



## 5 Essentials for Engaging Young Adults in a Parish

As the Catholic Church adapts to the rapidly changing social and cultural landscape, Her leaders face the critical challenge of ensuring the Church remains a vibrant and vital force for future generations. The Church has emphasized that young people are not merely its future, they are also its present. Simply put, the Church *needs* young people.

However, a recent study reports that 85% of young people stop practicing the faith by the age of 21. Even more challenging, at the same time, young people today face challenges to the faith that no previous generation encountered.

**How can Catholic parishes create spaces for Millennials (those born between 1981 and 1996) and those in Generation Z (those born between 1997 and 2012)?**

### Exploring the Issue

Catholic Leadership Institute conducted extensive research on how parishes can better attract and retain young adults, developing an in-depth white paper entitled **Reaching, Engaging, and Inspiring the Next Generation**. The research discovered these key themes:

- **Connection and Relationship Building** are high priorities for these generations, with loneliness and isolation identified as critical issues.
- **Technology and Relevance** key to connecting with younger generations who are more apt to engage with institutions that speak to them through social media.
- **Sacramental Accessibility and Participation** are challenging for these groups, especially new mothers and fathers.
- **Mission-Driven Approach and Purpose** are attractive to both Millennials and Gen Z since they are drawn to purposeful and impactful experiences.
- **Life Transitions** are common in younger generations: Millennials are moving, marrying, and having children while Gen Z is experiencing some of their most formative years, creating opportunities for connection with the Church.
- **Leadership** is a source of both interest and conflict for Millennials and Gen Z, who are generally less inclined to take on formal leadership roles.
- **Outlook of Geographic Parish Connections** is the final theme, with many young adults engaging in “parish hopping” and “parish shopping” to find communities that better fit their schedules, preferences, or spiritual needs.



Based on research findings by Catholic Leadership Institute, the following are five essential strategies for pastors and parish leaders to consider as they strive to welcome and better integrate young adults into their communities.

## 1. Reach and Welcome the Next Generation



### ☐ Create a Culture of Discipleship

- Help active parishioners feel comfortable sharing their faith with others.
  - Provide workshops on evangelization. Practice sharing faith stories in a natural, compelling way.
  - Discuss how to invite young people to church, start faith conversations, and answer common questions about Catholicism (apologetics) and the parish.
  - Create small, mission-oriented groups that focus on prayer, discipleship, and action, so they feel equipped to share the Gospel Message and extend invitations throughout their community, family, and work life.
  - Utilize programs that offer parish missionary discipleship training and formation.
  - Have a formal commissioning or blessing for missionary disciples at Mass.
- Encourage and provide resources for spiritual direction to help parishioners stay focused on their evangelizing mission.

### ☐ Ensure an Accessible Parish Website

- Optimize the website for easy access to essential information.
- Minimize the number of clicks required to find Mass and Confession times, ensuring a user-friendly experience.

### ☐ Be Available and Flexible

- Keep church doors open for prayer beyond regular hours and increase the visibility of lay Catholic presence outside the church premises to enhance accessibility and inclusivity.
- Adapt ministry meeting times and technology to allow for different schedules and last-minute participation.

### ☐ Implement a Standard Welcome Process

- Communicate with young adults who are not registered parishioners, but who may be participating in liturgies at least once a month. Look for ways to remain connected to them beyond Sunday Mass.
- Create a clear welcome process for young newcomers.
  - For example, when a younger Catholic attends Mass at the parish for the first time:
    - Have the pastor and/or a parishioner extend a personal welcome.
    - Offer a personal invitation to join the parish community in some way outside of Mass, preferably a social opportunity.

### ☐ Create a Young Core of Hospitality Networkers

- Recruit and train a group of young adults on effective hospitality so they feel equipped to extend personal invitations during and beyond weekend liturgies.

### ☐ **Connect the Community Virtually**

- Utilize virtual community-building tools to foster connections and engagement among younger generations.
  - Establish an online platform, such as a dedicated GroupMe chat, to help facilitate interaction and create a sense of community and belonging.

### ☐ **Leverage Social Media**

- Prioritize intentional, high-quality social media content for parish communication and engagement. Don't spread resources or messaging too thin trying to be active across every platform.
- All virtual communication should drive toward personal follow-ups such as retreats, discernment programs, or one-on-one conversations.
  - A dedicated staff member should monitor growth in engagement and relationship-building on these platforms.



## **2. Enable the Next Generation**

### ☐ **Encourage Lay Missionary Discipleship**

- Invite young generations to participate, so that they can encounter Jesus personally and then share the experience with their peers in an authentic and relatable way.

### ☐ **Prioritize Young Adults and Young Families in all parts of the Church.**

- Instead of separate young adult only ministries, include younger generations and families in all working elements in all working elements of parishes and in the life of the Church.
- To keep this at the forefront of everyone's mind, reflected beyond formal ministries and Mass time changes, consider adjusting budget, resources, messaging, and support.

### ☐ **Be Excellent in Each Encounter**

- Celebrate well-prepared liturgies, embrace diverse ministry approaches, and meet individuals where they are. Younger generations value authenticity, inclusivity, and intentionality, so it is imperative the Church creates an environment that resonates deeply.

### ☐ **Hand Over the Steering Wheel**

- Millennials and those in Gen Z value being included 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.
  - Assemble focus groups with young adults to discuss decisions related to parish activities and programs on a regular basis.
- Encourage greater participation and leadership from younger members of a parish to foster a more dynamic and inclusive parish community.
  - Involve Young Leaders in Parish and/or Finance Councils
    - Set goals for generational representation based on the median age of the local community and track years of service.
  - Re-evaluate Commitment Levels for young adults' volunteer leadership roles, ensuring that they accommodate their transient stage of life, by offering opportunities that are semester-long, annually renewed, or shorter-term.



### ☐ **Promote Transparency with Key Metrics**

- Define and share the 3-5 most important parish success metrics, realizing this is something younger generations value.
  - Track and communicate progress to build trust and engagement.

### ☐ **Fullness of Life vs. Don't Sin**

- Emphasize the joy and abundance of living a full and meaningful life rather than merely avoiding wrongdoing.
  - Motivate younger generations to join your community with positive, life-affirming messages that encourage personal growth and fulfillment.

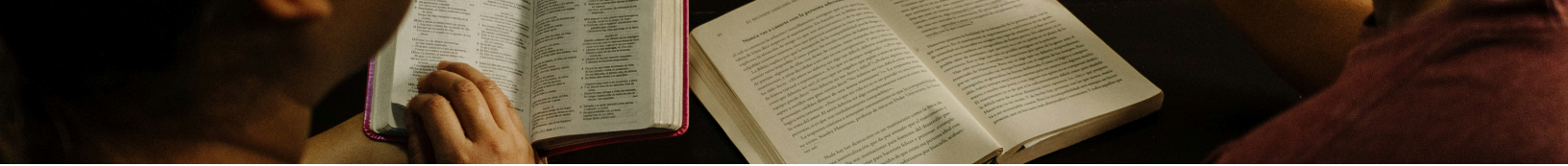


"Recently, we hosted a Catholic Date Night for married and engaged couples. It was a lovely evening with a speaker, but the real magic happened when we seated people on how long they'd been married. One table of young married couples hit it off, started a group chat called 'Table 7,' and now they meet monthly. They rotate parishes, attend Mass together, and go out afterward. They've built a little community from one event. That's the ripple effect."

**Maggie Riggins,**  
**Executive Director of Evangelization and Formation,**  
**Diocese of Allentown**







### 3. Involve the Next Generation

#### ☐ Shift Focus

- Shift from merely sustaining the parish 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.
- Use these social ministries as opportunities to welcome and engage young people who are looking for ways to give back to their community.
  - Encourage parishioners to invite young adults in their lives to participate in parish ministries that serve the poor, visit the sick, or support crisis pregnancy centers.
  - Be intentional about “branding” social outreach programs with signage, T-shirts, etc.,
    - This way, people in the community – including other young adults – will know they are ministries of the parish and might want to know more.
    - In addition, when young adults wear apparel with the parish name and ministry outside of the activity, other young adults may ask them about it, providing opportunities for evangelization.

#### ☐ Enable Connections

- Connect young Catholics to a small faith community of peers in a similar stage of life to cultivate a sense of belonging and facilitate authentic relationships. These kinds of intentional communities allow people to feel connected before committing to a larger community of faith.
- Make the parish a place to gather for casual fellowship outside of liturgical or ministerial events and/or create opportunities to be spiritually fed as a community beyond the parish itself, such as Bible studies at a local coffee shop or discipleship meals in someone’s home.

#### ☐ Emphasize Relationship Before Rules

- Help younger Catholics connect to the person of Jesus and learn about God’s love and mercy before asking them to conform to Church doctrine.
  - Offer opportunities that allow them to discover God’s wonderful plan for their life, and more importantly, God’s love for them personally.
  - Host workshops on identity, charisms, talents, and leadership potential.



## 4. Equip the Next Generation

- ☐ **Offer Sacramental Times for Working Professionals**
  - Provide sacraments outside typical work hours to accommodate busy schedules.
    - Offer confession on a weeknight after work.
    - Offer weeknight and/or noon Masses during the week for young working professionals.
- ☐ **Ease Burdens**
  - Create a smooth registration process with limited paperwork for individuals who attend sacramental preparation or engage in faith formation opportunities.
  - Offer a childcare option for adult-focused parish events and ministries.
  - Engage a group of grandparents or would-be grandparents to serve as volunteers.
- ☐ **Shift Assumptions and Expectations**
  - Redefine what it means to be an active parishioner.
    - Adapt expectations for those who may have greater outside time commitments than those who are later in their career or family situation. Be clear that being active is more about the quality of the time and effort the young person puts into parish life, rather than the quantity.
  - Minister to an individual before assessing his or her readiness for mission.
    - Prioritize relationships.
    - Seek out barriers and/or challenges to a young person's parish participation, and work together to develop solutions.
- ☐ **Avoid gatekeeping in ministries.**
  - Be open to welcoming young adults who are interested and willing to share their time and talents rather than setting rigid expectations about who can or cannot participate in certain ministries.
  - Focus on experiences rather than membership.
    - Refrain from pressuring young people to formalize parish membership.



### Did you know?

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 and rules that can be challenging to navigate.



## 5. Inspire the Next Generation



### ☐ Reframe Vocational Awareness

- Frame vocational discernment 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.

### ☐ Prioritize Healing First

- Provide opportunities for young people to pursue healing in both individual and group settings, maintaining a keen awareness of the various levels of trauma, pain, and burdens young people face today.
  - Connect young people to healing ministries and individuals who share testimonies of their own healing journeys. Offer grief support, healing retreats, addiction support, and infant loss Masses to support individuals during difficult times.

### ☐ Implement Peer Mentorship

- Invite young people to discern their vocation alongside a mentor, 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.

### ☐ Use Encounters with Jesus and with Priests and Religious communities, which are foundational to vocational discernment.

- Invite young people to mission-oriented experiences rather than asking them to join a particular parish, traditional club, or ministry.
  - Service projects - such as 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.

### ☐ Consider 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.

### ☐ Create Visible Signs of Vocation

- Make religious vocations feel accessible through the visibility of religious men and women in parish communities.
- Create opportunities for children and young adults to witness joyful, vibrant community life, making the idea of a religious vocation less abstract and more appealing, through a strong clerical and religious presence.



### ☐ **Emphasize Communal Vocation**

- Proceed and accompany discernment in a parish community through the Universal Call to Holiness.
  - Adopt a “Vocation Prayer” practice, where families take turns bringing a chalice or vocations cross home to pray for vocations.
  - Invite priests or religious into family homes to build relationships, allowing young people to see their humanity and joy.

### ☐ **Lean Into the Influence of the Domestic Church**

- Offer children a path to prayer, communal life, and identity in Christ through vocational awareness in the family.
  - Encourage parents to pray and demonstrate awareness and openness to their children’s individual vocations.
  - Share meals and faith experiences to create meaningful connections and to normalize vocations within the family context.



## Measure to Manage

As a parish implements many of these suggestions, it’s important to measure progress to know what’s working well and what requires additional attention.

In some instances, success may be measured more by quality over quantity, so a parish should consider what metrics are most important in advance of implementing each new endeavor.

For example, a parish could measure:

1. The average age of those involved in the parish welcoming/hospitality ministry, and how many new young people engage with the process.
2. Involvement of young people in groups such as parish councils, finance councils, etc., by tracking the percentage of members and staff under 50 years of age so you understand whether the parish is receiving a variety of perspectives.
3. The number of young individuals involved in formal mentorship programs.
4. Attendance at evening and weekend sacraments and services to assess participation of young adults.
5. Participation in liturgical service (lector, eucharistic minister, etc.) at Mass by tracking the number of young adults in these roles.
6. Attendance at events, and retention, such as how many events a young person attends in a given amount of time.



## Conclusion

The efforts of the Church to reach, engage, and inspire the next generation require creativity and accompaniment in a new way. And yet, young people were made for this particular time in the Church's history, and God Himself has blessed them with unique gifts that are personal to them and needed now.

The tools and approaches outlined above can help Millennials and Gen Z become all that God calls them to be in the Church. At the same time, they will serve to strengthen engagement for parishioners of all ages.

With excitement and joy, we all can approach younger generations in ways that honor their place in the story of the Church, inspiring future generations.



For a deeper dive into this important topic, read the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation "Christus Vivit of the Holy Father Francis to Young People and to the Entire People of God."