



Cultivating
Connections
in Christ

DIOCESE OF DES MOINES

Engaging Young Adults
in the Faith

PARISH TOOLKIT

Contents

| | |
|--|----|
| The State of Young Adult Ministry..... | 3 |
| Who Are Young Adults?..... | 6 |
| Best Practices | 9 |
| Recommended Resources..... | 10 |

Engaging Young Adults *in the Faith*

THE STATE OF YOUNG ADULT MINISTRY

Young Adult Ministry across the Diocese and the nation stands at a moment of crisis. Our choice as the Church is either to continue down the path that has led so many to drift away or to embrace the spirit of Pope Francis, who calls the young people of the Church to *“take risks, even if it means making mistakes. Don’t go through life anaesthetized or approach the world like tourists. Make a ruckus! Cast out the fears that paralyze you, so that you don’t become young mummies. Live! Give yourselves over to the best of life! Open the door of the cage, go out and fly! Please, don’t take early retirement.”*

Engaging young adults into deeper encounter and communion with Jesus Christ is similar to the ways we do so with any other demographic in some ways, and in some ways, it is very different. This toolkit outlines some obstacles to expect when undertaking young adult ministry efforts and offers some ways to address these obstacles.

Before his Ascension into heaven, the Lord Jesus directed his apostles, *“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit”* (Mt 28:19). This mandate is for all peoples of all times and all places. The Young Adult Ministry Commission finds it especially pertinent as we consider the call to invite young adults to live their lives within God’s family, the Church.

MINISTERING TO YOUNG ADULTS

Today’s young adults feel an acute hunger for a life filled with more than mere material achievement. They desire to love and be loved, to belong, to be in a community, to have answers to life’s most difficult questions, to find meaning and purpose that extend beyond themselves and this world. The Church is in a privileged position to address these longings and questions. We are the flock of the one Good Shepherd, who is the way, the truth, and the life (Jn 14:6). We are the body of Christ with a variety of gifts animated by the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 12:4). We are the pillar and foundation of truth (1 Tim 3:15). And we are the institution built on rock against which the gates of the netherworld shall not prevail (Mt 16:18). As young adults embark upon the formative years of their educations and lifelong vocations, this local church, the Diocese of Des Moines, must not fail to call to them. By introducing others to the Lord, by our obedience to the Holy Spirit, and by the joy that springs up in us from living in faith and charity, we may show young adults the face of Christ.

Young adults as a demographic nearly defy categorization. The education, maturity, life experience, and vocational transitions that occur between the ages of 18 and 35 are significant. Those who minister to young adults must always keep in mind their ages, states of life, and overall maturity. There may not be resources in any individual parish to address all young adults together. There may also be a desire for a specialized young adult group (a vocational discernment group, for example), which would suggest a collaborative approach with other parishes. Such an approach might also foster connections and friendships among the Christian faithful across towns, cities, and parish boundaries. Pastors and those who collaborate with them in ministry are called to use their own good judgment regarding the kind of ministry they are able to carry out. Their desire to be

solicitous to young adults should not be hindered by a perceived lack of resources. Rather, creativity will be required to work with others in this aspect of ministry. The Lord himself began only with the Twelve.

THREE PILLARS OF MINISTRY TO YOUNG ADULTS

Three emphases emerge as pillars in ministry centered on young adults: formation in prayer, service opportunities, and social events.



FORMATION IN PRAYER

In a world filled with noise, distractions, and busyness, young adults look for meaningful and positive experiences of liturgy and prayer. Pastors will be eager to make space for opportunities where our young adults may be nourished by the sacraments and by prayer, especially before the Blessed Sacrament. They may need and appreciate guidance in how to pray in the many ways that the Catholic tradition offers. This guidance in prayer should also be supplemented by teachings on doctrine, with the awareness that some young adult Catholics may be hearing the presentation of the Church's truths for the first time.



SERVICE OPPORTUNITIES

Young adults also seek to come out of themselves and give back to the wider community in imitation of the Good Samaritan who was neighbor to the fallen man on the road to Jericho (cf. Lk 10:29-37). A sincere concern for the tenets of Catholic Social Teaching will bring a unity between right belief and charitable action as well as reveal an integrity to the whole of Catholic life that seeks to exercise faith working through love (cf. Gal 5:6).



SOCIAL EVENTS

Finally, providing settings for young adults to gather in community (especially outside the context of faith-formation opportunities) gives them a chance to form meaningful connections and friendships with those who will support them, encourage them, and positively challenge them in their faith, something the world often does not provide them.

This toolkit provides resources as to how to organize, plan, and lead all three of these types of events. The toolkit need not limit a parish or a group. Rather, it should serve as a springboard into further ministry opportunities within the local context.

THE PURPOSE OF YOUNG ADULT MINISTRY

As with many specialized ministries, there comes a time when those young adults to whom we are ministering “graduate.” They will, at some point, no longer be young adults but simply adults or middle-aged adults. With this in mind, we need to ask what we hope to accomplish in our ministry with those who are currently young adults.

First and foremost, we want young adults to come to know and love Jesus Christ, who loved them and gave himself for them. This usually happens not in solitude but in a communal setting of committed believers. We want them to know the gift of a life lived within the Catholic Church, marked by weekly participation in Sunday Mass, frequent confession, regular prayer, familiarity with Scripture, service, and meaningful friendships. We want them to embrace their baptismal call to be lifelong disciples who seek the truth that will set them free (cf. Jn 8:32) and to bring this saving truth into the workplace, public square, fitness club, universities, and all fields of human activity.

Furthermore, a life of discipleship naturally leads one to embrace a vocational state: marriage, holy orders, or celibacy for the sake of the kingdom. These vocations are the ones uniquely mentioned by the Catechism of the Catholic Church, and they follow naturally from one’s growth in faith and in interior conversion. Having received so much from the Lord in the order of grace, it is only fitting that young adults would sense and respond to a call to give themselves totally to Christ and his Church via assuming a stable vocation within the Church. In these vocations of service, they will then work to hand on the gift of faith that has been so graciously and gratuitously given to them, either to children with the help of their spouse or to the Christian faithful as a spiritual father or mother consecrated to God’s service. To that end, young adult formation must always have this orientation toward helping young people accept and embrace the vocation that God has given to each of the baptized. This kind of formation can take many forms, examples of which could be: discernment groups for men and women considering priesthood and religious life, social events for college-aged adults and young professionals, and ongoing marriage formation for young couples. In cultivating the seeds of vocation in our young people, our local church ensures a fruitful harvest of disciples, not only for this generation, but also for many generations to come.

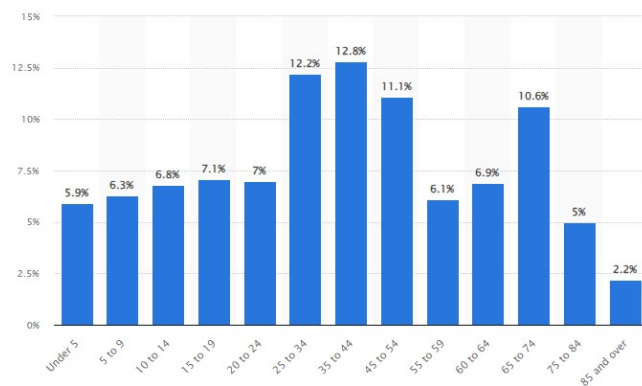
We commend this project to the Blessed Virgin Mary, who, in the flower of her youth, embraced the call to be the Mother of God and so cooperated in the redemption of the human race. She, with her Son, calls out to this generation to not be afraid, to continually ponder the mysteries of Christ in our hearts, and to put out into the deep.



WHO ARE YOUNG ADULTS?

While young adulthood is usually defined as ranging from 18-35, leaders must also be aware of the stages of life that those they minister to are in, not just their ages.

For example, the experience and ministry needs of a 22-year-old recent college graduate are very different from those of a 22-year-old single parent who is beginning the third year of their career in a town far from home. Young adulthood encompasses a broad range of life stagesⁱⁱ and all ministry efforts with young adults should be undertaken with an understanding of who they are for and what they need.



Around 20% of adults in Iowa are between ages 18 to 35.

WHAT IS UNIQUE ABOUT YOUNG ADULT MINISTRY?

First and foremost, ministry with young adults must work with the Holy Spirit in calling young adults into a relationship with Jesus Christ, as with ministry with any other age group. Striving to nourish their hearts, minds, and souls using appropriate resources and discerning opportunities to do so is nothing new to ministry leaders in all aspects of Church life. The common goals of all these efforts include meaningful experiences of the liturgy, development of a deeper prayer life, growth in knowledge of the faith, and generous sharing of individual God-given gifts with the Church. The difference lies in who these efforts are engaging. Three unique aspects of young adults' lives are key to ministry with this group.

THREE KEYS TO YOUNG ADULT MINISTRY

VOCATIONAL DISCERNMENT

One distinguishing characteristic of young adulthood is often (but not always!) that they are seeking the direction of their lives. All good young adult ministry, therefore, will strive toward helping them discern and embrace the vocation God is calling them to.

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

Related to vocational discernment is the loneliness that takes a toll on so many young people. For many, uncertainty about their life's direction leaves them vulnerable to loneliness and despair. Young adult ministry, therefore, should aim toward developing a sense of community among these young people. This is a delicate matter. The initiation and growth of friendships cannot be forced. Such community development has much in common with tending a garden: while you can't force growth, you can do a lot to encourage it. Give the young adult community the good soil of a welcoming environment, the sunlight of prayer, and the food of the Eucharist, and with God's grace many friendships will blossom.

DISTRUST OF INSTITUTIONAL PRACTICES

A third distinction found in young adult ministry today is a widespread, though often subconscious, distrust of institutional practices. While this may change as new generations of young adults emerge, those currently in this age group will usually range in attitude from actively distrusting the hierarchical elements of the Church to simply having a disdain for being registered for things like email lists, and everywhere in between.

OPPORTUNITIES & CHALLENGES

Ministry with any demographic comes with its own set of opportunities and challenges, as well as some that are consistent across demographics. In this section, this toolkit will attempt to outline some of each that are more or less unique to young adult efforts.

OPPORTUNITIES

OPPORTUNITY 1: AVAILABILITY

Young adults who have completed their education but have not taken on the responsibilities of family life may be available to engage in meaningful and committed participation with ministry efforts. We cannot assume, however, that any young adult who is single and childless is always available. Respect that their time often will be committed to opportunities outside the Church as well.

OPPORTUNITY 2: SEEKING COMMUNITY

Young adults want to be a part of something bigger than themselves. When they go to Mass or participate in other parish events, they want to recognize and engage with the people around them from many generations. From something as simple as being able to say hello to someone by name on the way out, to something as developed as having an older parishioner as a mentor, knowing and being known creates connections. Young Adult ministry presents a rich opportunity to build lasting bonds.

OPPORTUNITY 3: PASSION FOR JUSTICE AND SERVICE

The current generation of young adults has a desire to participate in making their world better. They are eager to be educated about how their involvement can make the world more just, more peaceful, more caring. They do not want to feel like their time is being wasted, but desire to be given or to develop ways to give back in service to the parish and larger community, whether as part of large projects or in one-on-one service to those in need. Young Adult ministry presents a rich opportunity to engage young people with others already doing such work and support new initiatives of their own.

OPPORTUNITY 4: CREATIVE RISK-TAKING

The range of ages that exists in the young adult community make it an area of ministry where creativity can yield tremendous fruit. Some of this creativity will be risky, and initial failure is almost a certainty. But the passion and willingness to try new things that many young adults possess make this precisely the arena to embark on creative risk-taking. Those who minister with young adults have the opportunity to encourage and direct their gifts and energy.

CHALLENGES

CHALLENGE 1: AVAILABILITY

The variety of stages of life found in the young-adult years means that this category belies consistent availability. While young adults without children might be able to participate in a 6 pm gathering, young parents will be reticent to disrupt their children's dinner routine at that time.

CHALLENGE 2: TRANSIENCE

Many young adults are in a stage of life where they have yet to settle into one physical place. Many of them will remain in the parish for a period of two or three years, which can make leadership recruitment and training difficult. It may also create a pattern where young-adult ministry efforts seem to plateau or die out completely after just a few years. Rather than putting undue effort and resources into keeping them alive, be ready to make changes as needed. If something only lasts a couple years before giving way to another effort, so be it!

EIGHT COMPONENTS OF YOUNG ADULT MINISTRY

Renewing the Vision: A Framework for Catholic Youth Ministry,ⁱⁱⁱ a 1997 document from the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), outlines eight components for “comprehensive ministry with young people.” While *Renewing the Vision* addresses primarily those who minister with teens, these components can be applied to young adult ministry, keeping in mind the discussions in the previous section of this toolkit to frame them properly.

ADVOCACY

The various stages of life that young adults exist in offer countless opportunities to advocate on their behalf in parish life. These can include inviting some to join parish leadership bodies; encouraging some to take on liturgical roles; or accompanying them through life issues that have nothing to do with the parish, such as unplanned pregnancies, citizenship documentation processes, or employment applications.

CATECHESIS

Be creative with catechesis: bring in speakers, share videos, articles, and books for small groups to discuss, for example. Classroom instruction has its place, but adults learn in so many other ways as well.

COMMUNITY LIFE

Small groups (Lent and Advent Bible study groups, for example); large-group gatherings; inter-parish ministry efforts; and pilgrimages to state, national, and international shrines and other holy places, can foster a sense of community and integration into the parish.

EVANGELIZATION

Everyone’s faith has a story: how they came to encounter Jesus Christ and his Church, how that relationship has intensified or cooled at times, and where it may be going. Young adults have reached an age and stage of life where their stories have substance, but they likely have not yet had much practice in telling these stories. Having opportunities to tell their stories not only helps young adults develop a sense of belonging and a deeper knowledge of their own faith, it also prepares them to evangelize outside the parish.

JUSTICE AND SERVICE

Many young people have a particular zeal for righting the wrongs they see in their own neighborhoods and beyond. Parishes can collaborate with other religious or secular groups in local service projects or trips to provide meals or clothing or home repairs. Such opportunities should be prepared for with Scripture and prayer, the formation of interpersonal skills, and the use of tools, if needed. Reflection afterward may include how their service affected them and their faith. Through parish efforts to direct this zeal, the secular call for justice is framed by the Good News of Jesus Christ.

LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

Embracing and encouraging young adult leaders is tremendously important for long-term success. As discussed in Challenge 2, transience is more prevalent in this demographic than with others of the parish. Rather than bemoaning the fact that leaders may be in the parish for only a few years, it is an opportunity for young-adult and parish leaders to train other leaders who will take on their roles.

At the same time, you may have young-adult leaders who are settled in your area and ready to step into long-term leadership not only in your ministry but also in the parish at large. Rather than seeing them as the next generation of parish leadership, guide them into meaningful ministry roles in the parish now.

PASTORAL CARE

As discussed previously, young adults are often primarily concerned with discerning their life's vocation. Adults able to accompany them in this discernment may foster long-term relationships of trust and aid in parish integration.

PRAISE AND WORSHIP

Offer opportunities where young adults are particularly invited to encounter Jesus Christ in the sacraments, whether this be times for Eucharistic adoration or the sacrament of penance, evening Masses as young-adult ministry events, or weekend retreats. Keeping the sacraments as the foundation of your ministry is an essential measure of success.

BEST PRACTICES

1. CONDUCT ASSESSMENTS REGULARLY

The importance of routinely reflecting on what has gone well, what hasn't, and why cannot be overstated. Be honest about whether what you're doing is working. These are the only ways to do it better!

2. BE CONSISTENT

Plan months ahead. One surefire way for any ministry to fall apart is to ignore people's offers to be involved.

3. BE INTENTIONAL & CREATIVE WITH COMMUNICATION

Each of the following will be effective to some degree with today's young adults, so it will be important that your outreach is not isolated to just one or two of them.

- Mass announcements about events and volunteer opportunities
- Bulletin announcements, online and hard copies
- Digital updates, including emails, social media, and website updates
- Stay in touch with teens who have left for college or work; they will be the young adults you see in four or five years

4. AVOID ASSUMPTIONS

Stay up to date on national trends and polls concerning the demographic you're working with. More importantly, get to know the young adults in your parish personally. They will buck the trends you read about as often as they live into them!

PARISH ASSESSMENT

To learn how to assess your parish's current young adult ministry so that you can set goals and measure outcomes, contact the diocesan director of Evangelization & Mission, John Gaffney at 515-237-5026 or jgaffney@dmdiocese.org or the director of Young Adult Evangelization, Justin White at jwhite@dmdiocese.org.

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

Websites and Organizations

USCCB Resources for Ministry with Young Adults provides a list of ministries, organizations, and apostolates with resources geared toward young adults ages 18 to 39. Additionally, a list of select Catholic podcasts, digital resources, and books produced for young adults is provided at www.usccb.org/topics/youth-and-young-adult-ministries/resources-youth-ministry-leaders

National Federation for Catholic Youth Ministry (NFCYM) is a membership-based organization that provides resources and support to Catholic youth and young adult ministry leaders. nfcym.org/

National Leadership Forum on Ministry with Young Adults is hosted by the National Advisory Team on Young Adult Ministry is open to all in the Church interested in improving ministry to and with young adults in the Church. <https://www.ministrywithyoungadults.org/>

Young Adult Ministry in a Box includes easy-to-follow young adult activities, tips from experienced veterans, and a guide giving an overview and basics of the ministry field. <https://youngadultministryinabox.com/essentials/who-are-young-adults/defining-young-adult/>

Books and Articles

Busted Halo Ministries is an online magazine for spiritual seekers that offers articles, videos, podcasts, and more. <https://bustedhalo.com/>

Catholic Link is an online platform that provides articles, videos, podcasts, and other resources to help Catholics grow in their faith. <https://catholic-link.org/>

Word on Fire is a Catholic media organization that produces films, podcasts, articles, and other resources to help people understand their faith. <https://www.wordonfire.org/>

Documents

Toolkit for Parish Based Young Adult Ministry, Roman Catholic Diocese of Charleston
<https://charlestdiocese.org/young-adult-ministry/i-want-to-start-a-young-adult-ministry/>

Ministry Effectiveness Toolkit, Diocese of Wilmington provides resources for effective pastoral ministry with young people. It includes a handbook and poster that are a project of the Diocesan Board for Catholic Youth and Young Adult Ministry.
<https://charlestdiocese.org/young-adult-ministry/i-want-to-start-a-young-adult-ministry/>

REFERENCES

i Pope Francis, *Christus Vivit* 143

ii Roman Catholic Diocese of Charleston. "Toolkit for Parish Based Young Adult Ministry." See page 7 in particular for a list of some of these stages. <https://charlestdiocese.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Toolkit-20201.pdf>

iii USCCB, *Renewing the Vision* 20