d. What additional resources does the parish need to be more successful in supporting the domestic Church of young adults?



CHAPTER FOUR: THE ROLE OF THE INNOVATION HUB

As a recipient of the Lilly Endowment grant, Saint Meinrad was tasked with being an “innovation hub” for 12-24 partner congregations. Throughout the Young Adult Initiative, Saint Meinrad journeyed with their partner parishes. Like many of these parishes, Saint Meinrad, too, went through its own evolution within the YAI and the role of being an “innovation hub,” and they were looking to learn as much during the YAI as their partners.

Saint Meinrad’s original role was to be a resource, and assist the parishes as needed, but not to tell them what to do, or how to do their ministry. The innovations were to be developed organically from each parish’s own community, and Saint Meinrad was to serve as a sounding board, or as a gatherer with all the partner parishes so they could brainstorm and finetune their ideas with each other. To the disappointment of some partner parishes, Saint Meinrad as the innovation hub did not portray themselves as the young adult ministry experts telling parishes how to succeed. Instead, they led the parish toward success, allowing each parish to form its own success stories.

Saint Meinrad was a resource, a cheerleader, a sounding board, a coach, and a formation leader to the YAI partner parishes. Almost every parish mentioned the value in the YAI director’s support and the relationship they had formed with him. Eighty-eight percent of the parishes’ YAI leadership utilized Michal’s visits, with many speaking highly of the impact of his visits.

There was a great feeling of peace among the parish contacts knowing that they had an advocate or someone they could turn to from Saint Meinrad when they were struggling. After an early observation during a pastor transition, Saint Meinrad YAI leadership began visiting the parishes with a pastor or contact transition as soon as possible to bring them up to speed on the YAI, their parish’s involvement, and the overall value the YAI would have on their parish and, eventually, the whole Church.

What did it mean to be a part of this?

“We decided early on to not be portrayed as the experts in Young Adult Ministry, but that we were partners.”

— Michal Horace,
YAI Director



Resourcing Parishes

It was, and wasn't, about the money

As a part of the grant, parishes were provided up to six disbursements of \$5,000 every six months for a total of up to \$30,000. A few pastors and contacts stated this was one of the reasons they were most interested in participating in the YAI. Parishes were informed that they needed to be good stewards of the funds, but other than not being available to pay for salaries, the money could be used in any way that they could justify as being toward the YAI, or ministry to young adults.



The money made planning less stressful. We didn't have to think about it as much, worry about it as much.

It took away "the box" and helped to spur creativity even though we did not use all or much of it.

You couldn't pay staff with it. If you could pay a volunteer to do some of the stuff we wanted, just to pay a staff member basically, hire someone part-time to do it, that would've been I think helpful.

— PARISH CORE TEAM MEMBERS

However, as the YAI went on, parishes struggled to use their funds. Only three of the 13 parishes received all six disbursements. Of the potential \$390,000 provided to parishes, only \$143,513.03, or 37% of the funds, was used by the 13 parishes as of June 30, 2021.

While the parishes struggled to utilize the available funds, the money served a valuable purpose. Many of the YAI Contacts or Core Team members admitted that, while they did not use the money, knowing it was there and available with minimal strings attached really helped them try to be creative and consider new ideas.

Joining the National Dialogue

Besides providing funding to the parishes, Saint Meinrad also provided additional tools to help the parishes best succeed. Coincidentally, as the YAI parishes were being chosen, a collaborative effort of listening to youth and young adults nationwide was also starting in the Catholic Church. Saint Meinrad recommended all parishes participate, and many of them did.

There were other recommendations over the years that Saint Meinrad provided, and these were suggested at biannual gatherings in St. Meinrad.

Going down the Ryver

During these gatherings, parishes had time for prayer, formation, collaboration, and fellowship. After the first experiences of these gatherings, there was a request by the parishes to be able to continue the conversations and gather virtually in between visits.

After an exhaustive search, Saint Meinrad purchased usage rights to Ryver, a team collaboration software, for all contacts and core team members. This software tool was highly encouraged by Saint Meinrad as a way for parishes to communicate with each other, share resources, ask questions, or offer prayers and support to one another.

It was also recommended to be used among each parish's core team members as a way to regularly collaborate. While the software was robust with features, the parish contacts and core team members identified that it became more of a burden to use instead of being helpful. Over time, most of them returned to using email and texting each other instead of using Ryver.

The National Dialogue was a collaborative and synodal experience of the Church in the United States, answering Pope Francis' call for accompaniment, conversation, and dialogue. To learn more, visit nationaldialogue.info.

"I probably use Ryver less than anyone. But that doesn't mean that I don't look at it. I do look at it, and I do read the emails, and I appreciate that, even if I'm not writing a bunch of stuff on the Ryver platform."

— Parish Contact





Coming to the Hill

Twice a year, the YAI parishes were invited to the campus of Saint Meinrad for a large gathering of all participants and their teams. The COVID-19 pandemic forced the Spring 2020, Fall 2020 and Spring 2021 gatherings to an online format. Parish contacts, core team members, pastors, and other invested parish individuals would attend these gatherings, as determined by each parish. Parishes participated in various degrees. Some would send only their contact; others regularly sent four or five participants.

LIST OF TOPICS FOR GATHERINGS:

- » Orientation
- » Young Adults 101
- » YAM 101
- » Synod on Young People
- » Evangelizing Young Adults
- » Listening to Young Adults
- » National Dialogue
- » Spirituality of Young Adults
- » Innovation in Ministry
- » *Christus Vivit*
- » Ministry of Hospitality
- » Event-Centered YAM to People-Centered YAM
- » Domestic Church and Young Adult Households
- » COVID-19 Adjustments
- » State of Religion and Young People
- » National Dialogue Recommendations
- » Future of Ministry with Young Adults

Parishes would share their current happenings, successes, or challenges, and discuss any commonalities or suggestions with each other. The value of these gatherings was primarily in the form of networking opportunities among the participants, but there were also formation workshops provided by the Saint Meinrad YAI team or invited expert guests during these times. One parish leader commented, "I really enjoyed the gatherings at St. Meinrad for the YAI, to hear different speakers talk about how to reach young adults and also to talk to people from different parishes."

Some of the topics of discussion were the recent research publications at the time, such as Springtide's focus on Relational Authority, the USCCB's National Advisory Team members spoke to the participants on innovation and vision, and another expert spoke to the group on young adult spirituality.

The Evolution of the Hub

Even Saint Meinrad's goals evolved during the YAI process

When Saint Meinrad originally applied to be a hub for this initiative from the Lilly Endowment, staff members had a preliminary idea of how they would focus their efforts and encourage their participants to do so. Most of this was through the idea of the “domestic Church” as promulgated through *Lumen Gentium*: “From the wedlock of Christians there comes the family, in which new citizens of human society are born, who by the grace of the Holy Spirit received in baptism are made children of God, thus perpetuating the people of God through the centuries. The family is, so to speak, the domestic Church” (*Lumen Gentium*, 11).

Traditionally, the domestic Church was understood as the family, but Saint Meinrad recognized that, due to the life stage of the young adults, their “domestic Church” did not fit the traditional model. Even temporarily, their domestic Church included their roommates or the other friends that they were in contact with almost daily.

Tammy Becht, Saint Meinrad Director, Office of Youth and Young Adult Formation, said it this way:

The Church has got to stop thinking of young adults as being established once they're married. We need to not ignore the years, after high school until marriage, which keeps happening later and later. This requires a shift in thinking about the domestic Church being only a traditional family construct. Home is a sacred space and safe haven, and needs to be seen this way; otherwise, there's a disconnect between life at home and faith life on the weekend.

It was in this model that Saint Meinrad originally envisioned to have an impact in ministry with young adults. As the initiative went on, though, the parishes took responsibility for the innovations and the process within their own visions or expectations. While some parishes continued to focus on the domestic Church, this variable was lost on many of the participants.

Original Key Aims from application

- » Strengthen the domestic Church (the Church of the home) to assist young people in forming their Catholic Christian identity.
- » Build upon the strengths of the communities and through reimagining, meet the needs of young adults.
- » Help young adults affiliate to the parish congregation based upon their experience within their domestic Church.

And then COVID happened . . .

Saint Meinrad had planned for calendar year 2020 to include a special focus on the domestic Church within the YAI, but unfortunately, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, this was minimized to focus primarily on ministry within the pandemic. One Core Team member expressed their frustration, “Right before COVID there was a lot of enthusiasm and desire and great ideas, innovative ideas coming forth... And then it’s like, okay, we’re in quarantine. We can’t do anything.”

As the initiative evolved, so did the key aims for the initiative.

While Saint Meinrad did not eliminate the domestic Church as a focus area, they did eliminate it as a key aim. The three goals or key aims that Saint Meinrad utilized for their final years of the YAI were:

- » Move the needle of young adult ministry to help improve the entire Church’s approach to ministry with young adults.
- » Strengthen the parish’s ability to better understand their young adult population with a desire to continue to learn more.
- » Young adults are better appreciated, valued, and engaged in their parish’s leadership and life.

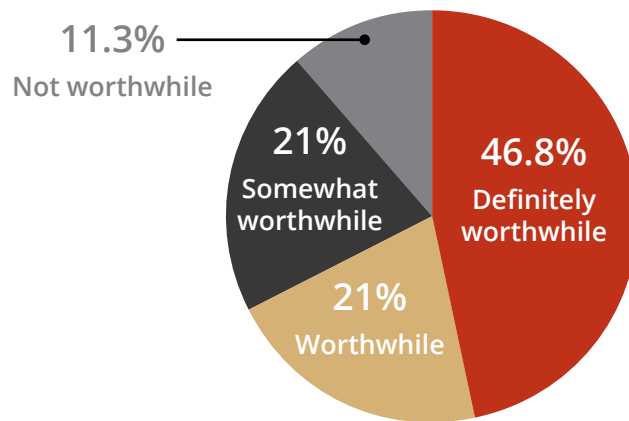


The support Saint Meinrad provided to the participating parishes reflected these new goals. While they never presented themselves as the “Young Adult Ministry Experts,” they did continually try to steer the parishes toward these goals as best as they could, based upon the diverse and universal realities of the parishes as partners.

It is clear from those in leadership that the YAI was a worthwhile experience, with 68% saying it was either definitely worthwhile (47%) or worthwhile (21%) and only 11% saying not worthwhile. (See Chart 17.) Additionally, general comments from the parish contact focus group indicate that indeed YAI was a success and could be considered a valuable resource for the field based upon what they learned through this initiative.

CHART 17: LEADERSHIP SURVEY

Now that the Young Adult Initiative is coming to a close in a few months, which of the following statements do you think is most accurate of your overall experience?



This question was asked only to respondents who identified as a current or previous Core Team member.

As the YAI concluded, this report is evidence of Saint Meinrad having moved the needle on ministry to young adults in the Church. The level of engagement in the National Dialogue shows the success Saint Meinrad had in listening to their young adults, but only time will tell if this, and the parishes’ appreciation of young adults, continues to grow. The YAI may not have provided the original findings Saint Meinrad had hoped for, but as you’ll see in the next chapter, it provided plenty for the field to consider.



Saint Meinrad's Original Timeline

Phase 1 - Getting Started

January 2017-August 2018

- » Staffing and preliminary work
- » Partner Parish selection process
- » Partner Parish orientation
- » Partner Parishes establish core teams

Phase 2 - Dialogue and Parish Self-Study

September 2018-April 2019

- » Examine demographic data from parish census, U.S. census, and other sources
- » Intentional dialogue with young adults, affiliated and disaffiliated
- » Intentional dialogue with parents of young adults and parish leaders
- » Examine parish culture and structure with respect to young adults
- » Educate parish leadership on young adults, their world, and their needs
- » Educate parish members on young adults, their world, and their needs

Phase 3 - Turning Needs into Changes, Initiatives, and Programming

January 2019 - December 2019

Based on your parish findings, determine how your parish will respond to identified needs of your young adults by developing innovative ways to:

- » Engage/re-engage/meet the needs of your young adults
- » Change the culture of your parish to be more welcoming to young adults

Phase 4 - Continue with Special Focus on Domestic Church

January 2020 - December 2020

- » Continue innovation process
- » Special emphasis on engaging young adults through domestic Church strategies

Phase 5 - Continue Innovation and Project Evaluation/Wrap-Up/Sustainability Plan Implementation

January 2021 - December 2021

- » Continue innovation process
- » Determine sustainability tasks to ensure YAI efforts continue after funding stops
- » Evaluate overall YAI efforts

CHAPTER FIVE: THE YAI MAJOR FINDINGS

THE LESSONS WE LEARNED FROM THE YAI:
TELLING OUR STORY

Overall Finding – Universality of Challenging Experiences

In choosing parish partners for the Young Adult Initiative, Saint Meinrad leadership was intentional about the need to include a diverse group of parishes. While the 13 participating parishes were unique, we were able to identify many common experiences among them. These experiences often uncovered a challenge the parish needed to address. Sometimes it was a positive challenge, such as ascertaining how to meet the diverse needs of all the young adults who surrounded their community. While for others, it was discerning why the community cannot find young adults or attract them to their parish.

In some way, every parish experienced these challenges in the overall theme. Depending on the circumstances, some parishes responded in innovative ways, while others found the challenges to be barriers to progress. The intent of using the title “Universality of Challenging Experiences” is not to indicate that a challenge was always negative; oftentimes a challenge prompted action and was met with determination and garnered significant insight.

During the YAI launch, all parishes expressed a common excitement concerning how it would impact their communities. They all acknowledged a great need to take new steps in the development of ministry with the young adult age group. Most of their goals revolved around evangelizing young adults, helping them gain knowledge about the faith, increasing their commitment to Church, and leading them to a life dedicated to discipleship.

The YAI parishes were also articulate and realistic about the challenges they faced. The challenges ranged from inconsistency in pastoral leadership to identifying and reaching out to new young adults. All parishes had to endure a temporary pause of in-person ministry due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Our research showed that even in the universality of these challenges, we

Diversity Variables

- » Urban
- » Suburban
- » Rural
- » Predominantly African American
- » Large Hispanic Population
- » Multi-Ethnic
- » Military Community
- » College Towns
- » Cathedral
- » Large Population
- » Small Population
- » Spiritual Practices

could gain insight from the distinctive approach and response of each parish. For example, some parishes were able to find successful and innovative solutions, while others found the challenges insurmountable. This research identified five challenges articulated by those who actively participated in the initiative.

One of the overall goals of the grant for the YAI was to assist parishes in integrating young adults more fully into the parish community. Saint Meinrad provided resources and training for the parishes to help them provide support, build community, and create programming to meet their young adults' needs or desires. It is important to note that while some parishes struggled, all parishes that remained a partner with Saint Meinrad through the YAI were successful and innovative in their own ways.

Ministry with Young Adults Is Hard! There Is No Quick Fix!

A common theme from the research was parish leadership describing this ministry as hard, difficult, or perplexing. Why did the parishes describe this ministry as “hard”? Like many pastoral problems, a programmed response, or a one-size-fits-all solution does not meet the individual needs presented. Solutions of this nature require intentional work. To meet young adult needs, the first step is to find them and deepen understanding of them through authentic listening.

Ultimately, building relationships of trust with young adults will lead to their integration into parish communities. Additional factors influence this process in each parish, making replication difficult. Factors such as socioeconomics, cultural makeup, average age of parishioners, educational attainment, access to human and financial resources, and greater community health all impact the ability to reach young adults, so what works in one parish might not work in another parish.



While Saint Meinrad provided a variety of resources, formation, coaching, and support, there was no universal solution to how this integration occurs that would fit all parishes. However, there were common experiences that challenged most, if not all, the parishes in some way.

These challenges, while universal, were expressed differently based upon:

- » Parish location
- » History with the ministry
- » Parish culture
- » Access to young adults
- » Pastor engagement
- » Leadership for the ministry

The COVID-19 pandemic is an example of a universal challenge in which these variables were at play. In March 2020, a novel virus called COVID-19 began to spread in the U.S. In response to not yet fully knowing the danger this virus posed, nor having the resources to accommodate a mass infection nationwide, parishes temporarily suspended in-person ministry for various time periods. For all parishes, the pandemic was one of the greatest challenges. For some of the parishes, it inspired their most innovative ministry efforts and sustained responses. Sadly, for a few others, just as they were building momentum to move forward, the pandemic caused them to shut down or pause their efforts, even temporarily. In the months and year afterward, these parishes had difficulty returning to where they were prior to the pandemic.

Our research findings bring to light five core challenges encountered by each parish as they struggled to meet their original YAI goals. Elements of each of these challenges impacted the parishes either positively, with them moving toward the completion of their goals, or negatively by stalling goal progression or hindering their goal achievement. While some parishes struggled more than others with innovation, all attempted, with the support of the Saint Meinrad YAI, to move beyond their initiative starting points. It is for this reason we can honestly say that they and the YAI were all successful in some way.

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One contact indicated this about YAI:

“The biggest effort or the thing that I felt like kept getting emphasized, probably because it was the most difficult, and also because it’s extremely important, is outreach to the ‘nones,’ the young adults that aren’t affiliated at all and hearing them and walking with them and trying to understand where they’re at and accompany them where they are.”

One pastor said,
“I know that there are young adults in the parish that we have continually reached out to that we have not been successful at getting them back into the life of the parish. Interestingly enough, most of them will at least go to Mass on Sundays, but we can’t get them to that next step.”



The Five Universal Challenges

1. **Defining Success and a Parish's Key Aims for the Ministry**
2. **Understanding the Diverse and Transitional Nature of Ministry with Young Adults**
3. **Understanding the Spectrum of Outreach and Accessibility to Young Adults**
4. **Fostering a Parish Culture that Leads to Integration of Young Adults into the Parish**
5. **Finding the Right and Consistent Leadership for Ministry with Young Adults**

The Universal Challenges Experienced in Parishes as Part of the YAI

Challenge One: Defining Success and a Parish's Key Aims for the Ministry

On the initial application and first report, all partner parishes expressed their hopes or key aims for participation within the YAI. During our research, all parishes were asked to define their measurement of goal success. These measurements varied from parish to parish and, for many, it was a conundrum that they could not effectively articulate.

We have concluded that a predefined understanding of how to measure goal achievement in relationship to a common vision is critical for overall success. Starting with a consensus of how to measure success serves as a way to unify the vision and mitigate conflict and possible leadership transition. The research had examples where lack of agreement caused conflict and, ultimately, people to leave leadership or abandon the ministry.

Researcher Observation of YAI Parishes' Measures of Success: Each parish's experience of the YAI was unique and each had their own metrics for **Measuring Success** of their efforts. Their ministry seemed to be impacted by how they viewed success. Measurements ranged from the raw number of young adult event attendance to the degree of young adult integration into overall parish life to a more qualitative judgment on the increase in community or discipleship of young adults.

One parish contact said this of measuring success: "I think the measurement of success to us is definitely just the conversions and the connections in the community that we see, and the awareness that we see from the parish."

Elements of this Universal Challenge:

a. Measuring Success in Numbers: Some parishes used a group model for young adult ministry but found the engaged population to be low and fluid as participants moved on when they entered a new life stage. Most parishes attempted a variety of programs to reach out to young adults. As seen in the general YAI parish goals, some focused on integration into the community while others focused on providing direct ministry to a group of young adults. However, when trying to use a one-size-fits-all model for ministry, the parishes quickly discovered that they were not as successful but did not necessarily pivot or adjust their approach.

For these reasons, most parishes found using attendance or the number of participants as a measurement of success to be inconsequential. A few parishes, which had a visible and accessible young adult population, were able to report large numbers for certain events, but repeatedly low numbers of program participation were reported by many parishes, even after various attempts.

Saint Meinrad's formation and support advocated for parishes to move from providing a "young adult ministry" program or group to a more comprehensive and inclusive view of "ministry with young adults." While this may sound like a subtle difference, in practice this difference is an important distinction. Ministry with young adults is broader than any group or program, and it focuses on having all ministries at the parish be, in some way, a ministry of accompanying young adults.

This is a fundamental shift from large group programming, which is measured both in unique and recurring young adult participants. By the conclusion of the YAI, a few parishes began to count young adults who were involved in the parish through liturgical celebrations or sacramental preparation and not just the young adult targeted activities.

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“Young adults who are single are not very interested in events for families with young children.”²

One young adult explained it this way:
“So I just felt immediately seen where I was, and I just really appreciated that, that he would pay enough attention to where I was that he could tailor his offerings to me.”

² One young adult said this direct comment. He went to the event, saw families, and thought, 'Oh, this isn't for me,' and left.



b. Accompaniment Versus Programs: With varying success, some parishes made the movement from young adults' programs to implementing one-to-one relationship-building and the formation of small communities based on a common need. For the most part, this led to an understanding and acceptance of fewer participants. The YAI leaders who embraced this method seemed more focused on the quality of discipleship, formation, and relationship than on the quantity.

One parish, whose core team consisted of four people, set a goal for each core team member over the course of the year to build a relationship with one young adult parishioner. By the end of that year, all four of them succeeded in their goal. Unfortunately, they were not successful in reaching many young adults beyond those four.

At another parish, which employed a staff member responsible for ministry to the young adult population, the pastor said, "I can't have a full-time staff ministering to 15 people; it's just not practical." Both parish experiences provide valuable insight, and both share legitimate concerns with the accompaniment approach to ministry with young adults. More research needs to be completed in this area to determine best approaches or solutions.

Researchers' Observation on Peer Connection: One word that surfaced repeatedly in the interviews and focus groups was community. Young adults desire **Peer Connection**. They crave community, but deeper than just being superficially acquainted with someone. The major variables that contributed to this observation included: young adults forming friendships through parish ministries, the desire to share more personally with fewer people through activities such as Bible studies or participating in small groups programs sponsored by the parish. Overall, parishes have discovered that young adults want to connect deeply and spiritually with people their own age to discuss issues that matter in their lives.

c. Measuring Success of Parish Integration: How successful were the YAI parishes at achieving the overall goal of the YAI: integrating young adults into their respective parishes? This question is complicated to answer, as is measuring young adults' integration. However, parishioners who took the parish survey reported that they saw an increase in young adults' participation in liturgical ministries, at parish functions, and in general communication about young adults, but they did not see an increase in young adults serving on parish committees or in parish leadership. A few respondents even lamented this reality.

One parish contact summarized the challenge with differing generations:



“You find a place where you feel like you belong first, then you start doing things with them and then you start asking about what they believe. I think that is a big reason that a lot of baby boomers have trouble understanding, why young adults aren't in the Church, what's going on with them, because . . . It's the exact opposite of how they think about joining something. And so being able to share that with older parishioners and say, look, this is how you experience the world, probably. This group of people experiences the world completely different, and that's not a good thing or a bad thing necessarily. It's just, it's the reality of how they experience the world and, to be able to better understand what they're going through and how we can reach them, you need to understand that that's how their world works. That's been a big thing.”

A major goal of Saint Meinrad's participation in the YAI was to integrate young adults more within parish life, especially liturgically. Many parishes had integration within liturgy as one of their key aims, but also strove for integration within the parish leadership. As we conducted our research, evaluating this variable of integration was a challenge. Each parish, and sometimes each leader within a parish, expressed a different definition of the integration of young adults in the parish.

YAI Contact on how her parish is doing on this challenge:



“This was not my doing, but it was the prior coordinator. One of her goals was to integrate young adults into the life of the parish and she successfully has young adults that are involved in every ministry, from teaching at the school, to serving at Mass, to the committees. Yeah. They're very present. And so, the whole parish leadership team, because of the presence that young adults have in the parish, one of the biggest things that we have to keep in mind whenever there's a decision being made is how is this going to affect the young adults? The young adults are kept in mind.”

Researchers’ Observation of the YAI Parishes on Integration of Young Adults into Parish Communities: Throughout the interviews and focus groups, the concept of **Integration** surfaced as a common goal for ministry with young adults. The parishes did not intend to create a young adult ministry separate from the life of the parish. Instead, they hoped to integrate young adults into the various ministries of the parish. Multiple factors contributed to these parishes’ ability to integrate young adults into the life of the parish, including: having structures in place to support integration, having consistent leadership, and having staff or parish leaders who intentionally focused on this integration.

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YAI Contact on their success dealing with this challenge:

“We finally kind of made space to advocate for young adults in leadership on pastoral council, on our evangelization team, our baptism team. But that was all our adult faith formation person. Once we got her hooked, we convinced her that it was important, she took off with it and she’s just been, ever since then, she’s been pulling young adults from everything.”

Between the parish surveys and our interviews, it seemed that some parishes took the next step toward integration and belonging but were not able to fully integrate, and a few parishes never moved beyond being welcoming.³ Several of the parishes, especially those who experienced transition, expressed the need to continue working on this and more formally integrate young adult ministry into parish leadership structures, such as the pastoral or finance councils. As a result, when transitions occur in pastoral leadership, other structures can provide stability or advocacy of the ministry’s vision.

3 It is important to note that while all parishes were asked to participate and promote the parish survey, and all the parishes are represented, three of the 13 parishes made up over 50% of the responses, so this survey does not fully represent equally all parishes. Some parishes had a higher response rate than others. See Chart 1 in Part 3.



d. Innovation in Ministry: A primary goal of the Lilly Endowment's grant was to seek innovative solutions to better engage young adults in the congregation. As this variable was researched, we found a challenge in properly defining and assessing "innovation."

Often, innovation is thought of from a macro standpoint, similar to that of an invention. It is something new that has never been considered or at least is not widely known to be considered by the larger community. As we began our research, this was our understanding as well. We found that we had to examine it from a micro standpoint. Instead of what was a new concept within the large Catholic context, innovation was a new concept for each specific parish community.

It was a novel concept in some parishes to have young adults address the congregation within a Mass setting, while other parishes had been doing this for years. Communication tools that may be widely accepted or embraced by some were new and exciting for others. Because of this reality, within our research, "Innovation" became defined as something that a parish had never previously attempted.



Innovation

n.

1. A new idea, device, or method
2. The act or process of introducing new ideas, devices, or methods

— Webster's Online Dictionary

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Parish contact:

"I measure that they went from kind of breaking bread together to really sharing in the Eucharist together. They are in communion as community, but they are at Mass. And they're bringing other people to Mass, and some of them that were away from the Church for a while have come back. Maybe the social was the foot in the door, but what's happened is there's this vibrant community that makes space for other generations. And so they're all interacting."



Challenge Two: Understanding the Diverse and Transitional Nature of Ministry with Young Adults

The YAI indicated what most people involved in ministry with young adults already recognized: ministry with young adults in these parishes, by its very nature, had to be diverse because young adults themselves were diverse. This ministry was also transitional because young adults were as well, in both their life stages, and, for many, their actual location. The parishes in the YAI continually talked about the challenge of these realities because no one strategy worked to meet the needs of all the young adults in the parish community.

One parish contact described the young adults in this way:



“I would say hungry comes to mind. There are so many different needs out there. We have some young adults that what they need spiritually and what they want spiritually is more aligned with the older school, more traditional Catholic Church. They want the incense; they want the Gregorian chant. They want the reverence. You have others . . . It’s almost even split of what we have . . . others that are really into the praise and worship and that’s where they are best able to experience that sense of community, that sense of family and belonging.”

Elements of this Universal Challenge:

a. Diverse Needs Based Upon Life Stage: Based on our research, we observed that the young adults have diverse needs for relationship and community depending on where they are along the normal markers of adulthood, such as finishing education, discerning vocation, finding work, supporting oneself, seeking a community of peers or lifelong relationship, getting married, or becoming parents. Comprehensively, five primary stages or categories of young adults were illustrated throughout the research:

- » **Emerging Adults:** In college, early in the military, or entered the workforce directly or soon after high school
- » **Newly Independent:** Those entering the workforce, establishing themselves professionally and stabilizing themselves financially
- » **Seekers:** Those who are seeking lasting relationships
- » **Newly Married:** Young adults focused on beginning their lifelong relationship
- » **New Parents:** Young adults who have the added responsibility of children who need to be considered when participating in ministry

One contact explained the complexity of this challenge at their parish:

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“So there’s sort of the large launchpad group, then there are subgroups of young adults that want to do things. There’s a mom’s group, a guy’s softball group that does a Bible study and fill in the blanks, and then there’s integration of all of those in the life of the parish by the choice of a young adult. And I feel like we kind of have to dance between those three groups at any given time. As people are moving, as they invest themselves, they’re moving away from (the young adult group) because that’s surface level in community and moving into some of the broader parish or niche small group opportunities, which is great on that end but then it always leaves us starting over on the communal. If it doesn’t look established, who wants to come be a part of the young adult community if it’s, everybody’s moved out to a different area.”

Researcher Observation on Audience Diversity in YAI: The YAI targeted those aged 23-29; however, the reality in parishes is that the term “young adults” includes a vast range of ages, life stages, and needs. Many parishes recognized this **Audience Diversity** but did not have the resources to minister to all of them. Most parishes either chose a target audience or naturally ministered to one or two groupings. Even over four years, the parishes struggled to reach their entire audience.

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Transitions could be sudden. From one young adult:

“And I know just from like having a kid and knowing how much that changes things, I guess it’s difficult to know personally how I fit into things now, because I know like, well, my wife, she’s got her women’s group. And then she’s got the Mass and playdate and the other things with all the other moms. But I’m trying to figure out... when you’re a married father, how exactly do I fit into things? Cause I feel like I just kind of don’t anymore. And that I felt I was a lot more free to do the things that the parish offered back when I didn’t have kids.”

b. Transitional Nature of Age Group: Due to movement along the markers of adulthood, transition was inherent in the ministry to this age group. While this might seem obvious, the challenges to build relationships, invite individuals to consistent leadership, and integrate young adults into the faith community as they are amid life’s transitions were some of the biggest obstacles to this ministry that our research identified.

In addition to the movements through life stages, young adults also transitioned in location, which led to a lack of consistency in the leadership preparing/planning the ministries and/or the engaged community. This could make planning difficult as even in the YAI core teams a few parishes had examples of someone joining the team, only for he/she to have to resign within a few months due to a job change and relocation. Changes in work schedules or responsibilities also led to a sudden lack of availability or becoming engaged and having to prioritize how to spend spare time.





Challenge Three: Understanding the Spectrum of Outreach and Accessibility to Young Adults

Like the various life stages of young adults, the parishes demonstrated that there is a wide spectrum of faith involvement and spirituality for their outreach strategies to consider and include. One aspect that many young adults discussed was the value of being listened to, with 13/13 parishes identifying listening as important to addressing the issue of the relevance of faith to life.

Researcher Observation: In particular, the young adults in the focus groups spoke of the need for the **Relevance of Faith to Life**. Given the world in which young adults live and the multitude of tough issues they face daily, they expressed a desire for their church and their faith to assist them in dealing with these difficult topics. To do this, ministry leaders must listen to young adults to distinguish their needs and provide judgment-free opportunities to discuss these tough issues so that faith can be integrated into all aspects of their lives.

Elements of this Universal Challenge:

a. Outreach: Within the YAI parishes, a discernable faith spectrum was present among community members that each parish needed to acknowledge and remain responsible for engaging in the faith. From our own lived experiences, we surmise that most Catholic parishes nationwide would acknowledge this reality as well. This faith spectrum, as it relates to outreach, includes:

- » Regular to semi-regular Mass attenders looking for a parish community to meet their spiritual needs and those of their family;
- » Those more on the fringes of parish life who were attracted to the young adult ministry programs or young adult group within the parish or who were seeking to get married in the Church but do not attend Mass regularly;
- » Unaffiliated young adults, some who are met randomly, others who could only be identified through their parents.

Most parishes in the YAI were primarily focused on the first two populations of the spectrum; some might call this a focus on the “low-hanging fruit.” However, most parishes struggled to find or identify unaffiliated young adults in their community except through their parents or attempts through social media and local advertising.

The commitment of a ministry of accompaniment, and the time it takes, was a common challenge in reaching out to these young adults. It begins with identifying them. If successful, intentional outreach and persistent invitation were effective. Finally, the establishment of relationships that met the needs of the young adult was the final obstacle before the young adult would choose to be regularly engaged.

Comment about what young adults are seeking from the parish:

“They need to be able to ask honest questions and to feel like they’re not being judged when they ask those questions. They want to understand what’s the Church’s stance on accepting individuals that are gay or homosexual. Why does the Church not allow same-sex couples to remain in their schools and so forth? It’s those deep issues that they’re experiencing, like one session we had on Zoom where they were able to come and just ask those hard questions.”

Researchers’ Observation on Outreach to Affiliated: When beginning the initiative, many parishes recognized that they had a large number of young adults already present in the parish. The methods used to reach these young adults who already had a connection to the parish were coded as **Outreach to the Affiliated**. By far, most efforts were geared to this group. The most commonly mentioned variables were: using socials to build relationships, personally recognizing visitors and introducing them to someone, and using sacramental moments as a way to connect young adults to the parish. The parishes experienced challenges in terms of identifying these parishioners and communicating effectively with them. Some truly innovative ideas are contained in this observation.

Comment from a young adult hearing the pastor speak to the issue of depression and anxiety:

“So that’s something that I never hear anyone, especially the priest, ever talking about, but it’s super common for my age group and my friends, is depression and anxiety. And I just wish it was talked about more if we had opportunities, ‘Like, hey, if you feel this way, this is kind of a way you can go to get help.’”



b. Accessibility: In light of the need for intentional outreach, there was also a reality of how accessible a young adult population was within the community. Only seven of the 13 parishes could be identified as having easy access to young adults.⁴ Various circumstances helped with the ease of identifying the young adult population in those parishes:

- » Larger cities
- » Places with large numbers of young adult professionals
- » Colleges and universities or military bases nearby

There were also several factors that hampered access to young adults:

- » Smaller areas saw many young adults leave
- » Smaller areas where young adults remained already had established relationships or lived experiences with the parish
- » The parish community/culture was older and not enticing to young adults in comparison to other nearby parishes

While all parishes struggled with outreach to the unaffiliated, some still used innovative solutions to reach out into the community to look for young adults and make connections. For example, one parish's strategy was to have their young adult team go out dancing together and, as they met people, give them a business card with their social media accounts to connect with them.

4 See page 171.





Challenge Four: Fostering a Parish Culture that Leads to Integration of Young Adults into the Parish

Parishes in the YAI generally defined their communities as welcoming, but for many, that was not enough to integrate young adults into the community. The movement from being welcoming to instilling a sense of belonging had to be intentional, with the pastor's support and engagement for this ministry, as well as the buy-in of the entire parish.

Elements of this Universal Challenge:

a. Being Welcoming: While there is not a single factor that contributed to a parish culture that led to integration of young adults, being a welcoming community to young adults was a critical and important first step.

The vast majority of the parishes in the YAI described their communities as being welcoming to young adults. Similarly, in our focus groups and survey of 350 young adults from the YAI parishes, the young adults overwhelmingly said their parish was always welcoming (65%) or sometimes welcoming (31%). Only 4% indicated they did not feel very welcomed.⁵ When we spoke directly with the young adults, while most claimed their parish was welcoming, they also had stories or anecdotes of times they felt like they did not belong. Many times, this was after a negative encounter with parish leadership or other parishioners.

One young adult explained the importance of follow-up after being welcomed:

“I like that there’s somebody who personally follows up with you and putting a name to a face. It makes you feel like somebody actually wants you there and is expecting you to show up. So the accountability piece is helpful.”

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One young adult in a focus group shared:

“I’m fairly new, too. I came last fall and the first time I ever came to church here was on a Wednesday and I stayed for a social after. And I was like, ‘I’m just going to grab a soda and leave. I don’t know anyone.’ And I’m not even through the food line, I think 10 different people introduced themselves to me. And I think the core group here is really essential in that because all of them that come every week, I knew all their names by the end of that night. And then I saw them every week after that. And I knew they would consistently be there, and I’d always have someone I knew to go to or talk to.”

⁵ See Chart 2 on page 139.

Other times, the lack of belonging came from assumptions that had been made or obstacles that would delay or prevent a desired outcome. So clearly, the challenge is not just to welcome them in the doorway, but to move beyond the doorway and help young adults feel like they belong.

Researchers' Observation: One of the themes that surfaced from the data was the idea that forming **intentional relationships** with young adults greatly contributed to the parish's ability to minister to young adults. This contained variables from the first point of contact through developing deeper relationships. Young adults from parishes whose ministries purposely included these variables of forming intentional relationships often reported these relationships as contributing to their desire to participate in the parish. Some of the most significant contributing variables to this observation were: being invited to the parish, opportunities to increase peer relationships, and having a young adult leader personally reach out to the young adults.

b. Moving to Belonging with Intentional Consistent Outreach: The parishes that were successful in making this movement and impacting their entire parish culture had leaders who embraced the outreach process and advocated for others in their parish to do the same. Leaders led by example, intentionally inviting young adults to return or be involved in specific ministries. Leaders, especially the pastor, knew their name and remembered it.



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YAI contact:

“We finally kind of made space to advocate for young adults in leadership on pastoral council, on our evangelization team, our baptism team. So, but that was all our adult faith formation person. Once we got her hooked, we convinced her that it was important, and she took off with it and she’s just been, ever since then, she’s been pulling young adults from everything.”



c. Pastoral Leadership Fosters Parish Buy-In: Pastoral leadership was essential in fostering a parish culture that led to integration. Pastors who were most engaged were described as hosting or participating in some events, speaking about and to young adults from the pulpit, and knowing the young adults by name. The majority of the parish administrators throughout the initiative were described as supportive by their core teams or the YAI leaders. With this support, these parishes were able to foster a culture of integration through “parish buy-in.”

The successful parishes recognized all their parish ministries could be ministry to young adults, especially marriage preparation and RCIA, even though these are not specifically just for young adults. A few of these parishes worked intentionally to make sure young adults felt welcomed and supported. In many ways, they made space for young adults on committees and in leadership, and they embraced the presence and sounds of young children in Mass.

YA said this about his pastor:

“Well, this isn’t really big or anything at all, but there was one day Father came up to me and he talked to me by name and was just like, ‘I’m an old man. Do you think you could go and get my suit jacket from my car?’ And he just hands me his keys and described the car. I’m like, ‘Okay. I can do that.’ And just him trusting me to do that and just calling me by name like that, I was just like, ‘Wow, oh my goodness.’”



Parishes that struggled with this movement toward belonging often lacked leadership or experienced transitions in leadership that included new or vague visions for the ministry. Many of these parishes also indicated that identifying young adults was one of their greatest challenges, so much so that several parishes could not even find young adults to participate in a focus group as part of this research.⁶ They often had pastors who were supportive, but not very engaged with that age group except through the sacraments.

Researcher Observation about Integration and the YAI: Throughout the interviews and focus groups, the concept of **Integration** surfaced as a common goal for ministry with young adults. The parishes did not intend to create a young adult ministry separate from the life of the parish. Instead, they hoped to integrate young adults into the various ministries of the parish. Multiple factors contributed to these parishes' ability to integrate young adults into the life of the parish, including having structures in place to support integration, having consistent leadership, and having staff or parish leaders who intentionally focused on this integration.

⁶ Three parishes did not hold a focus group for young adults or had only one attend.

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One Core Team Member said of this challenge:

“I think it’s more of a challenge of just finding the young adults who actually want to participate in those things, right? That’s the biggest challenge. And if I could just speak from what I’ve heard from my daughter, a lot of times when they don’t see enough representation of their age group or an age group that’s closer to theirs on these different committees and things of that nature, they kind of shy away because they feel as though their voice is not going to be heard, right? So they’re just a body and they don’t want to just be there as a body. They actually want to have a voice.”



Challenge Five: Finding the Right and Consistent Leadership for Ministry with Young Adults

Like parishes throughout the country, the YAI parishes often were challenged to find who would be responsible for this ministry and lead their parish's participation in the YAI for the long term. There was no single identifiable way that recruitment and retention of leadership happened effectively in the parishes, but those who had consistent leadership and prioritized empowering others to assist them in outreach and building relationships were more inclined to reach their goals.

Only four parishes had no major transition and three parishes experienced two or more major transitions of those in leadership.⁷ However, two of the four that had no transition during the majority of the YAI are now experiencing transition of their contacts.

As a part of the YAI, all parishes had a contact person to serve as a liaison between Saint Meinrad and the parish. They were tasked with building and coordinating a core team to set the vision and focus of their outreach to young adults and with keeping the parish informed of the YAI efforts. While it was not surprising, our research affirmed that the parish contact, the core team, and the pastor/parish administrator had some of the greatest impact on the success of the parish's YAI efforts.

⁷ A major transition is considered a change in Contact, Pastor, Minister to Young Adults, or a supermajority of the Core Team either changed or left and was not replaced. *See Comparison Three on Page 172 to learn more.*



Elements of this Universal Challenge:

a. Consistent Leadership: As previously discussed, transition within the life stages of young adults had a clear impact on the parishes' outreach and engagement efforts. However, even greater than that was the transition of the parish leadership on the parish's YAI efforts. Due to the storytelling perspective of this research on Catholic congregations, we are able to publish actual data, stories, and experiences of the impact that pastor, lay minister, or volunteer leader transitions have on the ministry.

Three of the 13 parishes had pastor transitions that impacted those leading the ministry⁸, often because they had a different vision or commitment to this ministry and initiative. Most parishes experienced a change of their parish contact at some point during the four-year initiative, with a couple of parishes having multiple transitions. In the final year of the initiative, only four of the 13 parishes in the YAI experienced no transitions in the key leadership roles of YAI contact, core team, or pastor throughout the entire four-year period of the initiative.

Those who contended with these adjustments in leadership noted the need for facilitating a smoother transition, so the ministry did not experience a continual restarting due to new leadership who brought different visions and gifts. It should come as no surprise that the parishes with the most transitions often struggled in their overall participation in the YAI and in ministering to young adults in their parishes.

The transitional nature of this ministry cannot be understated. Transitions occurring in both the lives of young adults and those in ministry and parish leadership pose one of the most significant challenges to the parishes in the YAI. This challenge is one that some overcame and did so with consistent clear communication and advocacy with those moving into the new positions, as well as an openness by the same people.

Originally, there were 16 participating parishes, but three parishes made the choice to depart the YAI. These three parishes also experienced transition during their time in the YAI.

8 Comparison Three on Page 172.

b. The YAI Parish Contact: At the beginning of the YAI, pastors were asked to select someone from their parish to serve as the YAI Parish Contact. In most cases, this person was the staff member responsible for ministry to the young adult population in the parish, but not always. His or her responsibilities included coordinating the parish's YAI core team, bringing the wisdom from the YAI gatherings and other participants back to their parish, and being an overall advocate for the YAI within the parish.

Paid Staff Leaders as Contacts: The vast majority of parishes in the YAI had a designated paid staff member who was tasked with leading the young adult ministry effort in the parish, especially as it relates to the YAI. However, in almost all of the cases, that same staff member had additional responsibilities in the parish.

In interviewing coordinators, the following observed traits and challenges were found to be true of most of those who were paid staff:

- » They had an overall more professional and ministerial approach to the efforts; however, in most cases, it was an add-on to their responsibilities, such as an Adult Faith Formation Coordinator or the Coordinator of Youth Ministry.
- » Due to this “add-on” approach, many of these staff expressed the challenge to have the time to do the ministry effectively and balance their other roles. Some expressed a struggle with finding time to do the YAI administration and participate in all the events.

Coincidentally, those staff responsible for both adult faith formation and young adults seemed to integrate ministry more easily with young adults into sacramental preparation and other areas of parish life.

From one adult faith formation staff member also responsible for young adult ministry:

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“I think what really sold me on doing it was that our broader emphasis and really a lot of my passion and interest is that evangelization missionary discipleship piece. How do we bring people in and engage them fully? Not a youth group for older people, but really ministry for adults who happen to be younger adults and that fits in with my job description as the director of adult faith formation and mission, as opposed to a youth and young adult coordinator or director. I think that’s one of the areas that I think we can really offer for other parishes to maybe look at a different model of saying that youth and young adult, because those are very different actually, especially the way youth ministry is generally done. It’s not just a youth group for older people who can drink alcohol.”

- » They could advocate for young adults in staff meetings or more easily talk to the pastor or other staff members about the ministry or young adult parishioners.
- » They tended to use social media and texting more often as a mode for regular communication, using parish resources such as Flocknote or direct messaging through Instagram or Facebook.

Volunteers as Contacts: The vast majority did not use a volunteer leader. The volunteer leaders shared about their deep commitment to this ministry and the struggles they had serving in the role as a volunteer. For those contacts in volunteer leadership, the following was observed:

- » Having the time to consistently focus on the YAI was lamented, because they either were full-time workers or parents with children.
- » Since they were not staff members who regularly attended staff meetings, they found it a challenge to find time to meet with the pastor or other staff members. Because of this, they did not always know what was happening broadly in the parish and how to integrate young adults into those activities.
- » For a majority of those in volunteer leadership, the YAI training from Saint Meinrad was the only formation for the ministry they received.

Flocknote is a communication tool that provides mass communication via email and text messaging.

There were four volunteer contacts in the YAI. In one of these cases, a parish had a paid staff member leading the ministry and a volunteer leading the YAI efforts and core team. This is why the total adds up to 14, because this parish was counted twice since it fit both categories.





Core Team Approach: This group of parishioners existed to give leadership, direction, and vision to the overall YAI efforts. It was found that those parishes whose pastor was involved in the selection and/or invitation process of the members resulted in a higher level of commitment.

Comment by a core team member on involving young adults in leadership:

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“It’s tough to plan for target audience when you don’t have enough of your audience doing the planning.”

When asked what worked for their core team, one core team member said, “It seemed to work when the team brainstormed ideas and then two-three members of the team implemented those ideas.”

While their purposes were supposed to be similar, core teams looked very different from each other, almost as different as the parishes themselves. One parish had just staff members, a few parishes had some parishioners as well as some members who were also staff members for other ministries, e.g., the liturgical ministry. Most parishes utilized a core team of mostly volunteers. Some core teams had a mixture of young and older adults, while others did not.

When the majority of team members were young adults, it gave them an opportunity to direct ministry for themselves and their peers. The biggest challenge these teams faced, besides transitions and the pandemic, was defining their role in the ministry. Originally, they were supposed to be focused on visioning and advocacy for the YAI. They often became the planning and implementation team as they were unable to regularly find or empower others to successfully implement their hopes for events or activities in the YAI.

Early on in the YAI, many of the teams led listening sessions with young adults to help determine the direction of their ministry.

CONCLUSION

Sometimes research discovers new things that did not exist before and, as such, forces us to think in new ways. Other research confirms our experiences by providing evidence of one experience and comparing it to others. Most of the findings articulated as the Five Universal Challenges of ministry with young adults would not be much of a surprise to those serving in some aspect of this ministry. It must be asked, then: “What does this research contribute to the body of knowledge about young adult ministry in the Church?”

First, it affirms the experience of many parishes that seek to minister to young adults and engage them in parish community. This research does not claim to explain the entire experience or even every challenge of young adult ministry in the Catholic Church in the United States, especially those parishes from different geographic locations and those with greater diversity of ethnic cultures.

When advocating for young adult ministry, it can be helpful to point to examples, obstacles or concerns, and structures similar to your pastoral setting, as revealed in this research. These universal challenges are not theoretical but based in the real experience of 13 parishes that journeyed together in trying to achieve their goals.

Second, the universal challenges can be a source for reflection and planning. Due to the limitations of the sample, the entire set of challenges of this ministry cannot be articulated by this research. However, due to the broad nature of these universal challenges, they could be a source of reflection for all parish communities seeking to integrate young adults.

Important to any successful ministry with young adults is the capacity to: define success, understand the young adults you seek to serve, identify and reach out to your audience, foster integration into the parish, and find the right people to lead and sustain the effort. This research has found that these challenges will be distinctively expressed across parishes, especially those not represented in this initiative and research.

Finally, this initiative and subsequent research points to the need for more research on ministry with young adults in the Catholic Church. This research has found this ministry to be complex and multi-faceted, and more needs to be understood about pastoral approaches to effectively engage and integrate young adults into the Church.

Additionally, more funding for initiatives like this one that enable parish communities to journey together, provide mutual support, and learn from each other proves to be an effective model based upon the assessment of the involvement of parishes in the YAI. Dioceses and national organizations should look to this model as an example of how to provide support for this ministry.



**PART TWO
VIGNETTES**

Vignette One: Where Do We Start?

Context: Pastor meeting with DRE one week into his new assignment to discuss hopes/goals for ministry with young adults. The pastor recently moved from a small, rural parish to a large, growing, suburban parish.

As I scurry through the door, Mary, the DRE, excitedly stands there waiting to greet me. After exchanging pleasantries and a quick hello from the receptionist, Mary gathers two cups of coffee in her hands and leads me to my office. She begins by saying, “Father, we just are not reaching the young adults in our community. There are so many young professionals in the area because of the growing businesses and the grad students at the university, but they are not fully participating in the parish. I am so glad that you are here. We need your help to change that.”

“My help?” I retorted. “What can I do? This ministry isn’t something we excelled at in my last parish.” I shared with Mary some of my past experiences with this ministry.

“Father! St. Aloysius is different!” Mary said excitedly. “You walk into the church on any given Sunday, and you can’t even count the number of young adults in the pews. It’s like you don’t even have to try to find the young adults. They just come!”

She continued to share with me what she had been doing for the last year. “You see, Father, we have been hosting listening sessions for young adults in the parish. We had a few of them here at the parish, and we even hosted one at the local bar where the diocese does Theology on Tap.

“The turnout was decent, but not great. We did gain some valuable insight, though. You see, we have so many young adults who come to Mass on Sundays, but we never see them at any other parish events or involved in parish ministries. We were trying to find out why that is,” she continued.

Mary then picked up a report that was sitting on my desk. “Do you see this, Father?” she asked. “Right here, 65% of our young adults said our parish was always welcoming and 31% said it was sometimes welcoming.⁹ If they feel so welcomed, why don’t they show up to anything else that we do?” I could hear the passion in Mary’s voice as she wrestled with this information. “What we found out in these listening sessions is that being welcoming just isn’t enough. Young adults need to belong.”¹⁰

Coincidentally, at the same time Saint Meinrad began the YAI, the National Dialogue was taking place across the USA. Saint Meinrad integrated this process of listening to young adults within the first year. To learn more, visit page 52 (Chapter 4).

12/13 parishes mentioned measuring success in terms of numbers.

⁹ Part 3, Chart 4.

¹⁰ Part 3, Table 3.

Mary's face filled with compassion as she pleaded with me, "Father, these young adults need to feel like they belong here at St. Aloysius. They need to know that the Church wants them here, no – needs them here. That's where you come in."

I could tell that Mary was coming from a place of genuine care and concern for these young adults, but I still wasn't sure what she thought I could do. Being as I was still brand new and felt I might regret this later, I finally paused Mary long enough to ask her the same question I was going to be asking all the employees that day. "Okay, Mary. I hear you. What can I do to help our young adults feel a sense of belonging at St. Aloysius? What do you hope I can do?"

"I'm so glad you asked," Mary replied. "I have a plan."

Relieved, I answered her, "I figured you might. Let's hear it."

The excitement in Mary's voice continued to build as she shared her ideas with me. "We've been approaching this ministry all wrong. Events are great for building community and drawing people in, but they don't create a sense of belonging. We need to intentionally build relationships with these young adults, one-on-one."

13/13 parishes mentioned the need for one-on-one outreach.

"If you just look at the numbers of young adults in the parish, it seems like we're doing great. The reality is the young adults are not participating in ministries or leadership. They come to Mass and that's an amazing first step, but they desire so much more."

**Parish survey – 18% of young adults said they
"want to be welcomed and engaged in the life of the Church by helping out or being heard."**



“We must help these young adults grow deeper in their discipleship of Jesus Christ. We need you to put together some people to lead this ministry. To do this the right way, we need more people.”

Even knowing little about the parish yet, I knew that what Mary was telling me was spot on. The question is: how do we do this? How do we draw these young adults into discipleship and into the life of the Church? “Okay, Mary,” I responded. “As for the direct ministry with young adults, is there a team in place to lead it?” Mary shook her head no.

“Ok, let’s start there. We can put a team together to lead it. I don’t know many people here in the parish, but if you give me some names of people who are just incredible at reaching out and genuinely getting to know people, I will make it a priority to begin getting to know them first and personally invite them. Perhaps, over time, we can also identify some young adults who buy into what we are doing, and we can invite them into leadership on the parish council.”

“That makes so much sense!” Mary replied. “Why haven’t we been doing this all along? Why are we just now thinking about this as a Church?”

Her words resonated in my mind. Why were we only now thinking about the needs of young adults? “Maybe because they aren’t naturally taking over leadership positions in the Church like their parents did,” I lamented. “I think we have taken for granted that people will just volunteer for ministries and show up at church events. That just isn’t the case anymore.

“If we want young adults to be a part of the Church community, we have to change our approach. Young adults today follow more of a path where ‘you find a place where you feel like you belong first, then you start doing things with them and then you start asking about what they believe.’ We need to start with belonging.

“This is going to be difficult and probably even frustrating at times because I don’t even know how to identify if we are succeeding. ‘Personal engagement in faith is unmeasurable.’

“Mary, you’re right, though. Just having young adults in the pews is not enough. I think numbers matter to me because I came from such a small parish in my previous assignment. Let’s focus on the integration of young adults into the parish instead.”

“*Young adults are young ADULTS. Listening to young adults will help you grow and innovate, but you have to spend time listening. Not in a listening session, but in every aspect of ministry. There should be a young adult on the finance committee, parish council, and any other leadership structure in the parish.*”

— Young Adult
Survey Respondent

When asked if they met their goals, almost 63% said “Somewhat” with 30% saying “Yes” and 7% responding “No.”



Once again, Mary smiled slyly. “That’s going to be a hard sell around here, you know,” she retorted. “People are used to seeing things a certain way. We will have to change the conversation and the culture around ministry with young adults. We’ve tried a few things in the past. We hosted some very successful social events. We have been offering Theology on Tap every Lent and Advent. A lot of young adults show up, sometimes as many as 75 at one event! I just don’t think measuring in terms of numbers is the way to go. I’m willing to put the work into it if you’re ready to support us.”

“It’s a good thing that I’m new here,” I replied. “We can begin with a blank slate.”

“I know I said it before, Father, but I’m so glad that you’re here,” Mary said as her eyes welled with tears. “I can’t imagine anything that’s more demonstrative of success in ministry than their involvement in the life of the Church.’ I know that I will need ‘to really appreciate the small moments that I see and the small victories that are really not small,’ but if we can reach these young adults one at a time, I know it will be worth it. Thank you for listening to me today.”

My eyes, too, welled with tears. “Mary, I am the one who should be thanking you. Your passion and compassion for these young adults is admirable. I can already tell that we are going to make a great team.”

Reflection Questions

Even with access to young adults, it is not automatic or easy to fully engage or integrate young adults into the parish.

1. What type of access does your parish have to young adults?
2. What are the parish’s goals for the ministry with young adults?
3. How would you recommend that your parish listen to young adults?
4. What types of leadership positions and/or structures does your parish need to put in place to support the ministry?
5. How are you and/or your parish going to measure the success of ministry with young adults?



Vignette Two: Change Is Hard

Context: Parish staff meeting where the youth and young adult minister brings up integration of young adult ministry across all parish ministries.

Walking into the parish conference room for our weekly staff meeting, my stomach filled with butterflies. I don't normally get nervous in meetings, but there is something intimidating about answering questions regarding your ministry to people old enough to be your parents. I'm the youngest staff member by at least 20 years and I've been here for three years, but they still see me as a kid. I just know someone's going to say that I just want to get out of doing my job. I'm trying everything I can, but it's just so hard. How can I convince them that this ministry is bigger than just me? I take my usual seat, take a deep breath, and prepare myself for whatever comes next.

Fr. John begins the meeting, "Welcome, everyone. Once a month I like to highlight one of our ministries. This month, Jane will share with us what she has been doing with young adult ministry and what her plans are for the future. Jane, you have the floor."

Nervously, I collect myself, stand up in front of this room of my colleagues and begin telling them about our recent events. "We have had some great success with our social events. Last month, we had 50 people attend our Beer Brewing Night. Almost 40 of them came back last week for the beer tasting. Our weekly Young Adult Mass and socials have seen a steady increase in attendance." I share a few more recent events before inviting anyone around the room to ask any questions about what we have done.

Richard, our DRE, quickly chimed in, "Jane, those events are great, but we just aren't seeing these young adults at anything else. They're not joining the Knights of Columbus. They're not volunteering on the fair committee. They don't want to be lectors or ushers or sacristans. Why don't they want to be a part of our parish community?" The quiet but steady murmuring in the room tells me that the rest of the staff agreed with Richard.

So, there it was. The question I have been dreading but also wanting to address. I mustered up my courage and responded, "You see, Richard, we've been doing some great direct young adult ministry over the last year, but I feel like we've reached this plateau. We draw these young adults into our events, but our parish is not really set up to fully minister to them. That's what I was hoping to talk to you about today."

In the parish leadership survey, only 23% of parish leaders said their parish welcomes and embraces change, while 18% said change is not supported and even avoided.

“I want to expand this ministry beyond just a group of young adults who gather for events. To do that, though, it’s going to take a ton of work from the whole parish. You know that I lead both youth and young adult ministry, so I only have part of my time to spend on this ministry. I’ve been talking with some other parish young adult ministers to find out what has been working for them, and I’ve garnered some great ideas.”

As is often the case, my bringing up change did not receive a warm response. As I watched my colleagues fold their arms, shake their heads, and mutter to each other, I knew convincing them would be as difficult as I had imagined. Gaining resolve, I continued, “In all the conversations I’ve had, I keep hearing the same thing: ‘Make it a parish-wide focus.’”¹¹

“I recognize that what I can accomplish as a youth and young adult minister is only a fraction of what we can do if the whole parish focuses on ministry with young adults. I would like to work with all of you on how we can better serve our young adults in all of our ministries. I meet these young adults at our events, and I can tell they are hungry for more, but I just can’t provide it all on my own.”

I attempted to read the reactions on their faces. Some of them seemed annoyed, a couple confused, but Fr. John looked pensive. “What did you have in mind, Jane?” he asked curiously.

Full of confidence that our pastor was giving me a chance, I excitedly presented my plan. “Ministry with young adults is hard, and intentionality is the key. If we start with us, the pastoral leadership of the parish, to create a shared vision for this ministry, I think we will be surprised with how much change we can affect. Let’s each think about our own ministries.

“How many of the people we encounter are young adults? Think about marriage preparation, baptismal preparation, and RCIA. Richard, I know I see several young adults bringing or picking up their siblings from religious education or being chosen as Confirmation sponsors. Are we taking into consideration what those young adults need? Are we helping them connect back to the parish? That’s ministry with young adults and that is what I propose we as a staff focus on for the next year.”

I think Fr. John agreed with me, but I could tell he still had questions. “So, you’re saying that I need to change how I do marriage preparation with engaged couples?”

11 Part 3, Table 16.

I begin to question myself. Am I really challenging my pastor? I tell myself to stand firm in my convictions. “Well, Father, what if we just expanded on what we do with engaged couples? For instance, getting them all together with other engaged couples in the parish for wine, cheese, and chocolate and having the preparation sessions occur in that context and then sharing the Church teachings with them. Why does marriage preparation have to be done in an office? We could even have mentor couples meet with engaged couples. Kind of like an instant community support group for their marriage.

“I’m just saying maybe we need to talk to some young, engaged couples and see what would make their marriage preparation more meaningful for them.” I suddenly wonder if I’m going to lose my job for telling my pastor how to do his job. Then, his smile tells me I don’t need to worry.

Looking around the room, the folded arms have uncrossed. The angry faces have softened. I think what I’m saying might be sinking in. “Jane, I think that’s a great idea,” Fr. John says. “Think of all the other applications this could have. Richard, we can look at RCIA and baptism preparation and breathe some new life into those ministries as well.

“We can look at it as us inviting them into the fold of the ministry of the parish. So not seeing it as though we’re going to minister to them, or this ministry is completely segregated from the rest of the parish, but to see it as an opportunity to bring them into the whole experience of the parish. This is exciting to think about, Jane. How do we start moving in this direction?”

I was so excited at the possibilities of what we could accomplish with our pastor’s support and the support of the whole staff, I could burst. “Like I said before, ‘ministry with young adults is hard. The first step is getting all of us on the same page.’ I think it would be helpful to also bring in the rest of the parish leadership on our idea, especially the parish council. We could open some positions for young adults on the parish council so their voice can be included in the parish conversations. They can help us ensure that our vision remains at the forefront of everything we do.

“Some of the other parishes shared with me that having the pastor talk about young adults and highlighting what they are doing in the parish made an incredible difference. Fr. John, I was hoping we could schedule some times for you to include young adults in your homilies and announcements. Maybe you could even make it a habit to welcome any new young adults in the congregation at Mass.

11 out of 13 parishes mentioned using RCIA and/or marriage preparation in outreach to young adults.

11/13 parishes mentioned pastor support, especially from the pulpit, aided in their success.

“Lastly, we have to find a way to get more young adults in leadership in our parish. Even on our staff, I’m so much younger than everyone else here. Sometimes it feels like I’m the only one who understands what it’s like to be a young adult. What does everyone think?”

Richard seemed nervously excited about the possibilities when he said, “This really won’t be easy. You’re asking us to completely evaluate everything we do, but I look at my own kids who left the Church and I know that we have to do this. We want to put information out there. Our parish staff shares it, promotes it, makes sure that the parish as a whole knows about things that are happening in the young adult world, so that they can either invite people they may know or pray for those retreats or events or whatever it is. I support you, Jane.”

“Here’s what I can do,” Fr. John added. “We’re going to ask our staff, parish council, finance board, and the leaders of ministries to have two young adults in their leadership. Let’s start there. We might get some pushback, but we can handle it. And I want to try that wine and chocolate event. That sounds fun!”

“Only if the whole staff is invited!” Richard yelled, which made everyone laugh.

After all the buildup of emotions to prepare for this meeting, I finally felt relief. After the meeting ended, I popped in my pastor’s office; “Fr. John, thank you for giving me the opportunity to say all of that today. For the first time in a long time, I don’t feel as helpless in leading this ministry. Thank you for trusting me enough to listen, and for allowing me to lead the way.”

Reflection Questions

Changing the parish culture and how it relates to young adults is extremely difficult. Depending on the situation, you may encounter varying levels of resistance.

1. What challenges might your parish face when it comes to helping everyone in the parish to see all ministries as ministry with young adults?
2. Whose support will you need to make the necessary changes in order to be successful?
3. How can your parish create a shared vision for ministry with young adults and ensure that the vision is carried out?
4. What role does the pastor play in changing the parish culture?

Vignette Three: They Called Me by Name!

Context: Young adult moving to a new city and his experience of being welcomed.

After months of searching post-graduation, I finally landed a job in my field. The salary was decent, but it would require me to move to a new town where I didn't know anyone. The area was great – rapidly growing, full of people my age, with lots of restaurants and bars. They even host festivals several times a month at the park. I'm just not the best at meeting new people. My first weekend after the move, I went to Mass at the church closest to my apartment. The people in Mass were warm and polite, smiling at me as I searched for a place to sit. The atmosphere felt welcoming.

There's something familiar and comforting about being in a Catholic Church. To my surprise, when Mass ended, a woman approached me and asked if I was new to the parish. Her name tag just read "Usher," but she introduced herself as Nancy. As I was telling her my story, she slowly ushered me over to where the priest was standing at the back of the church. She introduced me to Fr. Joe, and he and I chatted about football, my job, and our favorite Italian foods. I left the church feeling comforted, but not quite at home.

About two weeks later, I was scrolling on Instagram and saw a boosted post about the church hosting a young adult volleyball event. I like volleyball, so maybe I will attend. I liked the post and decided to add the church in my following. Not even five minutes later, I got a DM from Amy, who said she was from the parish, saw that I liked the post and asked me if I had any questions about the event.

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“I know a lot of people, especially women in our group. Clarice was their first friend in the group, because she was the person that they reach when they were reaching out on social media. So I would say social media is the biggest way that we have reached out.”

— CORE TEAM MEMBER

According to the parish survey, 65% of the young adults engaged enough within the YAI said that their parish was always welcoming.¹²

In our interviews and focus groups, 13/13 parishes mention personal recognition of visitors and introduction to at least one person.

A couple of parish contacts in more populated areas shared a value in “boosting” event posts on social media. Others in more rural areas did not see much return on the investment.

Innovation - One parish used social media to reach out to new people who liked posts.

12 Part 3, Chart 4.

We chatted back and forth about where I was from, what I did for a living, and what my hobbies were. She sincerely thanked me for considering coming to play volleyball. She even offered to introduce me to a couple of other guys who she thought were from my hometown.

Core teams had a process of introducing every new person to at least two people with some commonality (home state, industry, etc.).

I walked up to the volleyball event the following week. Amy immediately recognized me and rushed up to me and exclaimed, “Andrew! I’m so happy you’re here. Come see. I want you to meet Brandon and Alex. I’ve been telling them about you. They can’t wait to see if you have common friends from back home.” All of sudden, this new city didn’t seem so foreign. We had a great time that night playing volleyball and getting to know some new folks. Brandon and I had a really great conversation about a few people we knew in common. He invited me to go to Mass with him the following Sunday, but I told him I wasn’t sure I could. In reality, I’m still not sure if this is the right place for me.

Brandon, Amy, and another person I met at the game texted me that week asking if I was coming to Mass. I tried making up excuses as to why I couldn’t go, but they just kept asking anyway. Finally, I reluctantly walked into the church the next Sunday.

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“I first try to have an intentional conversation with them, so you get to know them and be able to connect in some kind of way. I feel like this is the standard of how I try to meet new people. And then I try to invite them really clearly, but then also give them no pressure to come, and then I follow up a million times.”

— PARISH CONTACT ON HOW THEY CONTINUALLY INVITE PEOPLE



As I opened the door, Fr. Joe greeted me with a big smile. “Good morning, Andrew!” he said. “I’m so happy to see you back at Mass again.” I couldn’t believe that he remembered my name! I mean, he knew my name! I only met him a week ago. As he stepped away to get vested, I noticed Brandon sitting in the pew. He caught my attention and motioned for me to come join him and Amy. “Maybe this is where I belong,” I thought as I walked over to sit by them.

As I got to know more people at the parish, I discovered that my story was not that unique. Lots of us were new to the area and someone invited us to get more involved. One day when I was talking with Brandon at our local coffee shop, he told me, “The moment I stepped into the parish for the first time, which honestly wasn’t that long ago, I was instantly greeted by somebody who gave me a welcome packet, offered to pray for me during Mass, that I may stay at the parish long-term and be an integral member of the parish.” That’s when he knew that this was his home. What we both figured out pretty quickly was that Nancy was the one who first welcomed both of us! Her job at the parish wasn’t even related to the liturgy. I think she was the youth minister or something. She had just been at the parish for a long time, knew everyone, and genuinely cared about each person who walked through the door. Perhaps even more important than that, she introduced us to other people.

The data indicated that having someone intentionally responsible for this ministry ensured its effectiveness. In one parish, this was done by a staff member who possessed a charisma for meeting new people and introducing them to the pastor. In another parish, a young adult Core Team member utilized her gift of connecting with people via social media to begin fostering relationships with new young adults.

Well, “every parish needs a Nancy,” Brandon told me.

There was something about the way Nancy, Amy, and Fr. Joe welcomed me that made me feel comfortable. “You know, Brandon,” I quipped. “I was really nervous to come back to Mass after that first volleyball game. It seems silly. Who is nervous about going to Mass? It’s just weird when you walk into a new place, and you don’t know anybody. The fact that you reached out to me that week and others persisted in the invitation, that’s why I came back. I told myself ‘You know you’ll have one person to talk to,’ or at least like, you feel more comfortable, I don’t know. Kind of more secure, I guess.”

“Even though I’m not even a parishioner yet, people remember me, like maybe you heard me sing, or they made some type of connection. Like Father, when he first got here and I hadn’t seen him in years and he came back as a priest, he remembered my name. Because... we were breaking off palm leaves or whatever one afternoon. And he just remembered me from there. So, like just already kind of having a presence and feeling welcome every time I come back. Even though I’m not even a member yet. It’s been really nice.”

— Young Adult

Brandon smiled, “I do think when you’ve been invited to something else, more people invite other people.” What he shared made so much sense. I hadn’t thought of it that way. He continued, “There is this culture of invitation at the parish. Nobody really talks about it, but we all just know that it’s okay to invite other people to come to stuff. It’s just kind of expected.”

Reflection Questions

Personal recognition and relationship building are key components of helping young adults feel a sense of belonging.

1. What would young adults say about how welcomed they feel at your parish?
2. How do you help young adults move from being welcomed to feeling a sense of belonging in your parish?
3. How does your parish intentionally reach out to new people to ensure they know they are welcome?



Vignette Four: One Size Does Not Fit All

Context: A series of job advertisements for ministerial employment being reviewed by a soon-to-be out-of-work lay minister.

Dominic's Job Search

Dominic is an experienced DRE, responsible for all aspects of faith formation, womb-to-tomb, as they say. His current position, however, is being dissolved and he is looking for a new parish position. At his last parish, he started a Theology on Tap for young adults and really enjoyed the ministry with this age group because they had so many questions and were desiring something more from the Church. He is interested in exploring positions that would include ministry to young adults.

Looking in the diocesan paper for a job, the two advertisements that caught his eye both involve leading ministry with young adults but from different contexts. One was working with youth and young adults, which in his experience is helpful because you can build relationships early when they are teens and walk with them as they become young adults. The other position seemed to focus more on young adults first as adults who happen to be young. Although he had not experienced this model directly, he saw merit in it.

After reading the job descriptions, Dominic liked them both and wondered to himself, Which one should I take if I want to focus on young adults in my ministry? Where is God calling me to serve? Where will my gifts be best used? After a time of prayer and discernment, he decided to apply for both but began to formulate some questions he would ask at the interview. He wants to know if his vision for integrating young adults into the parish community is similar to that of the pastor because, as an experienced minister, Dominic knows having aligned visions is important.

PASTORAL ASSOCIATE NEEDED

St. Vincent De Paul, a vibrant parish in the suburbs of Chicago, is looking for a pastoral associate to lead adult faith formation including RCIA, sacramental preparation for parents of children or teens receiving the sacraments of initiation, preparation for the sacrament of marriage for young couples, and to be the lead person for all of young adult ministry. Master's degree and experience working with young adults preferred. The right person will possess the following competencies:

- Understanding and application of adult education principles in teaching and engaging all adults young and old.
- Ability to relate to and accompany adults in faith, especially young adults.
- Capacity to oversee a team of volunteer leaders to assist in young adult ministry.
- Skill in advocating for the integration of young adults into the parish, especially through all sacramental preparation programs.

YOUTH AND YOUNG ADULT MINISTRY POSITION

Rural parish in the Archdiocese of Chicago seeking a youth and young adult ministry coordinator to lead a youth ministry program that has a long history of success and to create a young adult ministry program for college-age young adults through young adults with families. Credible candidates will have at least three years' ministry experience working with youth from 13 years old to young adults in their 30s. Additionally, they must be able to articulate and implement a vision for young adult ministry in a rural setting with its benefits and challenges.

Where should young adult ministry be placed in a parish staff? Should it be a youth and young adult position or in the position of the person responsible for adult faith formation? What do you think?

“

“I think by putting young adult and adult together, at least for me, it makes it a little bit easier. I can cross-plan some things. Because I think it's really important to provide young adults exclusive opportunities, but I think it's also important to provide those opportunities where they can become involved with the rest of the parish as well. That they're not segregated, particularly as they move through that young adult age group and life status, and everything.”

— YAI Contact



Fr. Tom's Dilemma

Fr. Tom has been given a \$6,000 donation targeted at ministry with young adults. He is considering two approaches for using the money and starting a ministry for young adults. He knows he wants a team approach, but as an experienced pastor he also knows that the success of ministry efforts in a parish often comes down to who is leading the effort.

Option one he is considering is finding a volunteer and giving them a good budget to support the ministry. He knows a parish across the diocese who did that and found that using money for food, low-cost or free socials, and for babysitting so that young couples can participate really helped the ministry advance.

The second one is using that money to stipend someone \$500 a month to lead the ministry for the parish. He likes this option because of accountability and because he knows that this type of position might be perfect for a young adult wishing to supplement their income. The problem would be no budget or a very small one that he might be able to take from the parish funds, but it would not be more than \$1,000.

As Fr. Tom ponders this dilemma, he wrote up both options for the bulletin and sent it to the parish council president for advice. The president talked to him after Sunday Mass and proposed maybe to start with the budget and, as it grows, consider moving to the stipend option. Fr. Tom considered this advice and decided that, before he does anything else, he wants to talk directly with young adults about what they need and see if anything surfaces.

Bulletin Announcements

URGENT: Volunteer Needed to Lead Young Adult Ministry

Young adults are leaving our parish and not coming back! As a parish, we must do something. Please consider serving as the ministry leader for young adults. This will be an official position on the parish council and the person will be appointed to this ministry by the pastor. Help us to create a core team of other volunteers to help with this ministry. There is a budget to support programs and for continuing education of the leader. This position pays nothing but the benefits in heaven make up for it! Please help our parish have a future by inviting young adults to faith and community in our parish. Please call Fr. Tom if you are interested. Looking for a two- to three-year commitment.

Young Adult Leadership Position

Servant leader needed to lead our young adult committee. This position will receive a small stipend for 20 hours a month of work. The role includes leading the parish council's young adult committee and helping to plan events, attending events, providing administrative support for the ministry, and advocating for the ministry at parish council meetings. Perfect job for a stay-at-home mom, flexible and rewarding. Please call Fr. Tom if you are interested. Looking for a two- to three-year commitment.

“

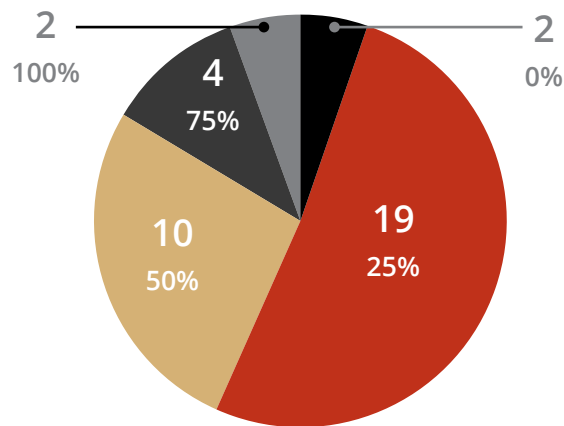
“I think, too, as far as just recruiting help and even core team members, I just think it has more impact if you're a staff member to say, 'Hey, do you want to join our core team?' Or even the pastor asking versus me, just because basically someone in just a position of leadership, I think it just comes differently.”

— Parish Volunteer

In the YAI there were 11 contacts serving in a paid position, with three contacts volunteering. One parish had both a paid and volunteer contact.

12 out of 13 parishes mentioned either the need for or the benefit of having (28 times) staff or leadership that focus on helping integration of young adults into the parish.

CHART 5: LEADERSHIP SURVEY – PERCENTAGE OF STAFF RESPONSIBILITIES INVOLVING YOUNG ADULTS



This question was asked only to respondents who identified themselves as being a parish staff member.

**Staff personnel who have young adults within their ministerial responsibilities*

Reflection Questions

There were benefits and challenges in each of the four leadership positions presented in the vignettes.

1. Which of these positions sound more like your parish experience or what you think your parish needs?
2. What do you see as the benefits and challenges of each vignette, looking at paid and volunteer positions?
3. What would you recommend to your parish if it was to seek a volunteer or paid leader for the position?



Vignette Five: Better Together!

Context: Ministry formation class on working with volunteer teams.

Ansel the Diocesan Leader: Today we will look at how to help volunteers who work with young adults in the parish. The theory we will explore is Situational Leadership, developed by Hersey and Blanchard, which is a process of enabling someone who knows very little about a task or role to gradually become confident to do it themselves and be highly committed. Others use the theory to understand the best way to support volunteers based upon their level of experience at the task they are doing. But let's start by understanding your current realities in working with volunteers.

So, what are the issues you face in working with a team of volunteers supporting young adult ministry?

Kathy: Well, I am not sure about this theory. Our main issue is finding people to even say yes. People are so busy these days and getting them to make a commitment is difficult. So, enabling them to do the role is not even something we get to in my parish. Especially young adult volunteers, they are really hard to get a commitment from and then, once you do, poof! – they get married or get a new job and they are gone, and I have to start all over.

Bill: For us, it is about vision. Our team has been consistent over the past year. Fr. Bob directly invited and appointed the team he and I discussed. I guess it was hard to say no to him. But anyway, our team began first by listening and then we are trying to set a vision for integrating young adults into the ministry, which is great, but we are stuck there. We don't have enough time to implement the vision.

FROM A CORE TEAM MEMBER:

“And he (the contact) worked closely with the pastor too I felt like they had really taken time and consideration because they sort of put their value in each of the team members. It was a real exciting team to join and be a part of and it didn't feel like they were just trying to get numbers on the team. It felt like they were really careful picking people to make a difference. It's hard to say no to that. You know, people put that much energy into something like that.”

“

One core team member explained:

“Planning was always difficult if there was not sufficient input from the young adults in the parish on the core team. It was hard to retain young adults on the core team because of the time commitment involved. As a result, most events were planned organically by the young adults and then supported by the core team.”

One core team member explained this about her experience on the team:

“We have a lot of ideas and sometimes we get lost in the ideas and then it becomes too grand to take on.”



YAI CORE TEAM MEMBER:

“I think of just the whole constant change thing In the time that I’ve been at (Parish Name), I went from being single to now living in a different city with a wife and a baby. And so, there’s a lot that can happen in a little amount of time, and that very much affects how you engage with your parish. Like, back when I was single or even when we were married with no kids, that looks very different than right now. Because there are so many different priorities that we have now, and I can’t be involved in the same ways. So, I guess that’s just been a challenge.”

Maria: That’s funny, Bill. We have the exact opposite problem. I have three people, if you want to call it a team, that’s fine, but all they do are programs. Some attract young adults, most don’t, but they try really hard. Two of them are young adults themselves, and one is getting married and another has decided to move across the country for a better job. I am not sure what is going to happen to our ministry. I thought finding young adults to help was the solution, but their lifestyle is so transient and changing that it’s really hard to build something.

Florez: Our parish, I guess, is lucky. We have two teams, one that plans and the other that implements. People seem to be good at different things, but the key is Sofia. She leads the team that visions the ministry and advocates for young adults within the parish. I lead the team that does the fun stuff, developing relationships with young adults, building community, and helping them become active in the parish. It was my last pastor’s vision, but I am a little worried now that we know he is leaving. Hopefully, we have enough in place for the new pastor not to mess with it too much.

Ansel: Wow, thanks for sharing. Anyone else? I am not sure where to start, but let’s set aside the leadership theory for a few minutes and talk about the basics of forming a team to lead a young adult ministry. Here are five questions every parish needs to consider when forming a core team for young adult ministry.

1. Purpose: Is the team’s role to set the vision or to implement the plan or both? If it’s both, how will you divide the work and make sure both happen?
2. Team Makeup: Is your team made up of only young adults or a mix of older adults and young adults? How will you handle the inevitable transitions to the team, especially with those who are young adults?
3. Invitation: How are you inviting people to be part of the team? Is your pastor involved or another staff member? Are you clear about the time commitment you are looking for?
4. Connection to Parish: Who will be responsible for advocating and connecting with the pastor, or other parish leadership or staff, about the work of the young adult team(s) and their activities?
5. Success: How will your team evaluate your work and what will your measures of success be? How is that connected to your overall vision for ministry with young adults?

Reflection Questions

Good ministry begins with a good team. It cannot be from just the mind and heart of one individual, but there is a difficulty in steering a team in the best way or finding the correct people.

1. Is your support team's role to set the vision or to implement the plan or both? If it's both, how will you divide the work and make sure both happen?
2. Is your support team made up of only young adults or a mix of older adults and young adults? How will you handle the inevitable transitions to the team, especially with those who are young adults?
3. How are you inviting people to be part of your support team? Is your pastor involved or another staff member? Are you clear about the time commitment you are looking for?
4. Who will be responsible for advocating and connecting with the pastor, or other parish leadership or staff, about the work of the young adult team(s) and their activities?
5. How will your team evaluate your work and what will your measures of success be? How is that connected to your overall vision for ministry with young adults?



“**One contact said this about structuring a parish core team for young adults:**
“Having a diverse core team with different connections to other ministries in the parish and at different life stages (single/married/parent) helped us to consider the needs of different young adults.”

One core team member shared this frustration:
“The core team had very little impact. Information was vague or came last minute. The core team didn't have much say or input; mostly we're told what to do by those in charge (not the pastor, but those running the core team). Never really understood my role on the team and I don't think I'd be the only member to say this.”

Vignette Six: Father, can you...?

Context: A deanery-wide clergy lunch soon after a diocesan clergy study day on young adult disaffiliation in the Church.

During Deanery Seven's monthly clergy lunch meeting, the topic for today is how to engage young adults. Fr. John is the deanery chair, so he facilitates the meetings and discussion. All the pastors attended a clergy day on the topic of the crisis of disaffiliation of young adults from the Church. These priests vary in age and in the types of parishes they serve, as well as how they are directly engaged with young adults. The conversation starts with a general discussion of the ministry and moves to a discussion of how to measure success of a parish's efforts to reach out and engage young adults.

Meeting begins at 12:01p.m.

Fr. John (deanery chair, pastor for 15 years): Okay, let's get settled. While we wait for lunch to be set up, let's discuss our topic for the meeting – ministry with young adults. At the clergy day this spring, we heard about the growing number of disaffiliated young adults and the complexities of engaging these generations in faith. As you recall, the bishop asked us all to discuss this topic at our deanery meeting: how do we engage young adults in our parishes and what we can do to improve in this area? So, let's do that and then we can bless the food and eat. I know I have a lot to get back to at the parish. What do you do to interact and engage young adults?

“

“Thanks to the support of our pastor, pastoral team, and parish council, the young adult presence continues to grow within our parish community. When we initially received the grant, our pastor made a parish-wide request that each major ministry/committee leave openings for young adults in leadership positions. Currently, half of our parish council and finance board are made up of young adults. The chairperson of the parish council is a young adult woman. Our pastoral team includes several young adults, and our numbers are growing within other parish ministries. The presence and perspective of young adults is not only recognized and welcomed within the community but sought out.”

— PARISH CONTACT

Msgr. Williams (pastor for 55 years): Well, for me, it's simple. I hear their confessions; that is an important pastoral moment. And when they come to Mass, I try to preach to them as best I can with stories. I hired a young adult coordinator, so it's their job primarily to engage them, not mine. I do support this ministry; I just wish the numbers were higher. It seems like we are spending a lot of money for 10 to 15 people to gather.



ANOTHER CONTACT EXPLAINED WORKING AROUND
THE LACK OF PASTOR SUPPORT:

“Right now, we have no budget for young adults. What is that going to look like after this (the YAI) ends? Are we going to have support? We are trying to find other people who can be helpful in the parish to back us up and that maybe would even connect better with the pastor. Where if the pastor heard it from this guy on the parish council who’s in his 60s, it might register more with our pastor than if it was from us. And that’s just the nature of it. Some people connect better with young adults and some people don’t.”

Fr. Sam (priest for 6 years, new pastor): Well, I found that the people doing young adult ministry didn’t know what to do, so I invited a group over to my house for brunch one Saturday to discuss it. That brunch was so popular that I do these brunch events at my house once a month for young adults. Also, when our college team has away games, I have people over to watch the game and eat BBQ. Honestly, they bring their friends, and it has become something that our whole ministry to young adults has grown from. They do lots of events without me, but they really like being at the rectory and hanging out with me, the pastor. Who knew that would be so important to them?



“It was just really cool to be able to hang out with the priest, and it wasn’t even that ... it was just that he was there, and his presence was there, and it felt like he wasn’t trying to be cool, which would’ve made it way worse. But he just showed up and was just being himself, and it felt like It made me feel like, yeah, I can come here whenever I want.”

— YOUNG ADULT

Deacon Jones: Our parish has no ministry to young adults directly, but indirectly through marriage preparations and baptisms. We tried to form a young adult group, but we found little success in engaging them because the audience was so diverse. Honestly, it is really hard to know where to start. Maybe we will try that brunch idea, but I am not sure if Msgr. Roy would be comfortable with that. All I know is that we need to do something, because so few are getting married in the Church or even baptizing their children, so something has to change.

Fr. Albert (priest for 11 years, from India originally): Honestly, I don’t really understand these young adults. They are very different from those in my country, but I know our focus has to be on evangelization, based upon the declining numbers. They must learn how to pray and trust in the Lord. I try to preach on this often at Mass so they can hear this message.

“

“As someone who’s trying to drive passion in something, to me presence matters, presence from the pastor matters.”

— Parish Contact

“When the leadership support is lacking, in the sense that I was kind of on my own in a lot of ways. I wasn’t supported, but I was applauded. That was my support. I needed more than that, especially as someone young and new in ministry, to really move things forward in the parish and make big changes. But again, I am very hopeful now that leadership has kind of come around and I’ve kind of made a voice for myself here.”

—Parish Contact

Fr. John: Thank you all for sharing. In our parish, I would say I try really hard to support all ministries. We’ve talked about this before – how everyone wants us there at their event or program or meeting, and how it is impossible to do it all. But lately, since the clergy day, I have tried to go to the young adult events, at least for a little while, and learn their names. It has made a difference. After Mass now, many of them come by to say hi to me. However, it seems just in our comments we have heard a spectrum from very little support, to supportive but not engaged directly, to those directly engaged. I guess it all depends on the pastor and his gifts. What should we tell the bishop about what we can do to improve in this area?

Fr. Sam: I think it all comes down to how we measure success in this ministry. Is it numbers at Mass or at programs, or in developing individual relationships with young adults? For me, it was about listening first and building relationships with them, like I do all my parishioners. I am not sure why I thought it would be so hard, but honestly it was not, and they seemed so appreciative. One thing we should tell the bishop is that youth ministry and young adult ministry are not the same. You need a totally different approach because they are adults who happen to be young.

Msgr. Williams: Absolutely, it has to do with measuring success, and 15 young adults gathering periodically doesn’t seem like success to me.



Fr. Albert: Our measure of success will be how many individuals come back to the Church, but I know this will be a challenge. I am not sure where to start.

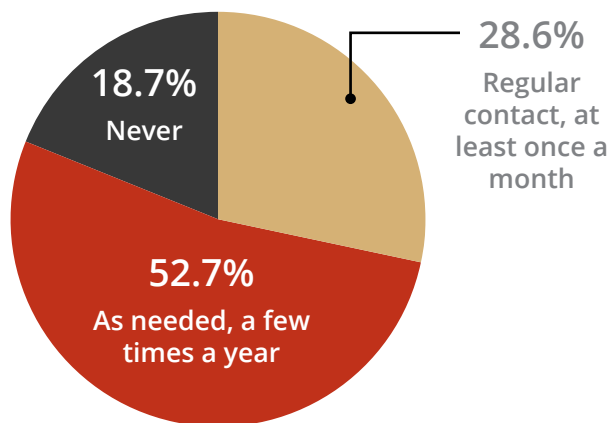
Deacon Jones: I think I'll start by trying to listen to them like Sam did and see if we can get something going. I hope we tell the bishop that we need more help in this area.

Fr. John: Looks like lunch is here. Let's continue this conversation while we eat. Let us bless the food!

7 of the 13 parishes indicated that the pastor still doesn't get the shift from YAM to MYA.

13/13 parishes mentioned the importance of pastor/priest buy-in ownership, participation, and support as very important to this ministry, in both interviews and focus groups.

CHART 8: LEADERSHIP SURVEY – INTERACTION BETWEEN THE PASTOR, PARISH STAFF AND CORE TEAM



This question was not asked to respondents who identified as a Pastor, as it was discussed in their interviews.



Pastor quote:

"They get married and then they ask us to have their baby's baptism. So, those are crucial... junctures, of getting married. And in terms of getting married, the destination wedding is a big deal. We do everything we can to work with them and they know that. In fact, a couple came to me because they said, "We hear that you will work with us." In other words, what we'll do is, you'll have your small Catholic wedding here first and then your destination wedding will be a renewal of vows and that's copacetic with the Church. And so, we'll do that. And many times, I have witnessed both. They might've been turned away somewhere else."

On Measuring Success of Young Adults Integrating into the parish:

"It takes time to move a mountain. Culture change is hard, and we need to be patient and see the little increments of progress."



Reflection Questions

There is a fine line between making a ministry dependent on the pastor and having a ministry with the support of a pastor. The support of a pastor empowers others to take on leadership roles and engages both the young adults and the parish in different ways.

1. Which style on the spectrum are the leaders in your parish (pastor, young adult coordinator, yourself, others) when it comes to young adult ministry? Is it working for your parish? Do they match or complement each other or not?
2. How do you engage parish leadership in young adult ministry?
3. How often do you talk to the parish leadership about ministry with young adults in your parish?
4. Does your pastor ever speak about young adults or ministry with them from the pulpit? Is the support of ministry to young adults generally known by parishioners, or is it something that only those involved would be able to comment on?

Vignette Seven: Transition: Is it Inevitable? Here We Go Again!

Why didn't you meet your goals? 27.7% noted "Leadership concerns including transitions, conflicts, and lack of consistency or enthusiasm."

TABLE 12: LEADERSHIP SURVEY –
IF YOU DID NOT MEET YOUR GOALS, WHY?

	N	Responses Percent	Percent of Cases
Leadership concerns including transitions, conflicts, and lack of consistency or enthusiasm.	13	27.7%	41.9%
Could not reach or keep young adults engaged consistently.	12	25.5%	38.7%
COVID interruption to ministry.	8	17.0%	25.8%
We did not offer attractive or diverse offerings.	7	14.9%	22.6%
Still growing and trying to reach our goals.	5	10.6%	16.1%
Other	2	4.3%	6.5%
Total	47	100.0%	151.6%

This question was asked only to respondents who identified as a current or previous Core Team member.

Context: Email to young adult ministry (YAM) team from coordinator, and their responses.

Dear YAM Team,

Thanks for all your hard work at our line dancing outing last week. I am still sore! Who knew Achy Breaky was real!

I need to share some exciting and sad news with you. My husband has just taken a new job in Chicago that is his dream job, so I will be leaving the parish at the end of June. I know I have only been here a year, but I have loved the ministry we have done together! I know the next coordinator will be very lucky to have all of you on their team!

There are still four months before I go, so let's meet next Thursday to plan the next social event. Hopefully, this time I won't be as sore the next morning! Thanks again!

Peace,
Joan

Reply to All from Max:

Hi Joan,

I know what you mean, I was a little sore too! So sad you are leaving, I thought we were getting some real momentum. I am not sure I want to continue volunteering. It's not anything you did, but you are my third coordinator. And each time a person comes in, we move in a new direction, and I feel like we can never get any traction and that is why our numbers remain so low. Honestly, this is not directed at you, but we have to find a way to have consistency.

Five years ago, our focus was on single young adults. The person we hired was younger, so it made sense. It was great, we had a small but real community. We did mostly socials and a lot of Theology on Taps. That is why I stayed because it was a great community. But then Rebecca came in and said at her previous parish young adults were craving the Eucharist, so we started weekly adoration and a couple of retreats.

Then Salina came and, because she was newly married with a small child, it seemed like things became more about couples and families. It was cool with me because I was engaged, so a couple things worked, but that left out a lot of people. And Joan, you have helped us focus on outreach to new people and building community with things such as the line dancing social. What will be next? I just feel, like, here we go again! Does anyone else feel this way? And now that Fr. Tom is retiring next year, what will that mean?

Max



“

YAI Contact:

“I felt so supported in the transitions we were encountering, and seeing through the data that we’re not the only ones.”

“It feels like every time we start to build momentum, something happens. Whether that’s a pandemic or the director leaves or whatever it is, something happens and that momentum that we’d been building, it’s just gone.”
— Core Team Member

Reply All Email Chain:

Sr. Margaret (DRE): Yes! Well said, Max!

Jose: Definitely, we have to find a way to focus even if the person changes! But how? Maybe we need to create lots of small groups based upon the many differences in lifestyles and needs. This is one of the reasons I don't always go. As a married guy, I don't fit in at all of those socials we have done and sometimes the family stuff doesn't fit either. But I really like it when we do men's-only things where it seems age and lifestyle don't matter as much.

Maggie: Agreed, but what do we do? Should we talk to Fr. Tom or the parish council? We have to stop this back and forth, especially with Father leaving, too. I would hate to see us have to start all over again, again!

Stephanie: And the biggest challenge is not just leadership transition. Sometimes it feels just as we are gaining momentum in creating a community, one or more of the young adults really involved leaves because of relationships or work. My friend at Sts. Peter and Paul said they have had a similar issue, but they seem to have fixed it. I wonder what they did?



12 out of 13 parishes spoke about the transitions and differences between various life stages, with 9 out of 13 acknowledging the value of the diversity of the young adult audience but didn't know how to respond.¹⁴

Only four parishes out of the 13 experienced no major transitions.¹⁵

“*I think I really do believe it's established enough to keep going, but I think there's another level to it. I think the next phase of this is that there's a position within the parish council or initiative within the parish council.*”

— Pastor

¹⁴ Report 3 theme 8.

¹⁵ Page 172.

Reply All from Joan (three possible responses)

A) Wow, everyone, I didn't realize how much of an issue this is, but that is Fr. Tom's way. He lets the staff determine the course of action. He told me, when I was hired, it was my baby and to take care of it and try not to make too many waves. Not sure how to change him or his way of thinking, so I think the most important thing is focusing on what we can do with the young adults we are engaging and trusting the rest to the Holy Spirit. Max, Fr. Tom likes you, maybe you should share with him your experience.

B) All of you are so right! I thought starting with outreach made sense, that's what one of the webinars I attended said to do. I knew the parish had tried different things, but after hearing this, we have to do something different. Let's put a pause in our programs and meet with everyone, including Father, the parish council, and maybe some young adults, so we can develop a plan for this ministry. I promise, I'll work on having an intentional handoff when I leave so that things don't get dropped and make sure we meet with the new person altogether to share the vision.

C) I understand your feelings and I think you are right. How about this? Let's keep planning the next event and I'll contact the young adult minister at Sts. Peter and Paul, as well as the diocesan office, to see if there are any resources we can use to address how to create consistency in the midst of changing circumstances. The reality is we can't keep doing the same thing and expect different results! Now that Max articulated the issue, we have to address it before the next hire. I will advocate with Fr. Tom; it could be an uphill battle, but he is supportive and wants this to be successful. So, thanks Max, for sharing how you feel and everyone else! Who is ready to plan our trip to the progressive dinner throughout the city with night prayer in the Cathedral?



ONE CORE TEAM MEMBER SAID THIS ABOUT THE CHALLENGE OF TRANSITIONS:

"She brought her own vision of what she wanted ... it was definitely different than where our group was at, at that point. She opened the door, which was fine, she should have, of people to transition out if they weren't feeling called to this ministry. And then we lost several core members at that time. And so, it's been challenging."

Four changes in this category meant a lot of stops and starts and changing directions/visions. There was never a long-term plan implemented, and I feel like we could have done much more if there had been consistency.¹⁶

¹⁶ From Leadership Survey about the transition of the contact role by a core team member.

Reflection Questions

Transition will always be a part of ministry, but the impact can be diminished with proper planning and preparation for the inevitable.

1. If you were Joan, would you send message A, B, or C? Why?
2. Has your parish ever experienced a transition like this in leadership? How did it go? What helped or hurt in managing your transition?
3. When there is a change of pastor, what is the best way to help the new pastor understand the direction of young adult ministry that has existed prior to him?



“

One core team member said this about the challenge of transitions:

“Our problem has been a lack of consistency in leadership. We’ve had three official young adult ministers at the parish over the past four years (and a couple volunteers who’ve tried to fill in the gaps when we were without any staff member in that role). Due to this constant starting and restarting, then the pandemic, we’ve had a hard time getting all of these events off the ground and reaching young adults consistently.”

One core team member said about transition of the contact:

“Yes, this was hard in that it changed the direction and dynamics on our core team. Several did not agree with the new leader and left.”



Vignette Eight: Getting to Know You

Context: A young adult who recently entered the professional world and moved to her own place for the first time is searching for a parish. She shares her experiences in her diary.

Dear Diary,

I'm enjoying my new job! I know that everyone at home gave me a hard time wanting to get into agriculture, but I do love it! Unfortunately, being so far from home on the outskirts of the city has been a little rough on me. I miss my friends and family, and there doesn't seem to be anyone else around here. I finally visited a church today, and I thought it would be a good starting point to meet some people ... but I'm not really sure if this is the place for me. I walked in and, I swear, I was closer in age to the crying baby than I was to the next oldest adult!

The Mass had no energy, and it felt like everyone was there just for the donuts afterward. I grabbed an "evangelization éclair" from the pastry table after (they all had fun names like "discipleship donuts" and "share-your-faith scones"). Ironically, I sat down at a table by myself. As I stood up to leave, someone with a "Hello My Name is" nametag stuck to their coat came over and introduced himself. Tim, Ted, Tom? I don't remember his name, but I told him how I was new here and was looking to get back involved in Church.

I can't believe this, but he told me that I should consider leading their new young adult program! I mean, he just met me. I felt bad, but when he asked for my phone number, I gave him Lisa's: 867-5309. Maybe they should have a "sinful cinnamon roll" for me next time. I wish this had worked out, as it's only a couple of blocks away, but I'll ask around the building to see where others go. Next week, I think I'll try the small church near the office that I pass each day, but I'll probably skip any donuts from now on.

- Jenny

Dear Diary,

Well, good news, bad news, and then some more bad news. Every day, as I leave the city and enter the country to get to work, I pass this small little church about a mile from the office. Compared to the rest of the town, I'm not sure how this church has stayed open since so many of the business fronts in the one block of "downtown" are empty. But, after last week's debacle, I thought I'd give it a try.

First thing I noticed, the good news: there were young adults here. But that's also the bad news: Most of them I've seen come in and out of the office. And what's bad is that they are already their own group of friends. I mean most of them come from area farms that have been passed down generation to generation! But then there was some good news: Mass was really nice, and during the announcements they mentioned a young adult picnic planned for that afternoon right after Mass.

I decided to stick around for the picnic. It was already planned, so there was no way I would be asked to lead it. I noticed my coworker, Ross, who I thought lived closer to the city like me and asked if he would be sticking around for the picnic too. He told me that he doesn't live there anymore but was helping his parents for the weekend. He then told me to be careful, as he knows the group that usually comes to these events and wouldn't recommend them as close acquaintances. In hindsight, I don't think he was that concerned about them as people, just that they weren't his type of people or friends.

It wasn't much of a picnic, and other than a few who recognized me from work and said a quick hi, or the creep who was staring at me and always seemed to be near until he asked for my number, I think I was invisible. The people there were already good friends. And after I declined to give creepy eyes my phone number (at least I didn't lie!), I somehow felt like a third wheel among eight other people my age.

I really did like the homily and Mass, though, so maybe if I have time during the week I can stop there for a daily Mass, but I don't think I'll be making that my church either. Maybe tomorrow I can ask Ross where he usually goes if he's not visiting his old home. Oh well, that's just strike two. I'll try one more next week, and if that doesn't work out, maybe God is telling me to take a break from Church for a little bit anyways. We'll see.

- Jenny

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YAI Contact:

“We have our established little friend groups ... if it's someone not my friend from high school, I think it's kind of like, well, I'm not friends with them now. What if it's all their friends there now and I'm the stick out?”

“If you come here without that insider invitation, which obviously you don't need, but if you don't have someone to go meet at this church, then I can see it being hard to figure out which circle of people to stand in.”

Dear Diary,

The other day I saw Ross in the breakroom, and he asked me about the picnic. I told him about getting hit on, while simultaneously being ignored, and he chuckled, "Yeah, that's so-and-so ... he thinks he's going to find his wife at that church so notices any new female that walks in." I guess it was a good thing I wasn't feeling too special about his attention. Anyways, Ross told me about another church that he usually goes to. It's not too far away. It's in the neighborhood I wanted to live in, but couldn't on the small salary I get compared to what the locals probably make, but I'll give it a try this weekend. I'll let you know how it goes.

- Jenny

Dear Diary,

I think I found a church! That's good because I didn't want to not go, like I said last week. But this place, Saint Gregory the Great, was definitely worth my time. It had a good Mass, had lots of young adults (like more than half there had to be between 25-40), and no one asked me out or asked me to lead something! Win-win!

Data Report 1, Table 12: 53.6% of young adults said their parish's young adult ministry gave them community and a place to belong. 51.3% said it provides a variety of social, spiritual, and service events that myself and other young adults enjoyed. These were the only two options that more than half the participants selected.

Let me tell you about it: First, as I walked into the church, the priest was waiting to go up and said good morning. He asked me my name since he didn't recognize me, and I told him that it was my first time there. He waved to someone with an official nametag, who then came over and asked for my name and contact information. I thought of giving him Lisa's number again, but found myself to be more trusting and actually gave him my real number. They said someone from the church will be reaching out to me later this week to tell me a little bit more about them.

Mass was really nice, and on my way out the door, the priest remembered my name and told me that he hopes to see me around. Ross was talking to a few other people outside and introduced me as I walked by. I noticed that quite a few people were sticking around, yet no one was eating a donut.

I looked in the bulletin and there's quite a bit to do this week. Not everything seems interesting or relevant, like the young mom's club, but maybe I'll check out the young professionals' group or a Bible study. Who knows if I'll stick with this place, but at least for now, I think I can give it a few more tries.

- Jenny

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“One definite sign of healthy parish culture is that there doesn’t have to be a formal event for parishioners to want to interact with each other after a Mass ... you’ll be able to see people you know there.

Sometimes you could go out and do something afterwards.

It doesn’t even have to be something official. That’s just very much the kind of positive culture that you want to have, that parishioners want to stick around after Mass and talk to each other, which sounds kind of silly, but a lot of parishes don’t have that.”

- YOUNG ADULT

Reflection Questions

There are many things that a parish cannot control when it comes to young adults in the community. But a parish can recognize what they can control and use that to their advantage in their outreach to young adults.

1. What are the qualities of your parish that a young adult would appreciate? Can these be highlighted better to make sure a visitor or new attendee would know about them?
2. What are the qualities that may be disappointing to young adults? Are there ways you can adjust or change these or diminish their impact on the parish?
3. How familiar are you and the parish with the demographics of the surrounding community? Are they representative of each other?



“

A priest that said, “You’re worth my time even though you’re not in my parish bounds, you have no history on the registry of the parish, but I’m going to give you the time of the day because you’re a person. And then, kind of backing that up with just good pastoral ‘meat’ for them, has been really helpful.”

Vignette Nine: The Young Adult Melting Pot

Context: A younger lay minister for young adults asked to have coffee with a more experienced lay minister from another parish in the area.

Teresa has been in ministry for over 20 years to mixed success. Angela has been in ministry for only a few years at a parish in a neighboring town. She has been struggling in her role, and her pastor has been hoping for more results at a faster pace than has occurred at the parish. Because of this, Angela reached out to Teresa for a conversation over coffee. After sharing pleasantries, the two of them sit down at a table near the front window as they wait for their coffee.

Teresa recognizes that Angela feels exasperated and asks, "How are you holding up?"

"I'm not really sure," Angela shares. "I'm glad you said yes to meeting today because I definitely need to talk to someone. I'm at such a loss with my young adults, and Father's not happy about it. No matter what we try, we just can't get anything going."

"It's a hard ministry. Ministry with young adults is exceptionally difficult work. And I'm saying that as someone who also ministers with middle school, or high schoolers. That's easy, that's cake compared to this. There's a built-in reason for them to be there. There's all of this stuff. But ministry with young adults, and all of it, the transitional lifestyle of young adults, the resources that go into it, it's difficult, because there's so much time that has to be sacrificed in order to build relationships with them."

Angela nods her head in agreement. "I know it is, but you all seem to be doing it so well. Father actually suggested I call you up and ask what program you use, or secret that you have."

"Well, it's really not a secret, we've just spent quite a bit of time focusing on it, and we've empowered everyone in the parish to recognize it's everyone's responsibility, not just mine, to incorporate young adults into our parish."

"How much time?" Angela asks just as the barista arrives with their coffees in hand.

"Large mocha latte, with skim, extra foam." She hands Angela a large mug with a nice tree design in the foam of the cup. "And one black coffee and blueberry muffin," the barista announces as she slides both over to Teresa.

Teresa takes a quick sip of her coffee as Angela lets hers cool a little more. "Coffee, the fuel that provides us sanity," she quips to a small chuckle from Angela. "You asked how much time it took us, and the reality is, it took us years."

Angela, who finally took a sip of her drink, almost spits it out in surprise. "Um, years? I'm not sure I have that kind of time. I think Father wants something a little sooner," she exclaims. "What about your events? How do you get so many young adults to come to one event?"

"Look, I think we all wish ministry would work faster, but unfortunately, it really doesn't. It took time and a lot of trial and error to find a good path. But I think the big thing that propelled us was we finally stopped and talked to young adults directly and asked them what they wanted."

Confidently, Angela states "Well, we know what they want, but we want to provide what they need."

Surprised, Teresa asks, "Do you think you know what they want, or have you asked them what they want? And again, is it what you think they need, or what they say they need? There's a big difference. Young adults don't want to be told what they need or want. They'll buy in if they feel a part of the process and not talked down to."

With her own look of annoyance, Angela looks at Teresa and tells her, "I'm a young adult, I know what I want and need. I've talked to other friends in ministry, and they think the same thing."

"Angela, are they having similar concerns like you?"

"Some are, some say they aren't."

Teresa takes another drink of her coffee. Her mug is already half empty. "You're a young adult, employed by a church. This is your profession. A majority of young adults aren't going to match your spirituality. In fact, even if you didn't work here, all young adults have a pretty eclectic spirituality and interest spectrum. If you're trying to only hit people like yourself, then you're not going to represent the community, and you're going to miss a lot of the young adults you want to engage."

"I guess that makes sense," Angela admits, looking sheepishly at her mug that is still almost full, but no longer holds the coffee art it once had.

"So, what were the last two or three things you tried?"

"Well, last Tuesday, we held an evening with Father at a local tavern, and last month we had a late-night movie at the parish hall."

"What kind of response did you have?" Teresa asked inquisitively.

"We had about 5 or 6 show up to both events. A few others had come in to the 'tavern talk,' as we call them." Angela puts her fingers up to do air quotes as she says this. "But some of those others either left right away or didn't participate."

"Why do you think they left or didn't want to join you?"

"Well, I heard through the grapevine that one left because they realized we weren't going to cover the tab. Sorry, but we can't pay for everyone's drinks. Another couple came, but once Father started his talk, they seemed more interested in their conversation."

"What was the talk on? What was promoted?" Teresa asked.

"Well, Father wanted to just wing it, so he allowed it to be Q&A the whole time and discussed what the young adults wanted to talk about. Unfortunately, only a few of them asked simple questions related to moral teachings, so Father decided to talk about abstinence and discernment in dating."

"You said the disinterested people were a couple, right? Are they married? Were they parents?"

"No, they don't have any children, but I do think they just got married a few months ago. We had hoped for some more couples and parents to come. We even offered babysitting at the church, but no one took advantage of it."

"Ah, well, I think I may know what happened. Can I be blunt?" Angela hesitantly nods yes, fearful of what she was about to hear.

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"We have to serve the whole person and, oftentimes, I think young adult ministry is boiled down to social events for single people and that revolves around beer, right? And so, there's so many other things, right, that ought to be included. Like different aspects of life, different experiences, different challenges."

- Parish Contact



“As a parent, even with babysitting, a school night is not going to work for me. If I came, even for a little bit, then that would push my kids’ bedtimes back due to the disruption of me being gone. Providing babysitting was a good idea, but it doesn’t work if it’s going to cause more chaos for me than help me if I participate. And then as a married person, I wouldn’t be too interested in hearing more about abstinence or dating.”



“There is a difference in the young adults ... I think for young families, engagement is the support they feel in raising their children. For the young singles, many of them want to know that they’re being heard, that there’s a place they can ask questions. I think it does vary. I think relationship and feeling that they’re part of something, and that there’s a support system for them is important.”

— PARISH CONTACT

“What else could we have done? What topic should Father talk about next month when we try to do this again?”

“This isn’t a one-size-fits-all approach. First, pick a topic that Father can commit to. Father needs to understand that planning ahead of time is crucial. Winging things is okay at certain times, but not when you’re trying to get something established. Young adults today want to make sure the time they’re going to spend or invest in attending something is worthwhile.”

“When you promote this, know your audience. Don’t just say ‘young adults’ because that’s too broad. Name the population based on the theme. If it’s about dating, then name young adult singles. If it’ll be about raising children in the faith, name newly married couples or new parents, and provide it at a time that parents could attend, like earlier on a Friday evening, or online.”

Teresa continued, “If it’s living out the faith in the workplace or at college, say young adult professionals or say students, but don’t do both because those are two very different settings. Remember students, or even new professionals, are usually living on tight budgets. While their coffee in the morning and drinks on Friday may be a priority, a Tuesday night burger or beer with the church is probably not within the planned budget. On your salary, would you be able to afford a drink and dinner at this restaurant or tavern?”

Angela thinks about whether or not she could regularly afford to eat out at the tavern on her parish salary. With a surprised look, she finally shakes her head in defeat, saying, “Maybe I could for one or two months, but I couldn’t do that regularly unless I make that my social life.”

Angela’s eyes begin to get a little watery. She wipes them dry with her hands. “I get all that you’re saying, but I’m not sure how I can do that. Like I said, Father wants us to hit all the young adults, and I already have to take care of the youth and children’s ministries. There’s no way I could do everything.”

Teresa, in agreement, tells her, “No, you can’t. Delegate, get help, especially someone from each population, as they may be more interested and committed to helping promote ministries for those in their life stage. And if you already have too much on your plate, which it kind of sounds like, there’s no way you’re able to do any of it well.”



“There are numerous ‘divides’ among our generation – those with children and those without, and even some with children who continue to live their former ways of life without proper consideration of their children’s needs. Our generation struggles to feel connected and often feels isolated. The parish’s and the archdiocese’s response during the pandemic only amplified that challenge. We long to have a village, but the village – even at (my parish) – only seems to show up for certain people. We need a village that extends beyond these divides.”

— Parish Young Adult

“I want meaningful experiences.”

— Parish Young Adult



“Well, it might be too late for next month’s event, but I’ll try and get Father on board for the future events.”

“It’s going to take time,” Teresa restates. “But, if Father is going to be a part of this, then he has to recognize that, while his presence will add great value, it could also push people away that aren’t as gung-ho about the church or about him. It’s why he must have a good plan in place for what he will be discussing ahead of time. Good luck explaining that to him.”

“Gee, thanks,” Angela says with a chuckle.

“Like I said, it’s not an easy ministry. Ministry to young adults should be very diverse, and no ‘one-size-fits-all approach’ is going to exist. It takes time to build up by finding the right people, including the right clerical support. Just know you’re not alone. We all want to see you and every other parish succeed,” Teresa says as she takes her last drink from her mug.

Reflection Questions

It’s not easy to have the patience to do ministry well nor to engage a wide variety of people, especially spiritually.

1. Does your parish attract or market itself to a more specific type of individual? Could anyone feel unwelcome or out of place in the parish?
2. Are the ministries you engage in more a representation of your spirituality, or the spirituality of the people they are meant to engage? Either way, how do you navigate a balance of sharing your strengths and providing for the desires of the parishioners?
3. Where are areas of your parish or ministry that you could adjust to welcome others?

Vignette Ten: Programs vs. Integration

Context: *The director of youth and young adult ministry was invited to attend a parish council meeting to discuss the status or lack of involvement of young adults in the parish.*

Alonso had been at the parish two and a half years when he was invited to attend the parish council meeting. He had been trying to incorporate more young adults within other ministries and convincing the parish subliminally that it was a role of the community and not just his responsibility, but he continued to hit roadblocks. This led to some of the parish “elders” wondering why they were “wasting” their money on a young adult minister, even though his responsibilities were technically divided between both the youth and young adults of the parish.

He had been asking for the parish council’s advocacy and help since he began and had finally been given the opportunity to come and talk to them. As he sat outside the door in the hall, he reflected on the last couple of years and where he hoped the ministry would be in a few more years.

Gina, a young adult who recently became more involved at the parish after a discussion with the parish’s deacon and his accompaniment afterward, turned the corner of the hallway. Alonso had invited her to join him at the meeting as a representative of young adults within the parish.

Gina and Alonso chatted briefly about the upcoming meeting and their expectations. They were waiting about 15 minutes when the door finally opened, and Sarah, the council chairperson, invited them in. Alonso knew Sarah fairly well, as her youngest child was a senior in high school, and her middle child’s senior year was his first year at the parish.

As he scanned the room, he saw the other council members. Ken is an older gentleman who believes that the world should still be similar to how it was 30 years ago. People should still be acting the same way. And by accommodating the lifestyles of today’s youth and young adults, it is a symbol of approval.

Mike is a middle-aged man who is married but has no children of his own. He is heavily involved in the parish, spending his time on pastoral council, being a lector, and a member of the Knights of Columbus. He is considering applying to the permanent diaconate.

Mark is a recent retiree who has been a part of the parish since his children were little. For the past decade, he and his wife have been members of the parish’s annual gala committee, even co-chairing it a few times. He was a thorn in Alonso’s side when he accidentally scheduled a retreat on the weekend of the gala. “How could you not know? It’s always that weekend,” he was told during just his third month on the job. Sadly, that wasn’t the only thing that was “always” with the gala. The committee had also been the same few couples for over a decade with new people only helping for a year or two before looking to other ministries. The one thing that was changing was the participation – it had significantly decreased in the last five years.

The last person at the table was Fr. Brian, a younger priest in his first assignment as a pastor. He was a good person, spent a lot of time in prayer, but had very little backbone, which was why Mark and his committee wasn’t going to be changing until they decided to change.



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When asked what did not work during the YAI, a Core Team member said: *“Designing events without young adult input.”*

“Ongoing support of the pastor, pastoral team, and parish leadership is essential to survival of this initiative. This is not a one-time ‘blessing’ of the initiative, expecting others to carry it out, but a commitment to its survival and growth by all.”

— Parish Contact
on the YAI

Before Alonso and Gina could even sit down, Sarah started the conversation, “Item #3 on the agenda is a discussion around young adults at the parish. As you know, we have been trying to get more young adults involved at the parish. We have two guests here tonight: Alonso Mosely, our youth and young adult minister, and Gina Walsh, a member of the young adult ministry at our parish. Thank you both for coming tonight.”

Finding his seat, Alonso replied, “Thank you for inviting us. I brought Gina here to help me respond to your questions and represent other young adults of the parish.” Gina smiled and waved but remained quiet. “We understand that you’re wanting to incorporate more young adults into the parish, and had some thoughts or questions about it, so that’s why we’re here, and if I may, I just want to say thank you for recognizing and embracing your role in this ministry.”

“You’re welcome. So, how about we begin a little by just hearing from you two – what your hopes are for the parish, or what you’d like to see from us regarding young adult ministry?” the chairperson asked.

“Sure. Gina, you and I were just talking about some hopes outside in the hall. Do you mind sharing what you had just said out there?” Alonso asked Gina.

Hesitantly, Gina responded, “Um, OK. Well, like Alonso said, first, thanks for having me. I guess if I were to think about my hopes, I would want a community that is welcoming and one I am considered a part of. I think being open to some of our ideas and not always doing the same thing would be good. Um, I think –”

Before she could finish her thought, Ken interrupted, “Can you give us an example?”

“Of an idea?”

“Or of what we should do differently?” Ken tried to clarify.

Gina thought for a second about the question and finally admitted, “I don’t know. There are a few things I’ve heard from friends. Maybe add some young people to the Mass? I have a friend who had talked to someone about reading at Mass, but never heard back. I think there are some who would like to help out the church in other ways, too.”

Mike interjected, “Well, that’s because when we do call them, they don’t show up, or have a lot of excuses for not able to come to our trainings.”

The council members seemed to agree with Mike’s observation and a small discussion ensued of who had the best example of one mistake from a young adult over the last decade. Alonso sat there, confused and flabbergasted, knowing that each one of them had at one point missed something. Mike even forgot about a scheduled meeting just last week when the two of them were supposed to get coffee.

Finally, trying to get the conversation back on track, Sarah refocused the group by asking, “Alonso, what are your thoughts?”

“I’d like to see us be a parish that engages our young adults. One that appreciates them for being adult parishioners who are young, and not just ‘young adults’. My hope is that we are welcoming to all who walk through our doors, whether it’s the thousandth time doing so or their first. I want all to know that this is their spiritual home, that they belong here, and that they are valued just as much as anyone else.”

Mark had a puzzled look on his face, “Aren’t we already doing this?”

Alonso recognized this was finally his chance to share the hard truth. “Not really. We’re trying, but it’s hard and there’s not a silver bullet beyond needing to engage more young adults into the life of the parish.”

“Do you think you could do that by the end of the year?” Mark asked, clearly not understanding the gravity of Alonso’s words.

“Me? No, I can’t do this alone. It needs to come from everyone. The parish needs to know that this is a priority and that we’re going to be intentional on the inclusion of young adults. We want to help welcome them all together, but the bigger picture is making sure they know they belong here and are a part – ”

Ken interrupted Alonso, “Well, they would know that they belong if they actually registered here. Then they’d get our newsletters and envelopes. They should be giving here!”

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“Part of how we’re measuring that success is really looking at which young adults are coming back, which is sometimes an issue of the quality of what we’re able to offer, again of not just throwing an event together for the sake of having an event, but having that intentional relationship-building be a primary component to that to let the young adults know this was their home, this was their series of communities, wanting them to have a safe place to come and just be young adults together.”

— Parish Contact

“Communication for the parish was mostly the bulletin and announcements at Mass, but that wasn’t just going to make it for people that were not coming or on the margins or weren’t at those Masses. So, we, number one, changed how we communicated. So, it was text, it was through Flocknote, it was Instagram....”

Mark, recognizing Alonso wasn't wrong in his response, asked, "Father, do you think you could write about this in one of your bulletin articles? Tell our young adults that they belong."

The young pastor nodded his head, "Yeah, I think I can do that. Remind them that they're a part of the parish and we're glad they're here."

Alonso knew this wouldn't work as very few people were even taking a bulletin, let alone reading it. He knew he had to pick his battles and respond carefully. "I don't think that's a bad idea, but I'm not sure it'll be read by a lot of people."

"And I think we need to recognize that registration isn't the best way to convince people they're involved. I mean we say we have 1,600 families, but can we honestly say that we have more than 300 involved? Maybe 400 when we include our Mass counts."

"I don't think we're that low," the chairperson responded.

"Maybe, maybe not. But we need to be honest with ourselves about where the parish is at and how we're moving forward," Alonso challenged the council members. The room was getting a little uncomfortable, and you could tell some of the members did not like what he had said.

Fr. Brian, sensing this was a time a priest might be of some value, confirmed Alonso's suspicions and provided some ideas. "Sarah, I don't think Alonso is that far off. But I am concerned with how few young adults we see at Mass and how we see even fewer involved. Gina, what kind of an event do you think we could do? Would a Bible study be helpful? If we did some talks at that restaurant down the road and recorded them for YouTube, do you think it could work?" He said this looking at Gina.

"I dunno, maybe, but we already have Bible studies. Why can't we incorporate young adults in some of those?" Gina wondered aloud to some of the council members nodding in approval.

Before anyone could respond, Alonso, sounding deflated, responded, "Because they all meet on Tuesdays at 9:30 a.m. I think what you're saying, though, is that we don't necessarily need to do more. You think if we did a better job incorporating young adults within the ministries that we already do here, that would help? Like more integration?" he asked Gina directly.

TABLE 18K:
INTEGRATION OF YOUNG ADULTS WITHIN THE PARISH COMMUNITY

	Priority	Challenging	Effective
Not at all	1.7%	1.7%	10.2%
Somewhat	35.6%	37.3%	49.2%
Often	28.8%	40.7%	25.4%
Very much	33.9%	20.3%	15.3%

"Yeah, I think so. My friends and I just want to be a part of the Church. If we could be more involved with, like, the food pantry, or the landscaping, or what was that thing announced last weekend at Mass? The um, big dinner. I think you would see more young adults because you would be side-by-side with us. Plus, we could then invite our friends to help with some things. I mean, we want -"

Now it was Mark's turn to interrupt, "Well, the dinner is already planned for the year, and that committee, which I'm a part of, has been pretty well intact for the last few years. It's not that we don't want young adults. It's just we don't need any more help right now with the planning."

Ken joined in agreement, “Yeah, and some of those other things we are always asking for help at time and talent weekend, but no one ever responds. Young adults can sign up for those things then. You know, the gala is in need of dishwashers, and tear down.”

“Thanks for that idea,” Alonso said, disappointed that Ken missed what Gina was trying to get at with participating at the gala side-by-side with other parishioners. “Well, again, I’m not sure relying on time and talent forms are the best strategy, but I do know of two incidents where young adults signed up for something and were disappointed with what happened.

“One wanted to help at funeral lunches. She came to one but was pretty much told she needed to stay hidden in the kitchen and then was washing the dishes wrong. When I heard that she hadn’t been invited to help at any funerals since, I asked a few people on that ministry. It seems that this particular young adult wasn’t accepted because she had a nose ring and pink hair.”

“Oh, I know her,” Sarah shouted joyfully, like she won a reward for knowing a young adult. “She sits by me at Mass during the week. Really nice girl, I’ve talked to her a few times. She would probably be really good in that ministry. I think I even suggested it to her once.”

Ken gave Sarah a look of disgust. His wife was one of those funeral lunch ladies and he remembered hearing a little about the girl who showed up looking disrespectful. “If people are trying to grieve, we should show solemnness, not flamboyance. She could have taken the nose ring out or wore a hat to cover her hair.”



Ensure you have the full support of the pastor, the pastoral council, and all staff members. Do your best to ensure this is not just lip service; other staff members need to be prepared to work collaboratively, make sacrifices, and intentionally integrate the YAI efforts into already-functioning ministries.

Alonso didn't want to turn this into a conversation about whether or not it was appropriate to judge someone based on their hair and looks, so he gave a quick response before changing the subject. "Ken, we can talk about that later on, I guess. But yes, Sarah, she would be great at that ministry. And while she has confided in me that you have helped her feel welcome by talking after Mass, this was an opportunity for her to know she belonged, and it failed.

"The other story, I can't say much since I promised them I wouldn't talk to others about it beyond in vague terms. But, long story-short, when this person came to help out the ministry they had been invited to join, they felt that there was already a club of people to do the work. And not only was he 30 years younger than everyone else, it became clear that the club didn't want any new members."

Fr. Brian was surprised to hear both of these stories. "Hmm, well, we definitely don't want anyone to feel like they don't belong. I can talk to the funeral ladies, but they are kind of set in their ways."

Gina was sensing that this conversation wasn't helping much, and her eyes started to become watery. She wiped them dry, collected herself, and shared her observations. "I think it's more than them. I can tell you that I've seen similar things firsthand in some aspects."

Sarah put her arm around Gina in a consoling manner. "Gina, I'm sorry to hear that. I think one thing that's been made clear is that we need to do a better job convincing our other parish leaders to embrace young adults and appreciate their uniqueness. Unfortunately, we're out of time, so is there anything else someone wants to ask quickly?"

TABLE 18B: REPRESENTATION OF YOUNG ADULTS IN PARISH LEADERSHIP GROUPS (I.E., COUNCILS, COMMITTEES, STAFF)

	Priority	Challenging	Effective
Not at all	13.6%	18.6%	18.6%
Somewhat	37.3%	35.6%	42.4%
Often	28.8%	27.1%	22.0%
Very much	20.3%	18.6%	16.9%

Mark was kind of coming around to what he was hearing. "What is one thing you want us to remember or how we can help you?" he asked.

"That's a good question," Alonso confirmed. "I think the help I need is a multitude of factors. First, as a reminder, young adults are a small percentage of what I can do. If we want to make this a priority, I need additional help. While I know we can't afford that right now, we can work harder on getting everyone in the parish to recognize we all have a role to play in welcoming, not just the young adults, but all young people and newcomers. I think tonight's meeting here is a great step.

"The second part is that I think we need to remember that there's more to ministry than who we can count at Mass. I know we're changing some hearts. I asked Gina if I could share why I invited her to accompany me tonight. It's because two years ago she wasn't a part of our church. But she attended the baptism of a friend's baby, and Deacon Carl introduced himself and started a conversation with her. Gina, why don't you share what happened next?"

“Well, sure, okay. Deacon Carl asked what church I went to. I told him that I was raised Catholic back home, but that I wasn’t a part of a parish here. We talked a little bit more about that and what kind of led me to not want to practice, but then he invited me out for coffee. He kept talking with me about the faith.

Fast-forward to Christmas that year, I went back home and while I was actually at the church with my parents, he sent me a text saying ‘Merry Christmas’. I texted back about the coincidence, and he said, “No coincidence, providence. How about coffee again when you get back in town?”

Since I had nothing else to do, I went to coffee again, and it became a regular occurrence. Gradually, I started coming here more regularly, I met Alonso, he invited me to a few things, I ran into some friends, and for the last year and a half, I’ve been trying to get more and more involved.” Everyone around the table smiled at this story.

TABLE 18H:
INTENTIONAL ACCOMPANIMENT OF INDIVIDUAL YOUNG ADULTS

	Priority	Challenging	Effective
Not at all	5.1%	1.7%	11.9%
Somewhat	40.7%	49.2%	49.2%
Often	28.8%	32.2%	27.1%
Very much	25.4%	16.9%	11.9%

Mike was very happy about the story. “That’s awesome. What was the event you came to that led you to wanting to get more involved? Was it prayer, a social, a service project?” he wondered.

Gina thought about it but didn’t have a good response. “I don’t even remember. I don’t think it really was an event *per se*, but it was Deacon Carl and Alonso talking with me and not pressuring me to come or do something.

“I think that’s what I hope you take away from tonight. That I don’t know anyone, especially any young adult, who wants to be told what to do, what they need or what they like. We just want to be seen as equals in this faith community and able to be a part of it. All of us are different. My married friends don’t have time like I do. And I’m not interested in hanging around a bunch of college kids anymore. Young adults are all of us. And while we’re all different, we all want the same thing: to call this place our spiritual home.”

Her words stung the room. The council members were used to complaints about the quality of the donuts, not the treatment of their fellow parishioners.

After a period of silence as everyone in the room reflected on Gina’s last statement, Sarah regained everyone’s attention. “Gina, thank you for sharing. Really, both you and Alonso, thank you. You have given us a lot to think about and consider as we look to the future of the parish.”

“Thanks again for having us and good luck with the rest of your meeting,” Alonso stated before standing up and walking out of the room with Gina.

Afterward, Alonso read in the minutes that the pastoral council discussed the comments they had heard for a few additional minutes. There was general agreement that they need to be taken to heart and that in a future meeting, especially with the parish staff, a further conversation was going to be necessary.

Alonso felt defeated. He had already been at the parish long enough to know that most things that are flagged as “to be discussed in the future” rarely ever happen. He was going to have to return to the drawing board on getting more of the parish to integrate young adults into their community.

Reflection Questions

While accompanying young adults is an obvious part of ministry to them, to gain the parish’s support often requires an accompaniment of the decision-makers of the parish.

1. What obstacles are in the path of young adults engaging or integrating themselves more fully into your parish’s life?
2. How are young adults viewed and accepted for their uniqueness in your parish? Would they agree with your perception?
3. Deacon Carl wasn’t a part of the meeting but had the most profound impact in the story. Why is accompaniment the best way to bring more people into parish life?



“*Almost half of our parish council are young adults, and the other half are people like me, in my age. And I just spoke to one of them, I had a home retreat, but the rapport, the repartee, the support between the young adults and the seniors, is just captivating. I just love it. I see it. They really connect and the older ones are not threatened. They do not try to dominate. It’s probably one of the most exciting councils I’ve ever been on. In fact, the chair is a young adult, but it’s just what you’re saying, Cole, is ‘No, you’re not less than becoming whole. You’re a gift. And I want to hear what you have to say.’ And then they have just taken every opportunity, leadership, and it’s just exciting to me to see that.*”
— Parish Contact



Vignette Eleven: No More Guilt

Context: An email to the parish's pastor who is also a family friend. The sender is a young adult reflecting on two recent experiences she had with him and their parish.

Hi Fr. Mike, How are you today? I wanted to send you a quick email about two different things.

First, I really appreciate you taking the time and talking with me and Jack the other day about all of his concerns with the Church. My mom is really on my case to get our son baptized, but I want Jack on board first. He's been a good sport, even with his negative thoughts from when he was single and tried to attend different things at the Church. But, like he said, once my grandpa mentioned limbo and told me that little Jack would not be going to heaven, it seemed like everything he had been holding onto as a problem with the Church came out.

So meeting with us, listening to him, and explaining what the Church actually believes and says was really helpful. In fact, I have to admit, I was surprised at how honest and in depth you were willing to answer everything he asked. Jack kind of came with the assumption that you were just going to read from a book the answers to his questions.

He and I talked afterward, and I don't think he embraced everything you said or that the Church teaches, but I know it made him think and he was appreciating the sit-down. Yesterday he went and grabbed a beer with his friend to continue talking about some of these things. I'm happy he's still willing to come to Mass with me and is again willing to have little Jack baptized. Before he wanted to kind of stick it to my Mom and Grandpa (he assumes they think he's going to hell) and wasn't going to do it.

“

“Catholic guilt” is turning people away from Catholicism.

— Young Adult

“I just felt immediately seen where I was, and I just really appreciated that, that he would pay enough attention to where I was that he could tailor his offerings to me.”

— Young Adult

“They (young adults) need to be able to ask honest questions and to feel like they're not being judged when they ask those questions. They want to understand what's the Church's stance on accepting individuals that are gay or homosexual. Why does the Church not allow same-sex couples to remain in their schools and so forth? It's those deep issues that they're experience (sic).”

— Young Adult

But this leads to the second item I want to mention. I love my Grandpa, but this isn't the first time he's misrepresented the Church, and that includes toward other young adults while at church. Last week at Mass, he spent the whole time scolding another young couple with a baby in the pew in front of us ... sadly, I know firsthand that he's not the only parishioner to do this. Like I said, I love him, but I also love this church. I have tried talking to Grandpa, but I worry about the example he is setting and the message that's being shared. He wears his nametag as a parish council member proudly every Sunday, but I think that only makes his behavior even more concerning.

To the newcomers, they're wondering if that's what this parish is all about. To the old-timers, they're seeing him as an example of what's acceptable. And he's not the only one to be doing this. A couple of friends told me of other people with nametags doing similar things. (They actually put me up to this email knowing you're a family friend.)

It's the ushers who say they don't need any new help, it's the knitting club that won't let us join them even though we enjoy knitting, or the men's group that recently moved their times to Mondays at 10 a.m. instead of their 7 p.m. time once Jack and a few other buddies decided to try them out.



“Needs more flexibility for working professionals who work early hours and late hours during the week. Have events start later during the week or virtual participation.”

— YOUNG ADULT

I'm wondering if you would be willing to dedicate a homily or parish letter in the near future to embracing and accepting those of us who are young and acknowledge our realities. I'd even volunteer to talk to the pastoral council and share some ideas of how we can be more welcoming and embrace my generation more appropriately. But, and I feel really strongly about this, it's not going to mean anything if it doesn't come from you.

I'm sorry if this seems like I've gone on forever or am just venting, but what I've seen and experienced lately saddens me. You don't have an easy job, and I don't envy you. As always, know that you are in my prayers.

- Hailey

Reflection Questions

Dialogue can be difficult, especially when Church teaching differs from what has been accepted culturally. However, to help others grow in understanding, these conversations are a necessity and require understanding and not judgment.

1. Do parishioners feel like they can have a dialogue about their disagreements in Church teaching? If so, how do they know that there is an openness to these conversations? If not, how can you help the parish journey with more people?
2. What percentage of your parishioners would be like Grandpa and make their annoyance of the sounds of a child known? What are some ways you could help Grandpa's thoughts evolve?
3. How accommodating are your parish's ministries that are open to all parishioners?

PART THREE: DATA REPORT

Data Participation

Research was conducted between February 2021 and September 2021. Applications, semi-annual reports, and correspondence on Ryver were initially utilized by the research team to form the parish survey. Parishes were provided the survey in May 2021 and were encouraged to promote participation to their parishioners, initially for two weeks, but this was extended for an additional two weeks in early June. A few parishes offered a gift card drawing as an incentive to participate; others did not.

After the survey, the research team visited every parish in person to conduct an interview with the parish contact and a separate interview with the pastor. In addition, they held a focus group with the parish's core team, and another focus group of young adult parishioners who were invited to participate by the parish contact. After interviews and focus groups, another online survey was created and promoted to parish-identified leaders, mostly the core team and staff personnel who have young adult parishioners participate within their ministerial duties.

When data collection began, 14 parishes were enrolled in the Young Adult Initiative. Soon after the launch of the parish survey, one parish decided to withdraw. Their very few responses (a total of 10) are considered valid in the parish survey, but they are not represented in any of the other data reports.

There is no correlation between the assigned parish number in the following chart and any other reference to parishes in the overall publication. This was done to protect their confidentiality as participants in the research. Boxes represent which data collection methods the parish participated in.

CHART 1: PARISH PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH

	Parish Survey Response	Leadership Survey Response	Parish Contact Interview	Pastor/Administrator Interview	Core Team Focus Group	Young Adult Focus Group	Parish Contact Focus Group	
Parish 1	25%	11.1%	✓		✓	✓	✓	
Parish 2	17.6%	5.1%	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Parish 3	13.2%	8.1%	✓		✓	✓	✓	
Parish 4	9.9%	9.1%	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Parish 5	6.4%	8.1%	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Parish 6	4.5%	8.1%	✓	✓	✓		✓	
Parish 7	4.5%	10.1%	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Parish 8	4%	13.1%	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Parish 9	4%	5.1%	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Parish 10	2.8%	6.1%	✓	✓	✓	✓		
Parish 11	2.6%	4%	✓	✓	✓			
Parish 12	2.4%	7.1%	✓	✓	✓		✓	
Parish 13	2.2%	5.1%	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Parish 14	0.7%	Withdrew from the Initiative after start of data collection						

PARISH SURVEY

Survey Respondents

There was a total of 1,359 valid responses in the parish survey. The survey was available online for parishes to promote to their parishioners between May 10, 2021, and July 19, 2021.

TABLE 1: PARISH SURVEY - AGE OF RESPONDENTS

	Frequency	Percent
18-22 years old	43	3.2%
23-39 years old	422	31.1%
40-55 years old	333	24.5%
56-70 years old	377	27.7%
71 years old or older	184	13.5%
Total	1,359	100.0%

TABLE 2: PARISH SURVEY – AGED 40+ RESPONDENTS

What sentence best describes how you see young adults participating in your parish ministries?

	Frequency	Valid Percent
I see young adults participating in some parish ministries outside of the young adult ministries.	279	40.4%
I don't know.	125	18.1%
I see young adults participating in many parish ministries outside of the young adult ministries as well as serving in leadership in the ministry.	115	16.7%
I see young adults participating in many parish ministries outside of the young adult ministries.	94	13.6%
I see young adults only participate in young adult activities.	77	11.2%
Total	690	100.0%

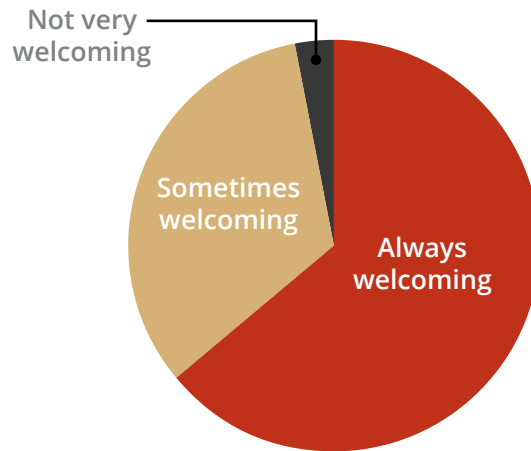
TABLE 3: PARISH SURVEY – AGED 18-39 RESPONDENTS

What do you like about your parish's ministry with/to young adults? (Check all that apply.)

	N	Responses Percent	Percent of Cases
It gives me a community and a place to belong.	185	21.0%	53.6%
It provides a variety of social, spiritual, and service events that myself and other young adults enjoy.	177	20.1%	51.3%
It helps me grow in my faith and become closer to God.	145	16.4%	42.0%
It helps me be a part of the entire parish community.	107	12.1%	31.0%
It challenges me to become a better disciple of Jesus Christ.	101	11.5%	29.3%
It provides meaningful and engaging liturgical experiences.	85	9.6%	24.6%
I do not participate very often so I do not know.	82	9.3%	23.8%
Total	882	100.0%	255.7%

a. Dichotomy group tabulated at value 1.

CHART 2:
 FREQUENCY OF HOW WELCOME YOUNG ADULTS FEEL IN THEIR PARISH
In your experience, how welcoming is this parish to young adults?



PARISH LEADERSHIP SURVEY

Survey Respondents

There was a total of 99 valid responses in the parish leadership survey. The survey was available online for parish staff, clergy, volunteer leadership, the parish contact, current core team members, as well as previous core team members that could be identified. This survey was live August 2, 2021, to August 26, 2021.

TABLE 4: LEADERSHIP SURVEY - YAI PARISH ROLES OF RESPONDENTS

	Frequency	Percent
I am currently on the YAI Core Team.	33	33.3%
I am a Parish Staff Member.	28	28.3%
I used to be on the YAI Core Team.	12	12.1%
I am the Pastor or Administrator of the parish.	9	9.1%
I am the Parish YAI Contact, and a member of the Parish Staff/Clergy.	8	8.1%
I am currently on the YAI Core Team and/or Young Adult Planning Team.	4	4.0%
I am the Parish YAI Contact but not a Parish Staff Member.	4	4.0%
I used to be the Parish YAI Contact and am a former member of the Parish Staff/Clergy.	1	1.0%
Total	99	100.0%

CHART 3: YAI ROLES REPRESENTED IN THE LEADERSHIP SURVEY

Please mark what best describes your role:

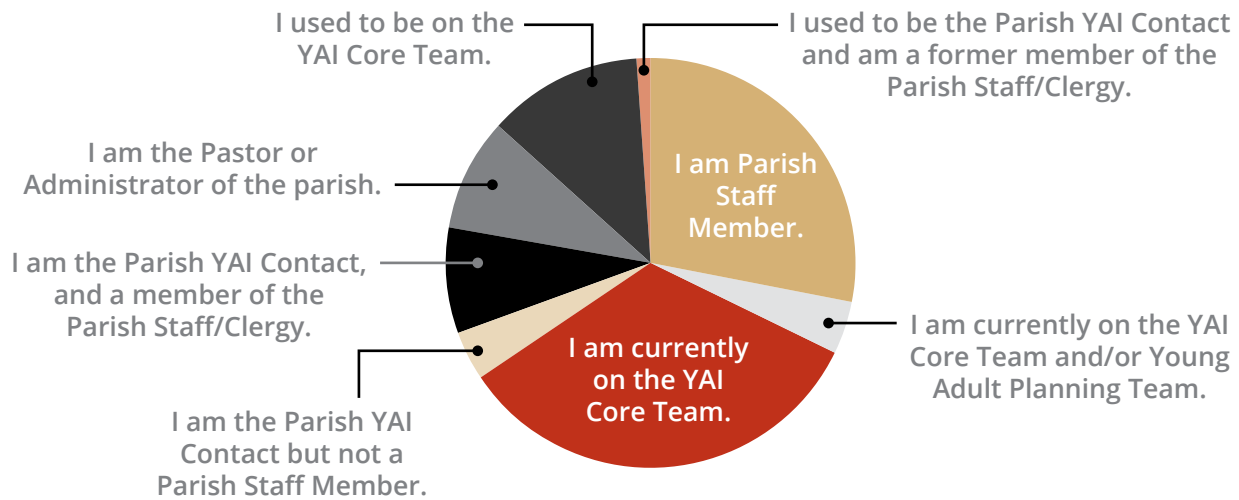


TABLE 5: LEADERSHIP SURVEY – PERCENTAGE OF STAFF RESPONSIBILITIES INVOLVING YOUNG ADULTS

	Frequency	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
0%	2	5.4%	5.4%
25%	19	51.4%	56.8%
50%	10	27.0%	83.8%
75%	4	10.8%	94.6%
100%	2	5.4%	100%
Total	37	100.0%	

This question was asked only to respondents who identified themselves as being a parish staff member.

TABLE 6: LEADERSHIP SURVEY –
OVERALL, HOW WELL DO YOU THINK YOUR PARISH ACCEPTS CHANGE?

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Change is welcomed and appreciated.	23	23.2%	23.7%
Change is usually embraced eventually.	54	54.5%	55.7%
Change is difficult, and not always lasting, sometimes leading to obstruction.	2	2.0%	2.1%
Change is not supported and avoided when possible.	18	18.2%	18.6%
Subtotal	97	98.0%	100.0%
Did Not Respond	2	2.0%	
Total	99	100.0	

TABLE 7: LEADERSHIP SURVEY
Please describe a time when you felt resistance to any of the initiatives the core team envisioned or tried.

Of the 28 causes of resistance:

6 were regarding resistance from the pastor or other parish staff.
6 were regarding resistance from interference or the lack of support from other parish ministries.
5 were regarding resistance as pushback for the ideas or proposals generated from the YAI, an additional 2 responses spoke of the lack of support of a personal concern.
4 were regarding resistance felt from older parishioners, although 1 of these mentioned that it evolved as the YAI went on and is no longer being felt.
3 were regarding resistance as a lack of enthusiasm or follow-through.
2 could not be easily categorized.

TABLE 8: LEADERSHIP SURVEY –
INTERACTION BETWEEN THE PASTOR, PARISH STAFF AND CORE TEAM?

	Frequency	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Regular contact, at least once a month	26	28.6%	28.6%
As needed, a few times a year	48	52.7%	81.3%
Never	17	18.7%	100.0%
Total	91	100.0%	

This question was not asked to respondents who identified as a pastor, as it was discussed in their interviews.

CHART 4: YAI CORE TEAM TIME SPENT

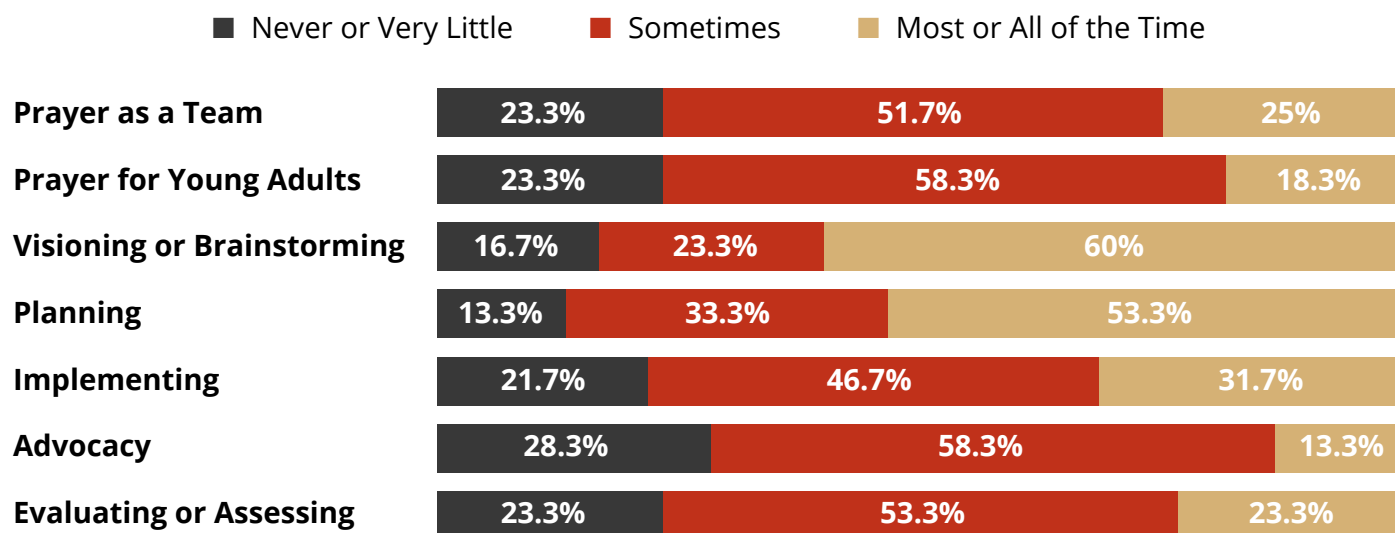


TABLE 9: LEADERSHIP SURVEY - WHAT IS ONE THING YOU HAVE LEARNED ABOUT YOUNG ADULTS OVER THE PAST THREE YEARS?

	N	Responses Percent	Percent of Cases
Young adults desire connection and purpose.	13	16.7%	18.3%
Young adults have varying needs.	10	12.8%	14.1%
There are many life stages with young adulthood with different needs.	9	11.5%	12.7%
Relationship building with young adults is key.	9	11.5%	12.7%
Ministry with young adults is difficult and takes work.	6	7.7%	8.5%
Young adults are enthusiastic and good people.	5	6.4%	7.0%
The young adult lifestyle is transient and full of transitions.	4	5.1%	5.6%
Young adults are non-committal at times.	3	3.8%	4.2%
Other	19	24.4%	26.8%
Total	78	100.0%	109.9%

This question was not asked to respondents who identified as a Parish Contact, as it was discussed in their interviews.

“Other Responses”

Responses have not been edited from their original submissions.

- 1 What I have learned about young adults, currently being one, is that many are more willing to do things when not pushed to do them or constantly being told to do something. It was interesting to find out that a lot of the young adults were more likely to join in on events that weren't necessarily at the church, because this was they did not feel pressured into anything.
- 2 The fear of being judged and misunderstood was large.
- 3 There are young adults in our community but the community already has preexisting groups which makes it difficult to develop a Young Adult group within our parish.
- 4 The mission doesn't change, just the way in which you evangelize.
- 5 Young adults in today's world are constantly bombarded with opportunities that can disrupt their routine.
- 6 They are becoming less and less involved with our parish.
- 7 Build it and they will come.
- 8 I see there is more impact and guidance on the young adults in a proper direction.
- 9 They want to do things, but time is a problem.
- 10 They are leaving all churches, not just the Catholic church. I am glad to see activities planned to try and get them back to the church.
- 11 need to be active at all times.
- 12 A healthy, orthodox, welcoming parish culture is more vital than oxygen for the body. This parish life is what we invite YAs to participate in and thus the age group cannot be a separate ministry.
- 13 They need a lot of encouragement to get involved.
- 14 The normal methods of contact are not effective. We are challenged to find the mechanism that best reaches our target group.

- 15 They are faith-filled people who long for experiences that can help them to feed their faith and help them to live their lives through the lens of their faith, they want to see that they can impact the world in a positive way, they need support and encouragement from their community (be it peers or their parish) in the midst of so much division and chaos in the world, and many young adults long for true, authentic worship and Catholic orthodoxy.
- 16 We are a very busy and overwhelmed generation. We are pulled in a million different directions at once; we move a lot; most of us are facing significant debt immediately out of school and are putting off the old “normal” markers of adulthood like marriage, kids, and buying a house until we are in a more financially stable position. We also have an unprecedented access and level of interaction with people around the world and this has led us to be less connected with the people in our direct communities.
- 17 How much they need affirmation and wait for the parish to take the initiative in reaching out to them.
- 18 That the young adults with children are a completely separate group from the young adults who are single/newly married. They also do not respond to email but via text messaging and social media.
- 19 They are a wonderfully made and complex segment of our population. They have their own unique way of communicating, networking, and engaging in community life.

TABLE 10: LEADERSHIP SURVEY
In your opinion, what was the primary objective/goal of your parish participating in the Young Adult Initiative? (choose up to 3)

	N	Responses Percent	Percent of Cases
Increase young adult participation.	49	22.0%	59.0%
Better incorporate young adults into parish life.	46	20.6%	55.4%
To improve ministry to young adults.	40	17.9%	48.2%
To better understand the young adult population.	30	13.5%	36.1%
To innovate and test new ministry methods.	17	7.6%	20.5%
Receive \$30,000 to assist ministry to young adults.	14	6.3%	16.9%
Help young adults have a ministry for their unique life situations.	13	5.8%	15.7%
To learn how to “do” or start ministry to young adults.	7	3.1%	8.4%
Other	7	3.1%	8.4%
Total	223	100.0%	268.7%

This question was not asked to respondents who identified as a pastor or parish contact, as it was discussed in their interviews.

TABLE 11: LEADERSHIP SURVEY – DID THE PARISH MEET THEIR GOALS?

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Yes	29	29.3%	29.9%
Somewhat	61	61.6%	62.9%
No	7	7.1%	7.2%
Total	97	98.0%	100.0%
Missing	2	2.0%	
Total	99	100.0%	

TABLE 12: LEADERSHIP SURVEY
IF YOU DID NOT MEET YOUR GOALS, WHY?

	N	Responses Percent	Percent of Cases
Leadership concerns including transitions, conflicts, and lack of consistency or enthusiasm.	13	27.7%	41.9%
Could not reach or keep young adults engaged consistently.	12	25.5%	38.7%
COVID interruption to ministry.	8	17.0%	25.8%
We did not offer attractive or diverse offerings.	7	14.9%	22.6%
Still growing and trying to reach our goals.	5	10.6%	16.1%
Other	2	4.3%	6.5%
Total	47	100.0%	151.6%

This question was asked only to respondents who identified as a current or previous Core Team member.

TABLE 13: LEADERSHIP SURVEY

Please check all “life-stages” of young adults that were a target audience for your parish ministries in the past 4 years.

Life Stage	Percent	Life Context	Percent
Single	85.9%	Military	9.1%
Married	76.8%	Parents of young children	59.6%
Widowed	8.1%	Parents of older children	10.0%
Divorced	13.1%	Young Professionals	59.6%
Young adults between the ages of 18-22	56.6%	College/campus ministry	24.2%
Young adults between the ages of 23-29	89.9%		
Young adults between the ages of 30-39	49.5%		

TABLE 14: LEADERSHIP SURVEY

Please mark what “needs” identified by young adults your parish intentionally addresses.

Young Adult Identified Area of Need	Frequency	Percent
Spiritual	81	81.8%
Social	79	79.8%
Community	60	60.6%
Knowledge of the Faith	59	59.6%
Small Groups	58	58.6%
Service Opportunities	33	33.3%
Authenticity	24	24.2%
To be heard by the Church	23	23.2%
Life Transitions	20	20.2%
Vocational Discernment	13	13.1%
Mentoring	12	12.1%
Life Skills, i.e., First Aid, finance class, etc....	11	11.1%
Mental Health	5	5.1%
Professional Networking	1	1.0%
Other	5	5.1%

TABLE 15: LEADERSHIP SURVEY

What aspect of ministry to young adults did the parish most improve upon since the beginning of the Young Adult Initiative?

	Frequency	Valid Percent
Leading events or socials for young adults.	20	29.4%
Engagement or integration of young adults within the parish.	18	26.5%
Promoting or marketing opportunities for young adults.	14	20.6%
One-on-one or relational ministry with young adults.	9	13.2%
Advocating for young adults.	3	4.4%
Training leaders about ministry to young adults.	1	1.5%
Other (please specify)	3	4.4%
Total	68	100.0%

This question was not asked to respondents who identified as a Pastor or Parish Staff Members.

TABLE 16: LEADERSHIP SURVEY

What advice or suggestions would you share with a parish looking to start this same initiative today?

Selected Quotes

Reaching Young Adults

- » Be well versed in the art of discipleship. The leaders need to disciple the core team, and the core team needs to disciple the young adults they encounter if things will be successful. Intentionality is key.
- » Listen to young adults, especially those who are not coming to church regularly.
- » Make it a parish-wide focus. Support mentors and leaders. Look outside those that already come to Mass and consider the needs of the parish boundary demographics and also the diversity of demographics that fall under young adult.
- » Try to get the targeted people together and see if you can understand what they need from the parish. It does no good if you do not understand what they are looking for or need from their home parish.

Logistics of YAI

- » Jump in whole-heartedly. Use the resources given to you, and give your core team better direct access to the resources from Saint Meinrad. Don't be afraid to try new things, even if they don't work. Provide free babysitting for every event, and develop a team of babysitters that will do in-home babysitting, not just babysitting at the parish.
- » Stick to a plan and don't feel pressure to start planning social events. So much of our energy has gone into social events and we even waited a year to do so. If a large percentage of the core team is focused on social events, invite them to spin off into their own social planning ministry, and ensure that the core team has enough energy to focus on all areas of Young Adult ministries, not just gatherings.
- » Your coordinator must be someone who seeks out and makes personal contacts with young adults. Emails and bulletin announcements won't do it.
- » Be patient. It is not about the numbers and how many attend. It's about reaching those who not always feel connected to their parish and hopefully there will be growth in the long run.

Leadership Needs

- » Find dedicated and enthusiastic volunteers in it for the long haul - Make sure your core team includes a parish staff member - Remember change and progress is slow - It's all about authentic relationships - Get parishioners & other ministries involved often. The core team doesn't need to / shouldn't do it all.
- » Clergy involvement is a necessity, involvement by entire parish is a necessity.
- » Ensure you have the full support of the Pastor, the Pastoral Council, and all staff members. Do your best to ensure this is not just lip service – other staff members need to be prepared to work collaboratively, make sacrifices, and intentionally integrate the YAI efforts into already functioning ministries. If ministry leaders aren't willing to adjust "their" ministries to better integrate Young Adults into them, the initiative will be difficult. You need a committed YAI team with a diverse skill set ready to work hard. Finally, recognize that this is a loooooong term initiative. It will take years. I feel we are only beginning, even though we are now 3 years into it.
- » It cannot be a one man show. Disperse the leadership, formation, and passion as much as possible across other ministries and ages. Pastor must be on board. Pour into these leaders! With a 3:12:70 model, the ministry goes beyond yourself and floods into parish life.
- » Ongoing support of the Pastor, Pastoral Team, and Parish Leadership is essential to survival of this initiative. This is not a one-time "blessing" of the initiative, expecting others to carry it out, but a commitment to its survival and growth by all.

TABLE 17: LEADERSHIP SURVEY

Now that the Young Adult Initiative is coming to a close in a few months, which of the following statements do you think is most accurate of your overall experience?

	Frequency	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Definitely worthwhile	29	46.8%	46.8%
Worthwhile	13	21.0%	67.7%
Somewhat worthwhile	13	21.0%	88.7%
Not worthwhile	7	11.3%	100.0%
Total	62	100.0%	

This question was asked only to respondents who identified as a current or previous Core Team member.

TABLES 18A-18M: LEADERSHIP SURVEY

Self-Evaluation by the Core Team and Parish Contact of the priority, challenge, and effectiveness in their parish regarding these common concepts

**Table 18A:
Forming of individual relationships
with young adults.**

	Priority	Challenging	Effective
Not at all	1.7%	3.4%	3.4%
Somewhat	23.7%	50.8%	37.3%
Often	37.3%	23.7%	30.5%
Very much	37.3%	22.0%	28.8%

**Table 18B: Representation of young adults
in parish leadership groups
(i.e., councils, committees, staff)**

	Priority	Challenging	Effective
Not at all	13.6%	18.6%	18.6%
Somewhat	37.3%	35.6%	42.4%
Often	28.8%	27.1%	22.0%
Very much	20.3%	18.6%	16.9%

**Table 18C: Helping young adults form
community with their peers.**

	Priority	Challenging	Effective
Not at all	0.0%	11.9%	3.4%
Somewhat	25.4%	49.2%	44.1%
Often	33.9%	23.7%	35.6%
Very much	40.7%	15.3%	16.9%

**Table 18D: Addressing the relevancy of
faith to the life realities of young adults.**

	Priority	Challenging	Effective
Not at all	10.3%	13.8%	10.3%
Somewhat	20.7%	34.5%	50.0%
Often	41.4%	36.2%	24.1%
Very much	27.6%	15.5%	15.5%

Table 18E: Outreach to unaffiliated or dis-engaged young adults.

	Priority	Challenging	Effective
Not at all	10.2%	3.4%	35.6%
Somewhat	45.8%	15.5%	50.8%
Often	32.2%	19.0%	10.2%
Very much	11.9%	62.1%	3.4%

Table 18F: Engaging young adults from diverse age groups and lifestyles.

	Priority	Challenging	Effective
Not at all	6.9%	3.4%	8.6%
Somewhat	46.6%	36.2%	69.0%
Often	31.0%	34.5%	15.5%
Very much	15.5%	25.9%	6.9%

Table 18G: Engagement of active or attending young adults.

	Priority	Challenging	Effective
Not at all	0.0%	20.3%	1.7%
Somewhat	11.9%	47.5%	30.5%
Often	44.1%	25.4%	39.0%
Very much	44.1%	6.8%	28.8%

Table 18H: Intentional accompaniment of individual young adults.

	Priority	Challenging	Effective
Not at all	5.1%	1.7%	11.9%
Somewhat	40.7%	49.2%	49.2%
Often	28.8%	32.2%	27.1%
Very much	25.4%	16.9%	11.9%

Table 18I: Connection with peers to go deeper to share about life and faith in small groups.

	Priority	Challenging	Effective
Not at all	6.9%	15.5%	10.3%
Somewhat	20.7%	39.7%	29.3%
Often	44.8%	25.9%	31.0%
Very much	27.6%	19.0%	29.3%

Table 18J: The use of resources from Saint Meinrad.

	Priority	Challenging	Effective
Not at all	13.6%	32.2%	11.9%
Somewhat	33.9%	44.1%	40.7%
Often	33.9%	15.3%	32.2%
Very much	18.6%	8.5%	15.3%

Table 18K: Integration of young adults within the parish community.

	Priority	Challenging	Effective
Not at all	1.7%	1.7%	10.2%
Somewhat	35.6%	37.3%	49.2%
Often	28.8%	40.7%	25.4%
Very much	33.9%	20.3%	15.3%

Table 18L: Trying new things and not being afraid to fail.

	Priority	Challenging	Effective
Not at all	5.1%	5.1%	5.1%
Somewhat	28.8%	42.4%	27.1%
Often	20.3%	30.5%	52.5%
Very much	45.8%	22.0%	15.3%

Table 18M: Clergy participation, support, or promotion of ministry with young adults.

	Priority	Challenging	Effective
Not at all	8.5%	49.2%	11.9%
Somewhat	25.4%	16.9%	32.2%
Often	32.2%	18.6%	23.7%
Very much	33.9%	15.3%	32.2%

**TABLE 19: LEADERSHIP SURVEY
WHICH OF THESE WILL BE FUTURE GOALS?**

	Frequency	Percent
Outreach to unaffiliated or dis-engaged young adults	42	71.2%
Integration of young adults within the parish community	32	54.2%
Helping young adults form community with their peers	31	52.5%
Forming of individual relationships with young adults	30	50.8%
Engagement of active or attending young adults	30	50.8%
Representation of young adults in parish leadership groups (i.e., councils, committees, staff)	30	50.8%
Connection with peers to go deeper to share about life and faith in small groups	29	49.2%
Engaging young adults from diverse age groups and lifestyles	29	49.2%
Trying new things and not being afraid to fail	28	47.5%
Addressing the relevancy of faith to the life realities of young adults	27	45.8%
Intentional accompaniment of individual young adults	24	40.7%
Clergy participation, support, or promotion of ministry with young adults	19	32.2%
The use of resources from Saint Meinrad	7	11.9%
I don't know	6	10.2%

This question was asked only to respondents who identified as a current or previous Core Team member or a parish contact. It had 59 respondents.

RESEARCHER IDENTIFIED OVERARCHING THEMES

INTRODUCTION

This section contains the researchers' main observations for the Young Adult Initiative, along with the variables that were coded to these themes. For each theme, there is a descriptive table listing all of the contributing variables and the frequency that they were shared in conversation. This is followed by some examples from the interviews to demonstrate the observation.

These observations and variables are taken directly from what was said in the interviews and focus groups. The frequency of parishes indicates the number of parishes in which this variable surfaced in at least one interview or focus group. If it was simply not mentioned, it was not coded. This does not mean that it was not a part of their experience, but rather that they did not talk about it.



1. Intentional Relationships



When intergenerational relationships exist, a collective memory is present in communities, as each generation takes up the teachings of its predecessors and in turn bequeaths a legacy to its successors.

— CHRISTUS VIVIT, 191

One of the themes that surfaced from the data was the idea that forming **intentional relationships** with young adults greatly contributed to the parish's ability to minister to young adults. This contained variables from the first point of contact through developing deeper relationships. Young adults from parishes whose ministries intentionally included these variables of forming intentional relationships often reported these relationships as contributing to their desire to participate in the parish. Some of the most significant contributing variables to this observation were: being invited to the parish, opportunities to increase peer relationships, and having a young adult leader personally reach out to the young adults.

Variable	Frequency of Parishes
Invitation	13
Young adult leaders outreach/one-on-one relationships (core team or volunteer coordinator)	13
Mentoring relationships with staff or other adults	13
Increase in peer relationships	12
Meeting young adults where they are	12
Staff outreach	12
Outreach to unaffiliated	11
Deeper community (small groups)	11
Hospitality	10
Relational authority	10
Follow up	8

Quotes

- » “He invited me over to his house, I think like the week after he met me to watch the football game... I think [him] reaching out that one time and bringing me over and I met a few other people in the group. That really did change my life.”
- » “That word ‘accompany’ or, and presence really, I tried my best to embrace that because from the beginning, I just felt like that was what was being conveyed, that it was the most important, and I felt really connected to that.”
- » “So, I just felt immediately seen where I was, and I just really appreciated that, that he would pay enough attention to where I was that he could tailor his offerings to me.”

2. Outreach to the Unaffiliated



In this outreach, we need to use above all the language of closeness, the language of generous, relational, and existential love that touches the heart, impacts life, and awakens hope and desires. Young people need to be approached with the grammar of love, not by being preached at. The language that young people understand is spoken by those who radiate life, by those who are there for them and with them.

— CHRISTUS VIVIT, 211

When observing the ways in which parishes conducted **Outreach to the Unaffiliated**, the data exemplified that this outreach was important, yet difficult. The unaffiliated group includes young adults who are not connected to the parish or may be connected only marginally. This group proved to be the most challenging for the parishes to find and to effectively reach. Some of the most prominent variables were: using social events as outreach, personally inviting people to the parish, and going to places where young adults gather to meet them.

Variable	Frequency of Parishes
Use of social events to build relationships	13
Personal invitation	13
Going to where they are	12
Use sacramental prep (RCIA, marriage, baptism) as a way to reach out	11
Grant funding helped with this	10
Use additional communication methods, i.e., Flocknote, texting, etc.	9
Social media	9
Challenge was identifying them	8
Outreach to non-affiliated or practicing YAs through using family relationships	8
You have to be authentic when you reach out to YA	7
Use beauty of the Church for outreach	3



Quotes

- » “So she posts on Instagram and on Facebook, and tags ... that kind of stuff, so that when people search for things happening in [the city], that appears. So I know a lot of people, especially women in our group, [she] was their first friend in the group, because she was the person that they reach when they were reaching out on social media. So I would say social media is the biggest way that we have reached out.”
- » “That’s probably the piece we’ve been the least successful with is engaging out in the community and bringing folks who have no real connection to our parish.”
- » “Another thing is there’s a group that goes (local public activity) on Saturdays. I don’t think they’re well catechized. I guess they just don’t know Jesus. But we’ll go there from time to time and just extend an invitation.”

3. Outreach to the Affiliated



Ministry should always include occasions for renewing and deepening our personal experience of the love of God and the living Christ.

— CHRISTUS VIVIT, 214

When beginning the initiative, many parishes recognized they had a large number of young adults already present in the parish. The methods used to reach these young adults who already had a connection to the parish were coded as **Outreach to the Affiliated**. By far, most efforts were geared to this group.

The most commonly mentioned variables were: using socials to build relationships, personally recognizing visitors and introducing them to someone, and using sacramental moments as a way to connect young adults to the parish. The parishes experienced challenges in terms of identifying these parishioners and communicating effectively with them. Some innovations are contained in this observation.

Variable	Frequency of Parishes
Use of social events to build relationships	13
Personal recognition of visitors and introductions by at least one person	13
Use sacramental prep (RCIA, marriage, baptism) as a way to reach out	12
Use additional communication methods, i.e., Flocknote, texting, etc.	11
Pastor recognition of person and their name or pastor direct involvement	11
Challenge was consistency of participation	10
Virtual gatherings	10
Outreach to YAs through using family relationships	10
Desire for formation once they are part of the community	10
YAs appreciated availability of sacraments	8
Up-to-date data on young adults in parish	8
Challenge was identifying them	7
Care packages or other non-gathered outreach strategies	5
Grant funding helped with this	5

Quotes

- » “The moment I stepped into the parish for the first time, which honestly wasn’t that long ago, I was instantly greeted by somebody who gave me a welcome packet, offered to pray for me during Mass, that I may stay at the parish long-term and be an integral member of the parish.”
- » “Well, one thing we realized was that communication was weak. So communication for the parish was mostly the bulletin and announcements at Mass, but that wasn’t just going to make it for people that were not coming or on the margins or weren’t at those Masses. So we, number one, changed how we communicated. So it was text, it was through Flocknote, it was Instagram. We had a young adult address.”
- » “He’s really going to work with a lot of our younger families who are bringing their kids for baptism and for first communion to be able to have that be a time of formation and accompaniment as much or more with their parents than just with the kids so that each young families really get more attention at a time.”



4. Peer Connection



Friendship is one of life's gifts and a grace from God. Through our friends, the Lord refines us and leads us to maturity. Faithful friends, who stand at our side in times of difficulty, are also a reflection of the Lord's love, his gentle and consoling presence in our lives.

— CHRISTUS VIVIT, 151

One word that surfaced repeatedly in the interviews and focus groups was community. Young adults desire **Peer Connection**. They crave community, but deeper than just superficially being acquainted with someone. The major variables that contributed to this observation included: young adults forming friendships through parish ministries, the desire to share more personally with fewer people through things such as Bible studies and participating in small-group programs sponsored by the parish. Overall, parishes have discovered that young adults want to connect deeply and spiritually with people their own age to discuss issues that matter in their lives.

Variable	Frequency of Parishes
YAs form friendships because of interactions at the parish	12
Bible studies that allow for life discussion and interpretation	12
Small-group programs by parish	11
Creating small groups based upon life stage	10
Support of parishioners' initiatives	8
Organic formation for small groups by YA	8
Ease of parishioners using space to gather if desired	4

Quotes

- » "One way I feel heard here is how the people I'm friends with share my values around whatever issue it is."
- » "I have ideas and I want to help participate and how can that be done more openly."
- » "I was brand new to town, so just a really good opportunity to meet some Catholic people in the same life space and I've been coming ever since."

5. Integration



Dear young people, please, do not be bystanders in life. Get involved!

Jesus was not a bystander. He got involved.

— CHRISTUS VIVIT, 174

Throughout the interviews and focus groups, the concept of **Integration** surfaced as a common goal for ministry with young adults. Most parishes did not intend to create a young adult ministry separate from the life of the parish. Instead, they hoped to integrate young adults into the various ministries of the parish. Multiple factors contributed to these parishes' ability to integrate young adults into the life of the parish, including: having structures in place to support integration, having consistent leadership, and having staff or parish leaders who intentionally focused on this integration.

Variable	Frequency of Parishes
Staff or leadership that intentionally focus on helping integration happen.	12
Structures that support the integration of YAs into the community and support it being a priority of the parish.	11
Transition of leadership.	11
Pastor led from the pulpit and in the way they led their staff as YA led to integration, awareness, or parish-buy-in.	11
Welcoming and supporting of families, i.e., childcare and babysitting reimbursement; crying babies.	10
Awareness was an issue because they did not hear about it.	10
Parish community can't just be welcoming. They have to be open to being changed by the relationship with YAs.	10
Understanding the realities of YA population, i.e., communicating effectively to the YA in community.	9
Integration into existing parish groups, such as KofC or Rosary Society.	8
Advocacy for MYA; letting them speak as parish leaders.	8
Authentic empowerment of YAs.	8



Quotes

- » “They seek community. They seek being valued in some way. They seek having a purpose.”
- » “There are some adults that really get it and they’ve been stepping back and inviting young people to come in and take their place. And it’s been really successful especially I would say in our fellowship committee. The lady that was in charge of that, although she has been a part of fellowship forever, she was one of the early voices that said we need to get our young people more involved. And so for one of our fellowship events, she just got all of the young people to take it over and they did a wonderful job. So everybody was so proud of them and then sharing what a great experience it was, but we need that on a regular basis.”
- » “I feel like everyone just cares about the family or the elderly and nobody really cares about the young adults. And I don’t feel like there’s very many opportunities for us to get involved besides randomly throw a party or something. But it’s like, I want to be involved in the Church, I actually do. I want to help grow it. I want to do things that really matter and to have an impact because this is my church, I’m giving you money. I want to be involved as much as possible. But for the most part, I feel like churches don’t see where unmarried 20-something-year-old fits in.”

6. Clergy Support



(Young adults) find the presence of the Church a nuisance, even an irritant.

This request does not always stem from uncritical or impulsive contempt. It can also have serious and understandable reasons: sexual and financial scandals; a clergy ill-prepared to engage effectively with the sensitivities of the young; lack of care in homily preparation and the presentation of the word of God; the passive role assigned to the young within the Christian community; the Church's difficulty in explaining her doctrine and ethical positions to contemporary society.

— CHRISTUS VIVIT, 40

Although most priests are not directly responsible for the ministry to young adults in their parishes, **Clergy Support** was consistently mentioned as a factor to the ministry's success. This support varied from having priest(s) directly participate in ministry events and activities to advocacy from the pulpit. Consistency in clergy leadership seemed to directly affect the ministry as well. The parish's ability to continue its ministry to young adults beyond the YAI hinges on the support of the pastor toward the leadership responsible for the ministry.

Variable	Frequency of Parishes
Pastor/priest buy-in ownership, participation, support, i.e., Party at Padre's, accessibility of pastor to YA	13
Pastor support aided in the success of the YAI	11
Consistency and transition of pastors and the impact	10
Pastor assumptions about YAM or MYA and YAs	9
Committed budget to continue	9
Pastor listens to YAs	8
Pastor knows my name	7
Pastor perception of success	7
Pastors still don't quite get the shift from YAM to MYA	7
No support or mentoring for the YA Coordinator	1

Quotes

- » “It was just really cool to be able to hang out with the priest, and it wasn’t even that... It was just that he was there, and his presence was there, and it felt like he wasn’t trying to be cool, which would’ve made it way worse. But he just showed up and was just being himself, and it felt like... It made me feel like, yeah, I can come here whenever I want.”
- » “As someone who’s trying to drive passion in something, to me presence matters, presence from the pastor matters.”
- » “I was disappointed that he or one of our other priests did not support the group better than they did.”
- » “He doesn’t always understand why we’re doing what we’re doing in our approach, but by letting us do it, that’s how he shows his love and support.”



7. Relevance of Faith to Life



A Church always on the defensive, which loses her humility and stops listening to others, which leaves no room for questions, loses her youth (fulness) and turns into a museum.

— CHRISTUS VIVIT, 41

In particular, the young adults in the focus groups spoke of the need for the **Relevance of Faith to Life**. Given the world in which young adults live and the multitude of tough issues they face daily, they expressed a desire for their Church and their faith to assist them in dealing with these difficult topics. To do this, the ministry leaders must listen to young adults to distinguish their needs and provide judgment-free opportunities to discuss these tough issues so that faith can be integrated into all aspects of their lives.

Variable	Frequency of Parishes (Positive)
Value of listening	13
Opportunities for people to ask questions without judgment	10
Integration of faith into of other aspects of life	9
Homilies include or are directed toward YA lives	8

Quotes

- » “But when I have that situation, that life issue ... instead of pushing back at it, he said, ‘Okay, what can I do next to help you walk this path?’”
- » “They need to be able to ask honest questions and to feel like they’re not being judged when they ask those questions. They want to understand what’s the Church’s stance on accepting individuals that are gay or homosexual. Why does the Church not allow same sex couples to remain in their schools and so forth? It’s those deep issues that they’re experiencing, like one we had some Zoom sessions where they were able to come and just ask those hard questions.”
- » “So that’s something that I never hear anyone, especially the priest, ever talk about, but it’s super common for my age group and my friends, is depression and anxiety. And I just wish it was talked about more if we had opportunities, ‘Like, hey, if you feel this way, this is kind of a way you can go to get help.’”

8. Audience Diversity

You have to discover who you are and develop your own way of being holy, whatever others may say or think. Becoming a saint means becoming more fully yourself, becoming what the Lord wished to dream and create, and not a photocopy.

— CHRISTUS VIVIT, 162

The YAI targeted those aged 23-29; however, the reality in parishes is that the term “young adults” includes a vast range of ages, life stages, and needs. Many parishes recognized this **Audience Diversity** but did not have the resources to minister to all of them. Most parishes either chose a target audience or naturally ministered to one or two groupings. Even over four years, the parishes struggled to reach their entire audience.

Variable	Frequency of Parishes
Transitions between life stages	12
Respecting YAs as adults and not older youth	10
Focused on target audience(s)	10
Staff collaboration to expand and diversify the audience	10
Acknowledge and value the diversity but didn't know how to or have the resources to respond	9
Respond to various YA needs & styles and not a singular or primary sole “type” of YA	9
YA Group vs Ministry with Young Adults	8
Need to clearly advertise to target audience	6

Quotes

- » “I’d kind of taken it to the Newman Center too, to try and share it with some of those seniors who were graduating, to try to help them embrace that transition.”
- » “I think by putting young adult and adult together, at least for me, it makes it a little bit easier. I can cross-plan some things. Because I think it’s really important to provide young adults, exclusive to young adults, opportunities, but I think it’s also important to provide those opportunities where they can become involved with the rest of the parish as well. That they’re not segregated, particularly as they move through that young adult age group and life status, and everything.”
- » “Young adults, when I first started (attending the parish), I showed up to something and it was all married spouses with children, and I was like, ‘I don’t have a spouse or a child; let’s try this again.’”

9. Unique Realities



Youth (and young adulthood) is not something to be analyzed in the abstract. Indeed, “youth” (or “young adulthood”) does not exist: there exist only young people, each with the reality of his or her own life.

— CHRISTUS VIVIT, 71

In many interviews, one of the first things people would mention was the **Unique Realities** of their parish. This demographic information showed some commonality in the challenges and opportunities the parishes experienced. These realities centered around their access to young adults, because of the demographics of their area, the presence of a college nearby, or proximity to a military base, among other factors.

Variable	Frequency of Parishes
Parishes with large population of young adults	9
Challenges of unique settings such as rural small parishes, military parishes, college towns, urban centers, etc.	9
Near a college	3
Has a school	3
Parishes without large populations of young adults	2

Quotes

- » “What can I connect to these young adults for three months? Because we only have them for one year. It’s going to take them six months to sign up and I might only have them for three months more.”
- » “Ours are coming in the doors, but how do we make sure that we now get them connected or feel welcomed?”
- » “It’s tough to plan for target audience when you don’t have enough of your audience doing the planning.”

10. Measuring Success



We should not be hesitant, afraid to take chances or make mistakes. Avoid the paralysis of the living dead, who have no life because they are afraid to take risks, to make mistakes or to persevere in their commitments. Even if you make mistakes, you can always get up and start over, for no one has the right to rob you of hope.

— CHRISTUS VIVIT, 142

Since each parish's experience of the YAI was unique, each had its own ideas regarding how it viewed **Measuring Success** when it came to its efforts. The ministry seemed to be impacted by how the parish viewed success. Some of the various measurements included integrating young adults into the parish, numbers of young adults involved, and looking for small increments of success.

Variable	Frequency of Parishes (Positive)
Numbers	12
Measures of integrating YAs into the parish	11
Measuring small increments of success	10
How mentality or perspective of YAM or MYA impacts the way you see success and how you measure it	10
Integration into the parish budget	9
Progressive measures - it is a process outreach to integration	9
How is success measured when it comes to relationships	9
How have young adults been intentionally welcomed and integrated into other ministries of the parish	6
Improvement of adult formation as a correlation to MYA	6
Evolution of YAM to MYA did not happen	4

Quotes

- » "One thing I think other parishes can learn is there needs to be a threshold of having enough people in it, so that it's not just like a dyad or a group of two people. You really do need the numbers."
- » "It takes time to move a mountain. Culture change is hard, and we need to be patient and see the little increments of progress."
- » "How many young adults do I see at Mass on Sunday? Are they staying around and talking to people, are they volunteering in the parish, do they feel like they are at home in the parish and now they are getting involved in the life of the parish and it is inspiring older parishioners?"

11. Engagement with Saint Meinrad Resources



The proliferation and growth of groups and movements predominantly associated with the young can be considered the work of the Holy Spirit who constantly shows us new paths.

— CHRISTUS VIVIT, 202

Even beyond the grant money the YAI provided, the parish’s **Engagement with Saint Meinrad Resources** often surfaced in the interviews and focus groups. These resources and support included numerous factors. The most often mentioned included the opportunities to gather at Saint Meinrad (or virtually), the accompaniment of the YAI Director, and the connections made with other parishes in the initiative. Overall, the parishes had an extremely positive attitude regarding the support and resources they received as well as hopes for future support.

Variable	Frequency of Parishes
Gatherings at Saint Meinrad	13
Grant money	12
Communication strategies, i.e., Ryver platform vs. standard comms tools	12
Attitude toward Saint Meinrad	11
Accompaniment by Michal	11
Connections made	11
Having the permission to fail was helpful	10
Overall experience the opportunity to participate	9
Lessons learned, i.e., relational authority	8
Want more resources	6
Want more training	6
Accountability	5
Reporting	5
How did YAI strengthen the domestic Church	4
Attitudes of parishes who are starting MYA or starting again	3
Want more networking or connection opportunities	2
Authorization for the ministry from STM (to get parish leadership to buy in)	2



Quotes

- » “I think Michal (Horace, the YAI Program Director) and his team have been exceptional in terms of giving us a variety of resources, a variety of experiences, coming to check on us, and listening to us and giving us input. And then when we weren't able to meet in person doing the Zoom workshops, so I think he's tried every technique possible.”
- » “I really appreciated their session on relational authority. I appreciated getting that presentation from kind of a broad, nationwide perspective. I felt like I could identify with a lot of the conclusions and feedback that young adults gave for that particular initiative.”
- » “When they first launched Ryver, I was more involved in it but then you realize nobody's really using this and, if they are, it's the same people that are speaking into it. And I just didn't find that very helpful and so now it's like I'm checking one additional thing so you kind of let it go by the wayside.”

CATEGORIES FOR COMPARISON AMONG YAI PARISHES

INTRODUCTION

The following report categorizes the parishes by similar traits and qualities observed through their summaries, surveys, and interviews. It is a tool to compare the parishes to determine any conclusive findings or overall best practices from the YAI.

Parishes have primarily been placed in their categories based upon their own statements, or lack thereof. As researchers, based upon our collective knowledge and reading of transcripts and reports, we decided which parishes went into different categories. However, arguments could be made potentially for placing a given parish in a different category.

While many of the observed traits and challenges for each aspect of the comparison are shared among many, if not most, of the parishes in the categories, they should not be universally applied. In addition to any trait or challenge that is shared among parishes, some listings also include specific examples from individual parishes that represent that category.

Each of the comparisons should lead all to reflect on the following “Big Picture Questions” regarding ministry with young adults.

Big Picture Questions for Reflection on this Data

1. What is the impact of having a paid staff member designated for leading Ministry to Young Adults (MYA)?
2. What are the benefits and challenges for parishes with either a large or small young adult population?
3. What role does transition play in leading young adult ministry in parish communities? How can we minimize it?
4. What can be learned from the data about the role of clergy support and participation in MYA?
5. What are the benefits and overall impact of prioritizing communication in efforts to engage young adults?
6. Are there any additional similarities or surprising differences you noticed when reviewing the data that should be considered?

Comparison One: YAI Leadership in Parishes

A comparison of parishes who had a paid staff member whose responsibilities included ministry to young adults within the YAI and those whose leadership was primarily from volunteers.

What is the impact of having a paid staff member designated for leading Ministry to Young Adults (MYA)?

PAID (11 Parishes)*

- » Had a more professional and overall ministerial approach to the efforts; however, in most cases, it was an add-on role; due to this, these staff expressed the challenge to have the time to do MYA and their other roles.
- » Had a greater ability to advocate for young adults in staff meetings or when talking to pastor and other staff members.
- » Contacts responsible for both adult faith formation and young adults more easily integrated ministry with young adults into sacramental prep and other areas of parish life.
- » Contacts for primarily young adults in their role tended to minister to young adults more closely to their stage in life.
- » Tended to utilize social media and texting more often as a mode for regular communication.

VOLUNTEER (3 Parishes)*

- » Most expressed a desire to be able to do more if they had more time.
- » There was a challenge to communicate regularly or gain access to the pastor and parish staff.
- » Decisions impacting young adults or the parish as a whole would be made without the contact being made aware to properly plan, prepare, or include the YAI Core Team.
- » Had the greatest ease in accompaniment ministry with those in the same life stage.
- » Saint Meinrad-provided formation for the YAI was their primary or only ministry formation.
- » 3 of the 4 parishes that utilized the least amount of YAI funds were volunteer led.

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- » Some expressed struggle with finding time to complete the YAI reports and/or participate in YAI events.
- » Contacts that were also young adults often had greatest participation from those in their similar life stage.

**One parish's YAI efforts were a partnership between the volunteer parish contact and the paid staff youth and young adult minister.*

Comparison Two: Easy Accessibility to Young Adults

A comparison of parishes where the population of young adults could be easily identified and targeted as an audience and the parishes where, due to population or other factors, the young adult audience was not as easily accessible.

What are the benefits and challenges for parishes with either a large or small young adult population?

EASILY ACCESSIBLE & IDENTIFIABLE (7 Parishes)*

- » This was usually a parish in a larger city.
- » The parish was typically near or in an area of economic growth.
 - This often included a young adult professional population.
- » The community as a whole seemed younger, rather than older.
 - Could be from the proximity to a college, university, or military base.
- » Tended to utilize social media and texting more often as a form of outreach.

ACCESSIBILITY A CHALLENGE (2 Parishes)*

- » Often more of a smaller area where young adults grew up, but then left.
- » Regularly lamented that they “cannot find young adults” no matter what they tried.
- » The community as a whole seemed older, rather than younger.

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- » Previous negative or positive experiences or opinions of involved young adults (usually from growing up together or from parish cliques) led to one’s desire to be involved or not.
- » The transitory nature of young adults impacted the consistency of young adult participants.

**Four parishes could not easily be categorized.*

Comparison Three: Transitions During the YAI

A comparison of parishes that had a major transition during the Young Adult Initiative to those whose leadership remained mostly consistent. Major transitions are considered a change in Contact, Pastor, Minister to Young Adults, or a supermajority of the Core Team either changed or left and was not replaced.

What role does transition play in leading young adult ministry in parish communities? How can we minimize it?

HAD TRANSITION (9 Parishes)

- » The Pastor, Core Team, or Contact did not always share the same vision.
- » They felt like they had to “restart” the YAI.
 - It was hard to “on-board” people midway through the YAI.
 - Expressed a need for help in making the transition(s) smoother.
- » Leaders expressed a feeling of Ministry to Young Adults lacking a consistent place or priority within the parish structure.
- » There seemed to be a connection between a change in contact often resulting in some changes within the Core Team.
 - Most parishes that had a transition, had multiple.
- » There was less confidence in a viable future of their ministry, but most remained committed to trying.

NO TRANSITIONS (4 Parishes)

- » There was stability in the Pastor, Contact, and Core Team.
 - They could each speak of the parish’s entire YAI efforts, knowing what had worked, what had been tried, and what the concerns were.
- » They were more confident in the continuation of the ministry in the future.
- » They seemed to be generally more innovative.
- » Conflicts that were present at the beginning of the YAI appeared to exist for most of the YAI.

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- » The transitory nature of young adults impacted parishes’ YAI efforts, especially with consistent participants.
- » Most leaders shared an initial level of excitement in participating in the YAI, whether that was in the beginning of it, or upon learning that their new parish was in it.

Comparison Four: Clergy Support

A comparison of parishes that were identified as having a pastor or their clergy support the YAI through pulpit announcements, public actions, or treatment and involvement with the contact or core team members and the parishes that self-identified that they did not feel the support of their clergy.

What can be learned from the data about the role of clergy support and participation in MYA?

CLERGY SUPPORTED (10 Parishes)

- » Core Team and/or Contact would express appreciation for clergy members.
- » Clergy would occasionally visit Core Team meetings.
- » Clergy would attend Saint Meinrad gatherings.
- » Clergy would mention or advocate for the YAI or overall ministry to young adults during public liturgies.
- » At the time of interviews, a discussion of or a commitment to a budget line for ministry to young adults for after the YAI had already been determined.

SUPPORT WAS LACKING (3 Parishes)

- » This was self-identified by the Pastor, Core Team Members, or Contact.
 - Researchers have not made this determination.
- » Pastors could become an obstacle by not understanding or regularly saying “no” without explanation.
- » Transition in pastor often contributed to at least a perception of minimal support.
- » Some pastors had cultural misunderstandings.
- » There was a disconnect between visions of ministry to young adults among parish leadership.

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- » Parishioners, staff, and parish leadership, i.e., Pastoral Councils, seemingly took their cues from the pastor on where to prioritize ministry to young adults.

Comparison Five: Clergy Participation

A comparison of parishes that were identified as having their pastor or clergy participate within the YAI and parishes that self-identified as their pastor/clergy did not participate (at least noticeably) in functions specific toward ministry to young adults. Participation included hosting events, speaking at them, being present, etc.

How did the participation or availability of clergy for young adults impact their YAI progress?

CLERGY PARTICIPATED (7 Parishes)*

- » Clergy hosted events, often at their residence or on parish grounds, which young adults mentioned.
- » Clergy provided presentations or talks as a part of the ministry to young adults.
- » Clergy were available to talk to young adults after Mass or throughout the week at convenient times.
- » Clergy advocated on behalf of the YAI to staff and the parish community.
- » In some cases, clergy who were also young adults were both engaging in their personality and their preaching.

CLERGY DID NOT PARTICIPATE (5 Parishes)*

- » Young adults did not mention any engagement with their clergy.
- » Pastor would acknowledge he hired staff that he trusted to do the work.
- » Pastor considered himself too old or “not cool enough” and would ruin the atmosphere.

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- » Young adults mentioned that clergy need to be authentic or genuine and not try to be one of them.

**For one parish, we were unable to establish a determination for their category.*

Comparison Six: Intentional Communication

A comparison of parishes that self-professed the importance or value of their communication efforts and their prioritization of doing so at a more-than-basic level to the parishes that did not mention communication methods beyond the use of the bulletin, Mass announcements and basic social media.

What are the benefits and overall impact of prioritizing communication in efforts to engage young adults?

DISCUSSED COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY (7 Parishes)

- » Most parishes mentioned a process of the contact or a staff member being notified of any new young adult registrant.
- » They used social media to engage or reach out in addition to promoting their events.
 - Some mentioned the benefit of “boosting” posts, for a greater reach in the area.
- » The parish had a communication plan or policy, or communication director, either as staff or a volunteer.
- » The parish would try new mediums and social tools.
- » They learned ways to target messaging for young adults.
- » They would provide follow-up to events.
- » Parishes worked at maintaining their database and keeping it current.

MINIMAL MENTION OF COMMUNICATION (6 Parishes)

- » Primarily or only discussed the bulletin and announcements at Mass as their strategies to reach young adults.
- » Many mentioned their database was out of date.
 - This impacted their abilities during COVID-19 pandemic.
- » Acknowledged they did not follow up after events.
- » Initial introductions to young adults were also used to invite them into a leadership position.

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- » Most mentioned that young adults don’t read the bulletin or “hear” the announcements.
- » Young adults do not RSVP or commit to attending events ahead of time.
- » Mention of the website needing to be attractive and easy to navigate for information.

AFTERWORD

TAMMY BECHT

I was at work, sitting at my desk in my office at Saint Meinrad, when the phone rang. I was surprised to hear the voice of Dr. Jessica Duckworth from the Lilly Endowment Inc. on the line. Immediately, I realized this phone call was about to change the trajectory of my work for years to come.

Many years before, I was in the parish hall having a donut after Mass. One of my dearest friends served as the liturgy and music director at my parish, and she joined me at the table. She asked why my oldest son, who was in the third grade at the time, was not registered in the First Communion class of our parish's religious education program. I replied, "I didn't know he should be registered. What do I need to do?" My friend immediately introduced me to the DRE (Director of Religious Education), who promptly invited me to become involved. That is how my service to my parish began.

I served my parish as a First Communion catechist assistant, then became the coordinator of the First Communion program, and eventually served as a catechist for high school youth. After 11 years, I decided to take a break and told our DRE in August that I was sitting out a year. On Thanksgiving weekend, my phone rang. It was my pastor calling. He told me that our youth minister had just resigned. He invited me to "keep the middle school program running until we hire another youth minister." That phone call is how my career in youth ministry began.

I served as the youth minister at my home parish for 11 years. I brought youth to Saint Meinrad to attend the "One Bread, One Cup Liturgical Leadership Program" for most of those years. That program informed my outlook on parish life, formed me in the love of the liturgy, and transformed the way I did ministry with young people.

I envisioned a Sunday liturgy at which young people served as liturgical ministers at every level, from server to sacristan to extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion. Over the years, this vision transformed the liturgical life of our parish. Young people were on the liturgical schedules of our parish in every ministry – hospitality, lectors, cantors, music ministry, servers, and more.

These young people continued to serve our parish liturgies into their college years, engaging as liturgical ministers while home on college breaks. It was the liturgical formation our young people received that made the real difference in their lives and formed the heart of my ministry with young people.

Donuts after Mass, one question about my son's sacramental preparation, a phone call asking for help, a program that created connection to the liturgy, and another phone call 17 years after the first are the significant actions and opportunities that called me into service for the life of the Church.

We are now five years into the focused work of the Saint Meinrad Young Adult Initiative. Our work with young adults aged 23-29, first prompted by Jessica Duckworth's phone call on that very ordinary day, is now beginning the second phase. The report you've just read tells the story of what we did over the past five years to try to connect young people more closely to parish life. If you look back through the report again, you'll see my story reflected in what you've just read.

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The challenge lies in helping the people and pastors of every parish learn to ask questions, to invite young people to service, to accompany young people through their lives, and to share and trust young people with the work and the joy of parish life.

Not because my story is unique or included intentionally – it's not – but my story can become the story of every young person in every parish. The challenge lies in helping the people and pastors of every parish learn to ask questions, to invite young people to service, to accompany young people through their lives, and to share and trust young people with the work and the joy of parish life.

As we begin Phase 2 of the Young Adult Initiative, we will focus on sharing what we've learned by sharing this report, by inviting parish leaders into our work, and by creating resources to guide parishes through the process of self-reflection, self-assessment, outreach, and engagement of young adults into parish life.

I want to offer my thanks to several people who have supported this effort and worked diligently so that we have something worth sharing with others. First, to Dr. Chris Coble of the Lilly Endowment Inc., whose long-standing relationship with the work of Saint Meinrad keeps us in the hunt for excellence in ministry. To Dr. Jessica Duckworth for inviting us, and Dr. Chanon Ross also of LEI, who serves as the program director for this cohort of grant recipients. Chanon offers guidance, facilitates camaraderie, and challenges us to innovate, think outside the box, and take our best moon shots.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, thanks to Mr. Michal Horace, who served as the director of Phase 1 of the Saint Meinrad Young Adult Initiative. Michal's dedication to young people has served our partner parishes as a model of accompaniment. Michal's long career in youth and young adult ministry and his broad network of ministry colleagues served to connect Saint Meinrad to the greater ministry circles on a national level. In Phase 2, we hope to expand our reach, to share what we have learned and, hopefully, to aid the Church in this critical time of its history.

To everyone who thinks that God may be calling them to ministry with young people, I say, “You’re right! God is calling you!” To everyone who is afraid to say “yes” to that call, I say, “Do not be afraid! God will sustain you in the journey and you will see the fruits of your labor in transformed lives!”

To pastors who are unsure about investing resources in the intentional, focused, and hard work of ministry with young adults, I say, “You can’t afford NOT to do it. Your attention, time, and unimagined joy lie in the way you allow yourself to become present to the young people already in your pews and those looking through the windows. Don’t withhold yourself from accompanying them inside.”

Proverbs 29:18 tells us, “Where there is no vision, the people perish.” The footnote on this verse in the New American Bible reads, “This much cited proverb has been interpreted in several ways. ‘Vision’ and ‘instruction’ mean authoritative guidance for the community. People are demoralized without credible leadership, but any individual heeding traditional instruction can still find happiness.”

As we continue this work to reach, accompany, and engage young people in parish life, may we become people of greater vision, seeing what is and imagining what may become. Finally, as you contemplate how to evangelize young people and engage your parish in this type of outreach, in my experience, God loves to offer the extraordinary through very ordinary means.

So stay after Mass and have a donut. Ask questions of young people. Answer that invitation to help out for a while and take that unexpected phone call. Each of these examples, and more, carries the potential to change everything. Please, just say yes.

Tammy Becht serves as interim director of the Center for Youth and Young Adult Evangelization at Saint Meinrad Seminary and School of Theology. She has served as the director of the “One Bread, One Cup” youth liturgical leadership program since 2013. Prior to coming to Saint Meinrad, Tammy served in parish youth and young adult ministry for 12 years. Tammy and her husband have four adult children and nine grandchildren.

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School of Theology*