



Catholic Leadership  
INSTITUTE

# Reaching, Engaging, and Inspiring the Next Generation



*Equipping Leaders. Igniting Hope.*  
2025

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“

Dear young people, my joyful hope is to see you keep running the race before you, outstripping all those who are slow or fearful. Keep running, attracted by the face of Christ, whom we love so much, whom we adore in the Holy Eucharist and acknowledge in the flesh of our suffering brothers and sisters. May the Holy Spirit urge you on as you run this race. The Church needs your momentum, your intuitions, your faith. We need them! And when you arrive where we have not yet reached, have the patience to wait for us.

”

Pope Francis, *Christus Vivit*, #299—





# Overview

As the Catholic Church adapts to the rapidly changing social and cultural landscape, its leaders face the critical challenge of ensuring the Church remains a vibrant and vital force for future generations. In 2019, the Church, in Her wisdom, brought this topic to light in Pope Francis' exhortation *Christus Vivit*, a document that encapsulates the dialogue from the XV Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops on young people, faith, and vocational discernment. This letter emphasized that young people are not merely the future of the Church, they are also its present. They bring energy, creativity, and hope to communities of faith that do far more than sustain—they thrive. Simply put, the Church needs young people.

At the same time, young people are facing challenges to faith that no generation has yet encountered. A recent study<sup>1</sup> reported 85% of young people stop practicing the faith by the age of 21. In addition, only about 8% of responses to Catholic Leadership Institute's *Disciple Maker Index* (DMI)—a parish survey tool with nearly 750,000 responses from Catholics nationwide since 2014—were from parishioners aged 18-35. When the other 92% of DMI survey respondents older than age 35 were asked, "What does your parish need more of?" the number one response was "more young people involved." These alarming trends pose a fundamental question: "How does the Catholic Church create a space for Millennials and those in Generation Z?"

The age of Christendom is past, and the new landscape of the Church hearkens back to the age of the apostles, when the sharing of faith was a mission taken up by only a few, apostles and the laity alike. As parish leadership demographics evolve, it is crucial to adapt our mindset and innovate our practice to better witness and accompany the younger generations into lives of active missionary discipleship.

To address this challenge, Catholic Leadership Institute conducted an 18-month study aimed at understanding how to better reach, engage, and inspire Millennial and Generation Z Catholics. This study brought together over 100 Catholic leaders for a three-part symposium series and gathered insights from over 240 young adults through in-person and virtual *Next Generation Conversations* events.

## Virtual Symposium

The three-part virtual symposium series was designed to explore innovative strategies for parishes to connect with younger generations. Spanning six days across three separate gatherings, the symposium engaged leaders from diverse backgrounds, representing the Church's broad demographic and geographic spectrum. Participants included parish leaders, diocesan staff, clergy, religious sisters, vocation directors, and representatives of various ministries and apostolates. Discussions centered on three goals:

1. **Reaching** the Next Generation—Inviting those who have drifted away from their faith back into a relationship with the Church.
2. **Engaging** the Next Generation—Encouraging deeper participation in parish life.
3. **Inspiring** the Next Generation—Empowering young Catholics to embrace and respond to God's call joyfully.

<sup>1</sup>Dynamic Catholic Institute, 2016

**34%**

*of respondents aged 18-35 strongly agree that their parish helps them recognize how God is working in their lives.*

**33%**

*strongly agree that their parish effectively forms them as disciples of Jesus Christ.*

“

Youth is more than simply a period of time; it is a state of mind. That is why an institution as ancient as the Church can experience renewal and a return to youth at different points in Her age-old history. Indeed, at the most dramatic moments of her history, she feels called to return with all her heart to her first love.

”

Christus Vivit, #34

## Next Generation Conversations

In parallel, the Next Generation Conversations offered 16 in-person and virtual gatherings with young Catholics aged 25-40 who are active in their faith and regular Mass attendees. In-person gatherings were held in US cities and included Washington, DC, Philadelphia, Cincinnati, Denver, San Diego, and Miami. Participants shared their experiences of faith, their needs within a spiritual community, and their perspectives on generational differences in practicing Catholicism.<sup>2</sup>

Together, these initiatives provided parish leaders with practical insights and actionable strategies. This whitepaper consolidates the findings, offering a comprehensive guide to fostering authentic engagement with young Catholics. It emphasizes the importance of creating welcoming communities, addressing the challenges of living out faith in a modern world, and leveraging the unique characteristics of younger generations to strengthen the Church’s mission.

By synthesizing the wisdom and experiences of Catholic leaders and young adults, we can better equip leaders in the Church to engage the hearts and minds of the next generation, ensuring a vibrant future for the Catholic community.

## Who is the Next Generation?

Millennials and Generation Z individuals represent distinct generational groups with unique characteristics and challenges. Throughout this 18-month study, each of the generation’s state of life, realities, and unique generational characteristics were considered as factors preventing Millennials and Generation Z from becoming a part of faith communities.

### The Millennial Generation

The Millennial Generation are individuals born between 1981-1996. Since this particular age group spans several pivotal stages of life, we have identified *Late* and *Early* stages within this group. *Early Millennials* are a few years post-college, in grad school, and/or just beginning a career, while *Late Millennials* might be reaching some of the pinnacles of their careers—becoming leaders in industry and corporations and even being elected to national office.

<sup>2</sup>Appendix I – Methodology



Millennials range from single to dating, and newly married without children to married with young children or married with high school-age children. Some who chose marriage might be divorced. Likewise, some in this generation might intentionally be choosing the single life.

While generalizations on any demographic of people are to be avoided, there are certain trends in generations that are understood to be consistent by both research and participants in this study. Some characteristics and challenges of the Millennial Generation include:

#### Characteristics:

- > **Identity and Purpose** are central to the commitments of Millennials, and they seek engagement in activities that align with their values. They thrive on opportunities that emphasize their unique contributions to society or, for those practicing faith, their role in God's plan. Building relationships and relational trust holds great importance, with Millennials frequently valuing community and connection over rigid adherence to doctrine.
- > Millennials tend to be **deeply introspective**, with a strong sense of conviction about their beliefs, but they often experience internal conflict regarding issues of faith and morals. Practicing Catholic Millennials are deeply rooted and formed in their faith.
- > The Millennial Generation is marked by **adaptability to rapid technological advancements**, having grown up in an era of significant digital transformation.
- > Unlike previous generations, Millennials often follow **non-linear life paths**, with many delaying traditional milestones such as marriage and parenthood. This group frequently moves, embracing fluidity in both their personal and professional lives, and seeking flexibility and support for their way of life.
- > Millennials' **worldview** has been shaped by consumerism, a focus on individual achievement, and an emphasis on tolerance. They often exhibit a general distrust of institutions, including the Church, stemming from experiences with institutional failures, scandals, and misinformation.
- > Millennials view the **purpose and function of the priest** in the Church through the lens of friendship and service, with priests as approachable figures who represent the face of Christ. Millennials value priests who aim to address challenges, shake up outdated systems, and adapt to meet contemporary needs, yet they often feel restrained by the structural limitations of parishes and dioceses. They value priests who balance sacramental responsibilities with active engagement in the community, such as participating in sports, casual gatherings, or social justice efforts.
- > This generation, shaped by their **desire for change and creativity**, views the priesthood as a role that could benefit from innovation and embraces their own role in restoring trust and authenticity to the Church's leadership.

#### Challenges & Barriers:

- > Millennials face several challenges due to their non-linear life paths and varying critical life stages. The **costs associated with raising a family**, providing education for children, and balancing career aspirations with personal responsibilities can be overwhelming. This generation highly values flexibility, and many struggle when work, church, or school events fail to accommodate their dynamic schedules or the demands of working parents and young professionals.
- > Millennials have experienced great pain from the **scandals in the Church** during their formative years. They are more vocal about institutional issues and demand transparency and reform. Their experiences with extensive safe environment training have also fostered an initial hesitancy to engage fully with younger generations, driven by fear of misstep.
- > Millennials often display a **comfort with doubt**, which, while fostering critical thinking, can lead to challenges in decision-making and a reluctance to commit to long-term paths. This often leads to relativism, where truth and values are defined by personal expression rather than universal principles.
- > Millennials can become demotivated by a **lack of relational outreach** or acknowledgment for their contributions. Poor one-on-one engagement and insufficient inclusion efforts often leave them feeling undervalued and disconnected, further exacerbating their challenges in community-building and commitment.
- > Millennials view the **priesthood through a more critical lens**, often shaped by scandals and broader societal expectations of transparency and efficiency. Their skepticism toward authority highlights a desire for authenticity, with priests who demonstrate personal struggles and a relatable faith journey earning greater trust.

## Generation Z

Individuals in Generation Z, often referred to as “Gen Z” or “Zoomers,” include those born between 1997-2012. While the younger portion of this generation is still living at home and attending middle school or high school, the older Generation Z population is stepping out on their own as self-sufficient adults, ready to contribute their knowledge and skills to the world.

### Characteristics:

- > Those in Generation Z are often categorized by their **deep integration with technology** and keen awareness of the digital landscape. This generation has grown up as digital natives, seamlessly navigating social media, apps, and online platforms to connect, learn, and engage with the world. Social media not only serves as their primary source of news but also as a tool for activism, allowing them to voice their values of truth, authenticity, and inclusivity.
- > Generation Z is drawn to environments where **transparency and sincerity** are emphasized, disengaging quickly when they perceive disingenuous efforts or a lack of empathy. They respect leaders who are genuine, willing to address tough issues, and open to dialogue about doubt and faith.
- > This generation is highly **averse to rigid structures** and formality, preferring informal, flexible modes of engagement. Traditional hierarchies and rigid structures often feel unrelatable to Generation Z, who value adaptability and personal autonomy. They are likely to connect with agile ministry models that transcend structured boundaries, seeking regional initiatives that provide broader opportunities for collaboration and community.
- > They are open to and actively seek out **mental health support and awareness**.
- > **Inclusivity** is a critical value for Generation Z, with a preference for diverse environments where exploration of faith is encouraged without the pressure of immediate conformity.
- > Generation Z views **priests through the lens of spiritual fatherhood**, valuing those who invest intentionally in youth, teach truth with clarity, and act as peacemakers.
- > Generation Z is drawn to **priests and religious who are approachable** and willing to interact outside the parish setting, embodying their faith through presence and accompaniment. Generation Z is moved toward priesthood awareness and discernment through personal storytelling—those who share stories of struggles and reliance on grace within vocation stories.

### Challenges & Barriers:

- > Generation Z faces unique challenges shaped by the **COVID-19 pandemic** that occurred during formative years of their life, compounding the difficulty of transitioning into financial independence and forging self-autonomy.
- > While this generation forges self-autonomy it often **neglects self-accountability**. This, and their struggle with communication and understanding with older generations often results in social conflicts.
- > **Mental health struggles** are another major hurdle for Generation Z, exacerbated by COVID-19 and the pressures of an interconnected world where the boundaries between personal and public life are blurred.
- > Social media, while a source of connection, can amplify feelings of **inadequacy and anxiety**. This generation also wrestles with the balance between seeking truth and meaning while navigating societal pressures to perform and conform.
- > Many in Generation Z perceive traditional religious institutions as **out of touch** with their realities. The lack of relevance and empathy in these settings often prevents deeper engagement. Their focus on inclusivity and exploration can clash with perceived rigidity or lack of openness in faith communities, creating further disconnection.
- > Generation Z brings a **skeptical perspective to the priesthood**, which often appears unattainable or radically different from their own aspirations. Generation Z may view priests as primarily sacramental providers and spiritual leaders but may also perceive them as isolated or disconnected from vibrant community life.
- > This generation's exposure to diverse priestly personalities through **social media** fosters a more personal and casual connection with priests. They often view the priesthood as an alternative lifestyle rather than an authoritative role, and they require authority to be proven through relational engagement and demonstrated authenticity.



# Key Themes of Millennials and Generation Z in Church

Over the course of this 18-month study, seven key themes emerged from participants in Next Generation Conversations and the Virtual Symposiums. These themes shape the experience of Millennials and Generation Z within the Church.

## 1 | Connection & Relationship-Building

Connection & Relationship-Building were found to be a high priority among participants across the board, highlighting loneliness and isolation as critical issues. For Millennials and Generation Z, connection to the “Church” is often more directly related to the broader Church rather than to a specific parish. Frequent moves are considered normal, and church-hopping is common due to preferences in liturgy, music, and location. Younger Catholics do not give much thought to the parish itself or the associated boundaries, as older generations do, but rather, see themselves belonging to a wider, broader Church.

Millennials and Generation Z often perceive the Church as an impersonal institution, focused more on maintaining traditions and structures than on fostering personal connections and communal experiences. Millennials and those in Generation Z value authenticity, personal connection, and a sense of community. They are more likely to be engaged by experiences that emphasize personal relationships and a supportive community rather than a rigid adherence to institutional norms.

There is a myth that the Church has to water down the Gospel in order to attract young adults. Instead, younger generations—especially Millennials—want the Church to present Herself in an authentic manner, deeply rooted in the Gospel message. They are seeking relationships with God, the Church, and each other that are rooted in truth, goodness, and beauty, and they want to speak openly about difficult topics which they encounter every day. It is important that the Church, including Her clergy, parishes, and lay leaders, presents Herself as She is, without any filters.

Since community is ultimately a reflection of the relationship between God and the Church, younger generations seek faith communities that are like themselves and offer a safe refuge for sharing life with others. They are often deterred by larger parish events and seek small faith-sharing groups as opportunities to grow in their faith. They respond and engage more comfortably in warm and inviting environments.

Millennials and Generation Z face challenges in finding and creating community, with barriers such as a lack of one-on-one outreach, difficulties “breaking into” parish communities socially, and indifference toward offering or facilitating young adult ministry. They expressed a strong desire for parishes to welcome them intentionally when they visit for the first time and to provide opportunities to connect with peers through activities outside of Mass, fostering authentic relationships.

There was a strong emphasis on the importance of shared experiences to facilitate meaningful connections. In the secular world, activities such as participating in gym communities, engaging with colleagues at work, bonding over pet ownership (like being “dog parents”), and enjoying video games create comprehensive environments where individuals feel a sense of belonging and self-improvement.

Millennials and Generation Z value opportunities for genuine dialogue where they feel seen, heard, and valued as part of a community. They value authentic conversation and relationship building but this remains an unmet need because there is virtually nobody doing one-on-one outreach at the parish to anyone (let alone young adults).

“

If the young grow up in a world in ashes, it will be hard for them to keep alive the flame of great dreams and projects. If they grow up in a desert devoid of meaning, where will they develop a desire to devote their lives to sowing seeds?

”

Christus Vivit, #216

According to the  
Disciple Maker Index survey,  
since 2020,

**47%**

of those aged 18–35 years  
old indicated that they  
“strongly agree” their  
parish makes them feel  
welcomed and accepted.

## 2 | Technology & Relevance

Younger generations engage with institutions that are “up with the times” and speak their native digital language through social media. Ineffective communication via technology, lack of formation for parishioners in relational skills, and perceptions of irrelevance further hinder Millennials and Generation Z from engaging with faith communities. These gaps feed into broader narratives of mistrust in institutions and lead to a further failure to resonate with the values of personal experience (for Millennials) and truth and authenticity (for Generation Z).

Communications that do exist in parish and diocesan ministries can often be unclear or unappealing, failing to resonate with the values and interests

of younger generations. This disconnect can result in a lack of awareness and engagement, and younger generations may not receive or relate to the messages.

Social media serves as the primary platform of communication for Millennials and Generation Z, making their engagement with the Church radically different from the traditional, location-based approach of older generations. Additionally, Millennials are more likely to prioritize church activities that fit into their schedules, rather than making time for parish events.

The effective use of technology is essential for fostering vocational awareness and recruitment. Social

media serves as a powerful tool to engage youth, offering authentic glimpses into the lives of priests and religious, demystifying vocations, and sparking curiosity about God’s call. While social media can bridge the gap between traditional parish communication and the digital world, its true power lies in being a starting point for deeper relationships.



## 3 | Sacramental Accessibility and Participation

Sacramental Accessibility and Participation was another common theme of this study. Mass and Confession times often conflict with the schedules of young professionals and parents, limiting their participation. This is especially the case for mothers and fathers juggling childcare responsibilities. The younger generation faces an increasing number of dual income households, where husbands

and wives equally share household/ childcare responsibilities— in contrast to their parents/grandparents where the bulk of childcare/household was done by mothers. The lack of accessibility to the sacraments amplifies the disconnect, reinforcing the perception that parishes are not attuned to the realities of younger generations.

Even when a parish makes intentional efforts to welcome younger generations, they often fail to adapt their approach to engaging these generations that meet their unique generational values. A church that tries to host events and activities to attract young adults but is unwilling to adapt their Mass and Confession times to better align with the young adult’s schedule, will continue to struggle with these demographics.

Millennials and Generation Z prefer low-commitment opportunities that allow them to gradually increase their involvement if they choose to do so. This stands in contrast to older generations, who often take pride in their specific ministry roles and form a strong identity around their service, such as being a lector.

For younger generations, simply attending may feel like sufficient participation, and their decision-making can be more spontaneous, sometimes resulting in behaviors like unpredictability or ghosting. Their expectation of participation leans towards flexibility and minimal obligation rather than long-term commitments.





## 4 | Mission-Driven Approach and Purpose

Mission-Driven Approach and Purpose are attractive to both Millennials and Generation Z since they are drawn to purposeful and impactful experiences. They seek communities that are outward-focused, driven by a clear mission and actively working toward positive change.

A mission-driven approach is more likely to inspire younger generations who want to feel that their involvement contributes to a greater good.

Many parishes operate with a scarcity mindset, focusing on limited resources, declining attendance, and financial struggles. This perspective often leads to a defensive and inward-looking approach, where the primary concern is survival rather than mission.

Social causes play a significant role in attracting young people, as they are eager to contribute to meaningful campaigns and movements.

Opportunities for service, volunteering, and involvement in political campaigns or movements allow them to feel like agents of change, giving them a sense of purpose and impact in the world. This engagement is crucial and aligns with their values and desire to make a difference through service.

A common struggle for Millennials and Generation Z in parish life is when they are viewed as parishioners—attendees of services—versus disciples and active participants in a faith journey. The former approach often emphasizes

attendance and adherence to rules, fostering a consumer mindset where individuals come to “receive” rather than to actively contribute. These generations crave more than just passive participation; they seek deeper engagement and a genuine sense of purpose. When they are challenged to step out of their comfort zones and invest time and energy for the greater good, they find a more profound and lasting sense of fulfillment.



## 5 | Life Transitions

Life Transitions are common in younger generations: Millennials are moving, marrying, and having children while Generation Z is engaged in some of the most formative years of their childhood and young adult life. Participants emphasized an experience of the Church missing opportunities during moments such as post-college adjustments, marriage preparation, and parenting, where they sought practical support and meaningful engagement but often faced obstacles like paperwork burdens and high participation fees.

Participants in the Next Generation Conversations highlighted the Church’s missed opportunities in supporting young adults through key life transitions. Many felt lost after leaving the vibrant community of campus ministry, encountering traditional parishes that lacked intentional outreach.



Marriage preparation was cited as a challenge, with burdensome processes and fees. Some exemplary “Pre Cana” programs were cited as proving lasting faith formation, though these are often not the norm.

The transition to parenthood revealed frustrations over inaccessible parish activities, lack of childcare, and high costs for children’s faith formation. These transitions are critical moments for parishes to build trust and connection by adapting communication, addressing barriers, and fostering meaningful relationships.

## 6 | Leadership

Leadership was a source of both interest and conflict for Millennials and Generation Z, who are generally less inclined to take on formal leadership roles, particularly when it involves working with older leaders who have held these positions for decades. Young Catholics who are already engaged in parish life often experience being overlooked by older parish generations and leadership. When efforts to involve more young people in parish activities are prioritized, they feel seen, appreciated, and welcome.



Participants identified a lack of formation of parish staff, volunteers, and the faithful in the pew to appropriately recognize and provide hospitality to the young who happen to be present. This adds to the sense of the parish not creating the space for them to thrive.

Unlike older generations who may lead out of a sense of duty, Millennials and Generation Z need a clear understanding of the “why” behind their involvement to feel motivated. They are drawn to informal, adaptable leadership structures and prefer environments open to change, rather than traditional, rigid institutions hindered by policy and procedure. Oftentimes, the length of leadership commitments in the parish do not work with the young adults’ transient lifestyle. Volunteer leadership opportunities without an end or commitments for several years are

often deterrents to young Catholics who are able to make shorter-term commitments, such as one semester or 1-2 years. Those parishes that offer important and meaningful leadership opportunities in shorter cycles are more successful in engaging the younger generations in leadership and send a message of relevancy and community to younger generations.

Younger generations prefer a broader, more action-oriented vision to setting direction, while older generations are more focused on getting the job done. The desire for instant gratification among Millennials and those in Generation Z makes long-term future planning more challenging. They are more likely to be motivated by causes that promise to make a tangible and immediate impact on the world and align with their preference for activism and social change.

*The Disciple Maker Index survey tells us that only*

**24%**

*of young adults “strongly agree” that their parish involves them in decisions that affect the future of the parish.*

## 7 | Outlook of Geographic Parish Connections

Outlook of Geographic Parish Connections was a recurring theme, with many young adults engaging in “parish hopping” and “parish shopping” to find communities that better fit their schedules, preferences, or spiritual needs. This consumerist approach reflected a broader challenge in fostering deeper engagement and leadership within parish life.

The traditional parish model of registering at one parish and committing exclusively to that community is frequently viewed as restrictive and incompatible with the fluid Millennial and Generation Z schedules and desire for freedom. Several participants expressed a desire to register with a diocese rather than a particular parish. There is a common perception that the

Church is disconnected from the personal experience of Millennials and those in Generation Z. This is enhanced by the fact that parishes and ministries often remain confined within parish boundaries. For both generations, there’s a need to experience the Church coming to them where they are at, not just being expected to meet at the parish building or on the parish’s terms.

Insights from participants also highlighted that the Millennial consumer-like approach to parish involvement is influenced by accessibility issues and need for flexibility. This lack of flexibility often forces them to seek parishes that better meet their needs, driving the phenomenon of “parish shopping.”

**By understanding and adapting to these differences, parishes can more effectively connect and involve younger members. These themes focus on flexibility, experiential engagement, and personal involvement, making parish life more accessible and appealing. Emphasizing relationship-building, inclusion, and transparency is key to helping younger generations shape the parish’s future, while fostering both online and in-person connections, ensures meaningful engagement and personalized welcomes for newcomers.**

# Recommendations

The Catholic Church stands at an exciting crossroads, called to engage Millennials and Generation Z with fresh perspectives and authentic outreach. As leaders in the Church, it is necessary that we respond to what we know about these generations and help call forth the “momentum, intuitions, and faith” that the Holy Father calls out in *Christus Vivit*. The following recommendations are offered as the fruit of this study and collaboration with Catholic leaders around the country.

Millennials and Generation Z thrive in spaces where their unique journeys are acknowledged. From destination parishes that foster belonging among diverse groups to tailored worship experiences, the Church is meant to be a home for all.

## Reaching the Next Generation

The following recommendations are offered to meet, attract, and invite Millennial and Generation Z within a diocese and parish:

- > **Offer Sacramental Times for Working Professionals:** Provide sacraments outside typical work hours to accommodate busy schedules. Track attendance at these services to assess participation.
- > **Implement a Standard Welcome Process:** Create a clear welcome process for newcomers. Measure how many new people engage with the “I’m new here” process and how many registered parishioners connect with new contacts each year.
- > **Be Available and Flexible:** Practical measures, such as keeping church doors open for prayer beyond regular hours and increasing the visibility of lay Catholic presence outside the church premises enhance accessibility and inclusivity. This means adapting sacrament schedules, ministry meeting times, and technology to allow for these schedules and last-minute participation.
- > **Create a Young Core of Greeters/Networkers:** Form a young team of greeters who extend personal invitations during weekend liturgies. Track the average age of greeters, the number of interactions per Sunday, and how many invitations are accepted.
- > **Ensure an Accessible Parish Website:** Optimize the website for easy access to essential information. Track the number of clicks required to find Mass and Confession times or online giving, ensuring a user-friendly experience.
- > **Focus on Experiences Rather Than Membership:** Invite young people to mission-oriented experiences rather than asking them to join a particular parish, traditional club, or ministry. Many young adults are not apt to register in a parish until they have a sacramental need, at which time they are faced with a lot of forms that can be challenging to navigate. Measure success by tracking attendance at these events and retention, such as how many events a young person attends in a given amount of time.
- > **Connect Community Virtually:** Utilize virtual community-building trends and applications to foster connections and engagement among younger generations. Establishing an online platform, such as a dedicated server or group within a popular communication app, can help facilitate interaction and create a sense of community. This shift indicates deeper engagement and a stronger sense of belonging, providing insight into the platform’s effectiveness in building meaningful connections.
- > **Leverage Social Media:** Use social media platforms for parish communication and engagement. A dedicated staff member should monitor growth in engagement and relationship-building on these platforms.

“

Christ is alive!

He is our hope, and in a wonderful way he brings youth to our world, and everything he touches becomes young, new, full of life.

The very first words, then, that I would like to say to every young Christian are these: Christ is alive and he wants you to be alive!

”

Christus Vivit , #1



“  
We need to create  
more spaces where  
the voice of young  
people can be heard.  
”

Christus Vivit, 38



- > **Shift Assumptions and Expectations:** Redefine what it means to be an ‘active parishioner,’ minister to the individual before assessing readiness for mission, avoid gatekeeping in ministries, and refrain from pressuring young people to formalize parish membership.
- > **Fullness of Life vs. Don’t Sin:** These generations are more motivated by positive, life-affirming messages that encourage personal growth and fulfillment. They seek communities that promote a holistic view of spirituality, where the emphasis is on living a full and meaningful life rather than merely avoiding wrongdoing. A shift towards a more positive and affirming message that highlights the joy and abundance of a life lived in faith is generally more attractive to them.

## Engaging the Next Generation

The following recommendations are offered to increase the participation of Millennial and Generation Z within a diocese and parish:

- > **Empower Lay Missionary Discipleship** among young generations so that they can share Jesus with their peers in an authentic and relatable way. This central focus to young adult ministry in our current culture requires that young adults are encountering Jesus, which can take place through personal invitation, small group sharing, and in communal life.
- > **Prioritize Young Adults and Young Families** in all parts of the Church. It’s not enough to relegate younger generations and their families to a separate ministry—they need to be included in *all* working elements of parishes and in the life of the Church. It needs to be on the forefront of everyone’s mind and can be reflected beyond formal ministries and Mass time changes. This includes budget, resources, messaging, and support.
- > **Emphasize Small Groups** and Christian communities to cultivate a sense of belonging, and facilitate authentic relationships in a setting accessible to these generations that allows them to feel connected before committing to a larger community of faith.
- > **Shift Focus:** Consider a parish that shifts from merely focusing on sustaining itself financially or maintaining parish buildings to actively participating in community outreach programs, such as organizing food drives, supporting local shelters, or partnering with cultural initiatives. This approach not only serves the immediate needs of the community but also sends a powerful message that the parish is committed to living out its values.
- > **Be Excellent in Each Encounter:** Younger generations value authenticity, inclusivity, and intentionality. By celebrating well-prepared liturgies, embracing diverse ministry approaches, and meeting individuals where they are, the Church creates an environment that resonates deeply.
- > **Hand Over the Steering Wheel** Millennials and those in Generation Z value inclusivity and collaborative leadership styles. When they perceive that their voices and ideas are not valued or that they cannot have a tangible impact, they are less likely to engage actively. Encouraging greater participation and leadership from younger members of a parish can foster a more dynamic and inclusive parish community.
  - **Involve Young Leaders in Parish Councils:** Include Millennials and Generation Z in leadership roles, such as on pastoral and financial councils. Measure their involvement by tracking the percentage of council members and staff under 50 years of age. Set goals for generational representation based on the median age of the local community and track years of service.
  - **Re-evaluate Commitment Levels** for volunteer leadership roles, ensuring that they accommodate their transient stage of life, by offering opportunities that are semester-long, annually renewed, or shorter-term.

- > **Encourage Participation in the Liturgy:** Involve Millennials and Generation Z in liturgical roles such as cantors, musicians, lectors, or ushers. Measure participation by tracking the number of young people in these roles.
- > **Implement a Mentorship/Discipleship Model:** Use mentorship as a way to integrate young people into parish life. Measure the number of young individuals involved in formal mentorship programs.
- > **Promote Transparency with Key Metrics:** Define and share the 3-5 most important parish success metrics to show transparency, something younger generations value. Tracking and communicating progress builds trust and engagement.
- > **Emphasize Relationship Before Rules:** The younger generations need to be connected to the person of Jesus and learn about God's love and mercy before being asked to conform to Church doctrine. These generations place their identity as a priority in the things in which they dedicate their time. Offer opportunities that allow them to discover God's wonderful plan for their life, and more importantly, God's love for them. Consider hosting workshops on identity, charisms, talents, and leadership potential. Consider sponsoring evangelization training.

## Inspiring the Next Generation

The following recommendations are offered to invite young men and women within a diocese and parish to joyfully respond to God's call to the priesthood or consecrated life. While this study's focus did not aim to dismiss Millennials, it acknowledged that Generation Z is the demographic most likely to be impacted by vocational awareness today.

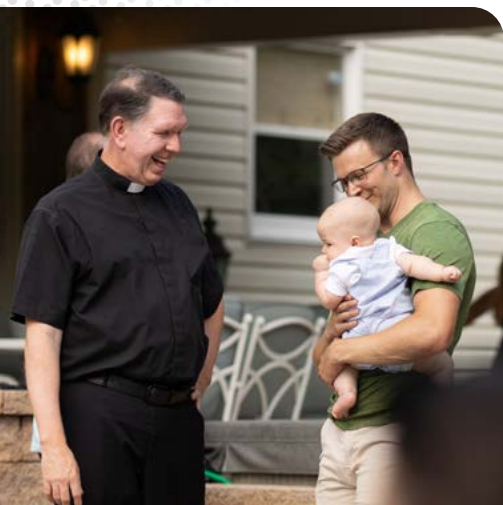
- > **Reframing Vocational Awareness:** Vocational discernment must be framed as a journey to discover God's unique design for their lives—a path that brings true joy and fulfillment. This approach reframes vocation as an invitation to live out one's identity in Christ, rather than as an intimidating or narrowly defined concept tied solely to the priesthood or consecrated life.
- > **Healing Come First:** Provide opportunities for young people to pursue healing in both individual and group settings, maintaining a keen awareness to the various levels of trauma, pain, and burdens young people face today. Connect young people with healing ministries and individuals who share testimonies of their own healing journeys.
- > **Peer Mentorship** is a powerful tool for inviting young people to discern their vocation, as they are more likely to listen to and trust those who are slightly ahead of them in life. These mentors, though further along in their journey, need not have everything "figured out" but should exhibit wisdom and authenticity.
- > **Encounters with Jesus and with Priests and Religious** communities are foundational to vocational discernment. Service projects like visiting nursing homes, serving meals on the streets, or accompanying a priest on a hospital visit create profound opportunities to witness faith in action. These experiences should include moments for reflection and debriefing, helping young people connect their service to their faith and discernment journey.
- > **Liturgical Recruitment vs. Invitation:** Involve young people in the liturgy by recruiting them as servers, lectors, cantors, ushers, and Eucharistic ministers. The liturgy provides a home for all, and young people often need more than an invitation; they must know they are needed.
- > **Visible Signs of Vocation:** The visibility of religious men and women in parish communities helps break down barriers and make vocations feel accessible. Parishes with strong clerical and religious presence create opportunities for children and young adults to witness joyful, vibrant community life, making the idea of a vocation less abstract and more appealing.

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Mentors should not lead young people as passive followers, but walk alongside them, allowing them to be active participants in the journey. They should respect the freedom that comes with a young person's process of discernment and equip them with tools to do so well. A mentor should believe wholeheartedly in a young person's ability to participate in the life of the Church.

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Christus Vivit, #246



## Bishops and Vocation

**Directors** offer holistic support, addressing both the spiritual and human needs of discerners and fostering personal relationships with those discerning, demonstrating care and encouragement. For example, a bishop might hold quarterly gatherings for discerners to build community and provide guidance. Diocesan initiatives could include parish-based vocational groups where discerners can journey together, with support from diocesan resources.

**Pastors** are central to cultivating vocations within the parish. They must model a healthy priestly vocation and witness to the fraternity of the priesthood, emphasizing that priests are part of a brotherhood, not a solo call. Practical steps include personally inviting young people to consider a vocation when they see potential, hosting them for conversations or gatherings, and being intentionally available for spiritual direction. For example, a pastor might invite a young person to join him for a meal with other priests, offering both relational and vocational insights.

- > **Emphasize Communal Vocation:** The Universal Call to Holiness should proceed and accompany discernment in a parish community. Practical examples include using a “Vocation Prayer Chalice” that families take home to pray for vocations and inviting priests or religious into family homes to build relationships and break down barriers, allowing young people to see their humanity and joy.
- > **Influence of the Domestic Church:** Vocational Awareness starts in the family and offers children a path to prayer, communal life, and identity in Christ. The parents’ prayers, awareness, and openness to their children’s individual vocations are of great importance. Practices such as sharing meals and faith experiences or welcoming a priest or religious for dinner create meaningful connections and normalize vocations within the family context.
- > **Social Media and Technology:** Leaders in the Church should prioritize intentional, high-quality social media content that resonates with their audience rather than spreading thin across every platform. All virtual communication should drive toward personal follow-ups like retreats, discernment programs, or one-on-one conversations.

In his exhortation, Pope Francis emphasized to the younger generations that they are “not an in-between time.” Rather, he said they are “the *now* of God” and that God wants them to bear fruit. (*Christus Vivit*, #178) The Church is called to collaborate on every level and integrate new and effective strategies to cultivate an environment where every young person is alive and flourishing in faith. These recommendations serve as a starting point for meeting the needs of the next generations, so that they are reached, engaged, and inspired to live their own unique call to holiness in a world that needs their faith.

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Anyone called to be a parent, pastor or guide to young people must have the farsightedness to appreciate the little flame that continues to burn, the fragile reed that is shaken but not broken.

”

Christus Vivit



“

The community has an important role in the accompaniment of young people; it should feel collectively responsible for accepting, motivating, encouraging and challenging them. All should regard young people with understanding, appreciation and affection, and avoid constantly judging them or demanding of them a perfection beyond their years.

”

Christus Vivit, #243

## Assessment: Accompanying Young Adults

The recommendations in this study summarize the experiences, theories, and collaboration of the Church and Her many members. And yet, the Church struggles to practically apply these concepts, leaving young Catholics underserved and feeling unwelcome in communities across the nation. At the current rate of generational decline, 85% of children confirmed in the Catholic Church stop practicing their faith by the age of 21. The collective response of the Church at this moment in time can change these trends and experience a renewal that only these generations can provide to the world.

According to the  
Disciple Maker Index survey,

**8.3 million**

people are estimated  
to leave the Church in the  
next 10-20 years.

To aid parishes in adopting practical applications, Catholic Leadership Institute developed an assessment as a starting place for parishes to begin to brainstorm how they can begin to apply these recommendations. This assessment is designed to highlight areas where positive practices are already taking place to meet the needs of younger generations, while identifying areas to further shift and challenge the current mindset to something more.



# Reach

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither	Agree	Strongly Agree	Not Sure
Our parish offers confession on a weeknight after work.						
Our parish offers weeknight and/or noon Masses during the week for young working professionals.						
Our parish welcomes young parents with small children at Mass and for social events.						
A young Catholic attending Mass at our parish for the first time will receive personal welcome from a parishioner and the pastor.						
A young Catholic attending Mass at our parish for the first time will leave with a personal invite to join the parish community in some way outside of Mass.						
Our parish seamlessly connects young Catholics to a small faith community of peers in a similar stage of life.						
Our parish fosters a warm and uplifting atmosphere.						
Young people at our parish have access to the parish as a place to gather for casual fellowship outside of liturgical or ministerial events.						
I invite a young Catholic to Mass, small group, or faith formation event, at least once a month.						
Our parish communicates with young adults who are not registered parishioners, but who may be participating in our liturgies at least once a month.						
Our parish has a robust social media strategy that was created and designed with input from young adults.						
Our parish website was designed in the last 7 years.						
The information on the parish website is easily accessible and updated on a weekly basis, at minimum.						
Individuals who attend our parish through sacramental preparation and faith formation are, first and foremost, invited to grow deeper in their faith journey.						
Individuals who attend our parish through sacramental preparation and faith formation have a smooth registration process with limited paperwork.						
Pastor transitions and changes that bring others to the parish community are viewed as opportunities to invite the community into a deeper relationship with Jesus Christ.						
Our parish offers a childcare option for adult-focused parish events and ministries.						



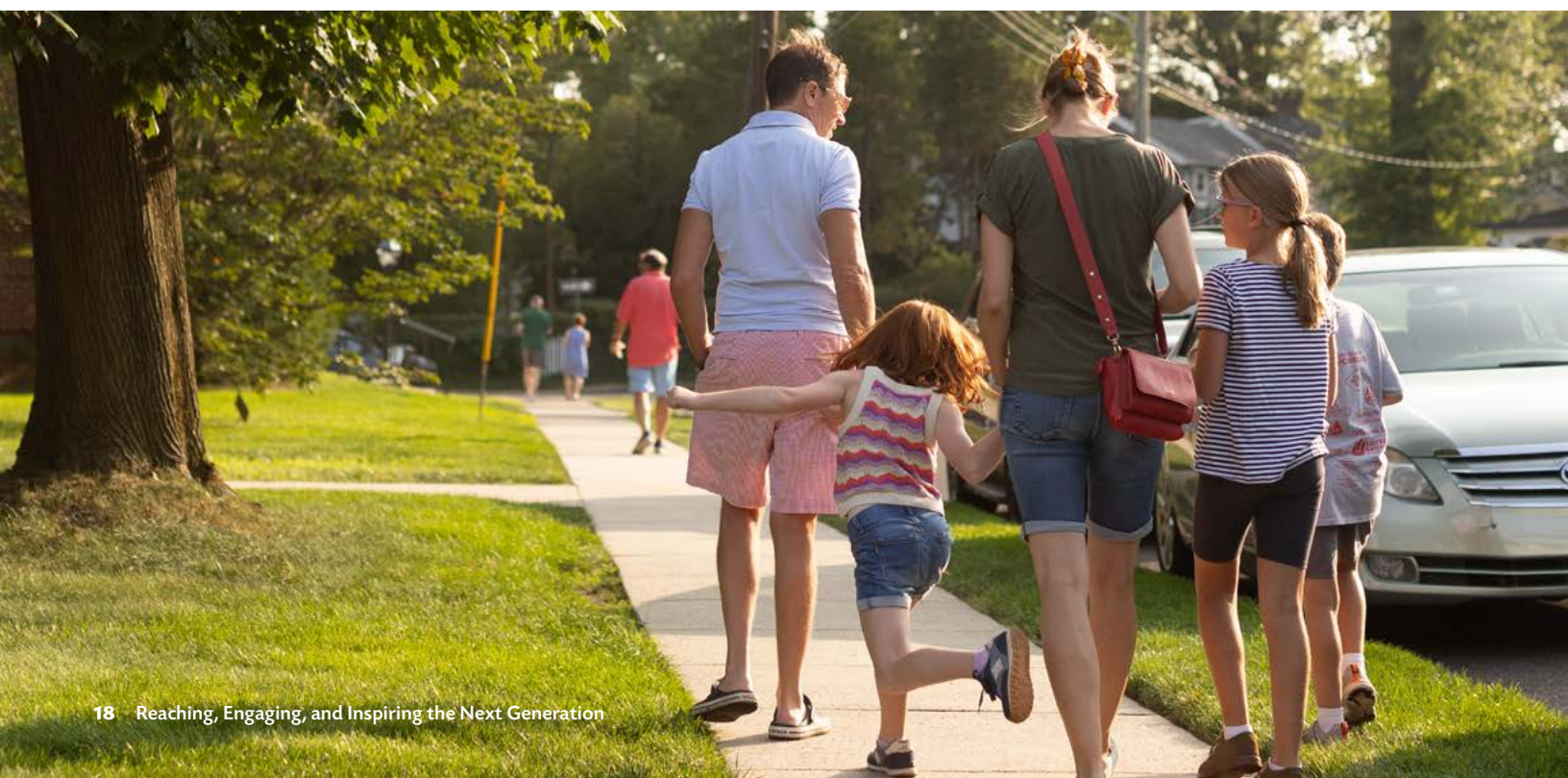
## Engage

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither	Agree	Strongly Agree	Not Sure
Our parish has an active and thriving missionary discipleship program in which young Catholics are active participants.						
We help our young Catholics become Missionary Disciples and learn how to share their personal witness and faith with others.						
Our parish offers grief support, healing retreats, addiction support, and infant loss Masses to support individuals during difficult times in a meaningful way.						
A significant percentage of our parish budget is allocated to ministries, events, and activities that engage young adults and young families.						
A significant percentage of our parish staff's time is dedicated to ministering or facilitating ministries that primarily engage young adults.						
Young adults lead ministries and parish events.						
A significant portion of our liturgical ministers (greeters, lectors, altar servers, cantors, musicians) are under the age of 40 and include both Millennials and Generation Z.						
Our parish leadership councils, boards, and committees have a contingent of individuals under the age of 40 and include both Millennials and Generation Z.						
Our parish volunteer leadership positions are accessible to transient young adult professionals who may only be a part of our parish for 6 months–1 year.						
Our parish volunteer leadership meetings are on weekends or in the evenings, accessible to parents of young children and young professionals.						
Our parish assembles focus groups with young adults to discuss decisions related to parish activities and programs on a monthly basis.						
Our parish invites young Catholics to participate in outreach programs, service projects, or cultural initiatives on a monthly basis.						



# Inspire

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither	Agree	Strongly Agree	Not Sure
Our pastor discusses vocations in his homilies at least once per month.						
Our parish hosts small group discussions on vocations and incorporates vocational awareness in all formation and faith sharing groups.						
Our parish communications “vocation” as a joyful journey to discover God’s unique design for each individual’s life.						
Our parish equips families to foster prayer and faith practices at home with resources, encouragement, and educational materials.						
We have a mentor system in our parish to accompany young people in their vocational discernment journey.						
Priests and religious are actively involved in our parish life.						
Priests are viewed as spiritual fathers in our parish.						
Our parish has a mission statement that promotes the Universal Call to Holiness.						
Social media and technology are used to promote discernment on at least a monthly basis, directing all further engagement to one-on-one conversations and small groups.						
We provide opportunities for young Catholics to engage with religious communities in the area at least every few months.						
Our pastor talks about his discernment and call to the priesthood in his homilies, talks, school visits, and one-on-one conversations.						



“

It is important to realize that Jesus was a young person. He gave his life when he was, in today's terms, a young adult. He began his public mission in the prime of life, and thus 'a light dawned' (Mt 4:16) that would shine most brightly when he gave his life to the very end. That ending was not something that simply happened; rather, his entire youth, at every moment, was a precious preparation for it.

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Christus Vivit, #23

## Summary: Alive in Christ

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As the Holy Father notes, Christ's entire life culminated as a young adult, when He served his public ministry, died, and rose from the dead. In this way, He not only sanctifies the place of the young Catholic in the Church, He insists upon it.

The efforts of the Church to reach, engage, and inspire the next generation requires creativity and accompaniment in a way that the world has not yet experienced. And yet, young people themselves are equipped to be received. They were made for this particular time in the Church's history and God Himself has gifted them with unique gifts that are personal to them and needed in this particular time. With excitement and joy, we can approach younger generations in the Church in ways that honor their place in the story of the Church, inspiring future generations to come.



Catholic Leadership  
INSTITUTE

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## About Us

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Catholic Leadership Institute (CLI) provides bishops, priests, religious, deacons, and lay persons in the Roman Catholic Church with world-class, pastoral leadership formation and consulting services that strengthen their confidence and competence in ministry, enabling them to articulate a vision for their local church, to call forth the gifts of those they lead, and to create more vibrant faith communities rooted in Jesus Christ.