

# **Radiate Christ: Become a Parish Who Accompanies Young People**

**By Tom East**



*Christus Vivit* provides vision and guidance for youth and young adults for their lives as missionary disciples. This article will explore the direction provided by this important document for parishes to transform ministries with youth and their families. Parishes are not directed to implement a particular strategy or to change the approach to a specific youth initiative. Instead, we are guided to change our relationship with the young people in our communities. Rather than seeing them as objects of ministry and participants in programs of formation, parishes are guided to see young people as God's beloved who are seeking truth and life.

Each young person's heart should thus be considered "holy ground", a bearer of seeds of divine life, before which we must "take off our shoes" in order to draw near and enter more deeply into the Mystery.

Pope Francis, *Christus Vivit*, 67.

Seeing the holiness of young people is recognizing that the task of evangelizing youth and forming them as young disciples is God's initiative. God has been completely in love with the young people in our communities from the moment of their conception. God began a conversation with these young people; our job is to pay attention to what God is doing, align ourselves with the Spirit, and walk with youth as they grow in discipleship. We are called to accompany them as they discern their response to God's plan for their life.

How is this different? It's all about stance. A typical story of youth ministry goes something like this: a youth minister has an experience of faith which leads to hearing a call and becoming a youth minister. She or he works to create programs where young people can experience faith and then tries to get youth to join in those programs. The parish community checks youth ministry off their list because they hired a youth minister. This process relies upon the personality of the ministry leader and the convergence between young people's interests and the programs that are created. In this model, ministry leaders have to initiate a relationship with a young person, help them trust, and sell them on joining a program that has a particular focus, personality and set of interests. We lose a lot of youth in the process, not necessarily because youth

aren't interested in faith or God, but because they don't relate to the leader's faith journey and the programs being offered.

The process suggested in the synod document is different. It all starts with listening. We are urged to listen to young people, to know them, and to respond in human, personal ways:

"All too often, there is a tendency to provide pre-packaged answers and ready-made solutions, without allowing young people's real questions to emerge and to face the challenges they pose. Listening makes possible an exchange of gifts in a context of empathy."

*Final Document for the Synod on Young People, the Faith, and Vocational Discernment, 8.*

### **Becoming a Parish Who Accompanies Young People**

We are also reminded that the whole community has a role in sharing faith with young disciples:

...community has an important role in the accompaniment of young people; it should feel collectively responsible for accepting, motivating, encouraging and challenging them.

Pope Francis, *Christus Vivit*, 243.

To live into this role, parishes should re-examine the way we minister with young people by recognizing that accompanying youth in faith is the primary way that youth grow in discipleship.

In such places...the person-to-person contact indispensable for passing on the message can happen, something whose place cannot be taken by any pastoral resource or strategy.

Pope Francis, *Christus Vivit*, 218.

### **Empowering Faith Companions**

This direction has important implications for parish communities. First, we need to be intentional in the ways that we support and empower all of those who walk with youth in faith. This begins with families.

The Synod insisted that "the family continues to be the principal point of reference for young people. Children appreciate the love and care of their parents, they give importance to family bonds, and they hope to succeed in forming a family when it is their time."

Pope Francis, *Christus Vivit*, 262.

Ministry with youth has been aware of the need to include parents and families more intentionally for the last thirty years. Unfortunately, much of the attention has been

focused on trying to get parents and families to come to things at the parish and do things at home and most importantly get their family to Mass. This approach begins with an assumption that families are evangelized and that parents know their job but just need to be encouraged or in the case of sacramental preparation, required to help them to do the tasks of parenting for faith. The work of the New Evangelization reminds us that the challenge in our United States context is not bringing the message of Christ to people who have never heard it, the challenge is helping people who have heard the message to know that it matters; the message is about them, it is a love story about a personal God who wants to be in their lives and with them in their everyday challenges. Youth ministry's connection to families is not about getting their support for the ministry and about getting them to do their job at home; it is about inspiring, evangelizing, and ministering to the families of youth.

In addition to parents, there are many other family connections for people who could be faith companions for youth including grandparents, aunts, uncles, and siblings. There are also people who have a sacramental relationship with young people such as godparents and confirmation sponsors. In many cases, these potential faith companions are just waiting for the permission and the starting point to enter the conversation of faith with the youth to whom they are related.

We should also consider all the other relationships in the parish where youth can experience faith companionship. These would include ministerial roles such as the pastor, and parish pastoral leaders, leaders in ministry with youth and young adults, catechists, teachers, and parish ministry leaders whose role touches young people. It could also include members of the parish community whose work and vocation puts them in contact with young people such as teachers, counselors, employers, health care workers, and others in the community. Peers also play an essential role in accompaniment. Their common base of experience lays a foundation for faith witness and companionship.

We can take a significant step in becoming a parish who accompanies youth by identifying and empowering all the faith companions in our community. What would it be like if everyone in the parish who has a connection to young people understood their role and felt equipped to pray for, provide care for, and witness faith to youth?

### **Transforming Ministries**

To implement this direction, we begin by looking at all the strategies, communities, and initiatives with youth in our community through the eyes of accompaniment. For many parishes, ministry with youth has been reduced to an emphasis on classroom-based sacramental preparation or faith formation, and event-based youth ministry. With so much focus on programs and events, relationships become incidental and ministry moves behind a podium. These efforts provide formation about the faith in the style of a

broadcast, but they often miss the one-to-one witness and accompaniment described in *Christus Vivit*.

Looking at youth communities and programs in new ways means transforming them to promote accompaniment relationships. For example, one parish is implementing the directive of accompaniment by transforming the process for preparation for Confirmation so that all youth are divided into groups of five to seven members with two faith mentors who accompany youth through the process of preparing to receive the grace of the sacrament.

Transforming our ministries also means focusing on helping youth grow in faith and discipleship. Because we love young people and we long for them to experience the embrace of Christ as disciples, we help them notice what God is doing and notice their choices to see the possibilities for their life and for their life in Christ. To keep the flame of faith alive, we need to minister in a way that is aligned with God's timing and purpose in growing in relationship with young people. Our generous God is always sending opportunities for encounter to young people. We are told to awaken youth to these encounters and consolidate these experiences to sustain discipleship. We are also warned – don't bore young people!

Sometimes, we allow our fears about how much youth know to dominate what we share and how we spend our time with young people.

...it happens that young people are helped to have a powerful experience of God, an encounter with Jesus that touched their hearts. But the only follow-up to this is a series of "formation" meetings featuring talks about doctrinal and moral issues, the evils of today's world, the Church, her social doctrine, chastity, marriage, birth control and so on. As a result, many young people get bored, they lose the fire of their encounter with Christ and the joy of following him; many give up and others become downcast or negative. Rather than being too concerned with communicating a great deal of doctrine, let us first try to awaken and consolidate the great experiences that sustain the Christian life.

Pope Francis, *Christus Vivit*, 212.

A second quality of our ministries is flexibility. Ministries transformed by accompaniment place the emphasis on the relationships, the encounters, and the witness of community. Structure is provided to the extent that it facilitates the dynamics of growing in faith together.

The young make us see the need for new styles and new strategies. For example, while adults often worry about having everything properly planned, with regular meetings and fixed times, most young people today have little interest in this kind of pastoral approach. Youth ministry needs to become more flexible:

inviting young people to events or occasions that provide an opportunity not only for learning, but also for conversing, celebrating, singing...

Pope Francis, *Christus Vivit*, 204.

Transformation is all about building mutual relationships in the parish. Relationships with peers, family, faith companions, and the whole faith community. These relationships are described in the Final Document for the Synod on Young People, the Faith, and Vocational Discernment:

Young Catholics are not merely on the receiving end of pastoral activity: they are living members of the one ecclesial body, baptized persons in whom the Spirit of the Lord is alive and active. They help to enrich what the Church is and not only what she does. They are her present and not only her future.

*Final Document for the Synod on Young People, the Faith, and Vocational Discernment*, 54.

Taking young people seriously now, means fully integrating them within parish life. We include them in ministries, in leadership, in service, in catechesis, and in our community life. We engage the young in our community and we strive to become communities who witness Christ's presence.

### **Conclusion: Radiate Christ**

Applying the direction of *Christus Vivit* to parishes begins with examining our relationship with the young people in our community. There are three movements for transformation and growth. Firstly, we look carefully at parish life as a whole to see how we are welcoming, including, and integrating youth throughout parish life. Secondly, we empower and equip all those who could accompany youth in faith. Thirdly, we transform all our ministry efforts with youth to promote relationships of accompaniment. These movements make us ready as a community to witness a living faith to the young in new and energized ways.

... (Young people) will be better integrated into communities that are open, living their faith, eager to radiate Christ, joyful, free, fraternal and committed. These communities can be settings where they feel that it is possible to cultivate precious relationships.

Pope Francis, *Christus Vivit*, 220.

What does it mean to be a parish that is "eager to radiate Christ"? This describes a community that has a fervency of faith to share. The community is eager to share the treasure of faith, which includes being intentional in sharing that faith with young people in our midst. These communities recognize that young people are making a choice with their lives about who to be with, how to spend their time, what to give their lives to. These communities long to be with young people in these choices and encourage the radical option of becoming missionary disciples of Jesus Christ. Standing

with youth in this life choice takes more than having them participate in a particular program or community. It's all about the relationship. Young people will see Christ radiated from communities who intentionally welcome youth, listen to them, include them, walk with them, and invite them to the adventure of discipleship.

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## **Appendix: Step by Step to Growing as a Parish Who Accompanies Youth**

1. Begin with the parish relationship with youth
  - a. Look at the engagement of youth in liturgy, community life, service
  - b. Look for involvement of youth in ministries, leadership and decision making
  - c. Look for the engagement of members of the parish community with young people
2. Assess territory for making connections
  - a. Consider all the potential faith companions for young people
    - i. Family connections: Parents / Aunts / Uncles / Grandparents / siblings
    - ii. Sacramental connections: Godparents / Sponsors
    - iii. Ministry connections: pastor, pastoral leaders, ministry leaders, catechists
    - iv. Community connections: teachers, counselors, community workers, employers
  - b. Work to provide formation, resources and coaching for faith companions to equip them to care for and witness faith with young people
3. Transform ministry efforts to support accompaniment
  - a. Strengthen current ministry efforts by creating space and building accompanying relationships
  - b. Eliminate some programs and strategies
  - c. Create new efforts paying particular attention to outreach