

Pastors' Perspectives on Accompanying Young People

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Dr. Charlotte McCorquodale, Principal Researcher, Ministry Training Source





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NFCYM
415 Michigan Avenue, N.E., Suite 40
Washington, D.C. 20017
202.636.3825
www.nfcym.org



Preface..... 4
Why is this study important? And why is it happening?..... 4

Introduction to the Study..... 6
Understanding the Pastors in the Study..... 6
Pastors Who Value and Invest in Accompanying Young People 6

Research Conclusions..... 7

Conclusion One: Pastors use two prevalent approaches to describe what it means to accompany youth and young adults. Both methods emphasize relational ministry, either through one-on-one engagement or community-building, aimed at fostering spiritual growth and a deeper connection with God 7

- Accompaniment View One: Reaching out to those in need of God’s love and mercy..... 7
- Accompaniment View Two: Creating an intentional, consistent community 8

Conclusion Two: Generally, there was consistency between the pastors’ views of accompaniment with young people and how they envision the practice of youth and young adult ministry with two subtle but important differences..... 9

- Vision of Ministry Consistent with Understanding of Accompaniment..... 9
- Outreach to Lost and Hurting Not Mentioned in Vision of Ministry 10
- Articulating Modern Understanding of Accompaniment with a More Conventional Vision and Model..... 11

Conclusion Three: The most significant factor shaping a pastor’s vision for accompanying youth and young adults is their own experience in ministry, followed by a working relationship with a youth or young adult ministry leader 12

Conclusion Four: Pastors demonstrated a deep awareness of the complex and interrelated challenges that young people and their families face in today’s world 13

- Entangled Relationship Between Sports and Faith 13
- Complex Interplay of Digital and Social Media Technologies..... 14
- Sexual and Gender Identity and Desire to Belong 15
- A Complex Dynamic of Faith Experiences..... 15

Conclusion Five: A broader discussion is needed among pastors and ministry leaders regarding the definitions and measurements of success in ministry, particularly within an accompaniment-focused approach..... 16

Conclusion Six: A shift in the vision and practice of ministry with youth and young adults was called in different ways by pastors 18

Conclusion Seven: Pastors shared that effective change in youth and young adult ministry involves addressing the mindset surrounding change and fostering shared ownership..... 19

Conclusion Eight: A shared perspective among pastors is that all are called to share their gifts as part of accompanying our young people; however, some pastors think that not all have the gifts to accompany youth directly..... 20

Conclusion Nine: The necessity of a proactive and relational approach in garnering support from pastors who might be less supportive or involved in youth and young adult ministry was recommended by pastors 21

Final Thoughts..... 23

What’s Next in the Accompaniment Project Research..... 23

Additional Study..... 24

Appendix Charts..... 25



Preface

BY DR. CHARLOTTE MCCORQUODALE,

Principal Researcher, Pastors' Perspectives on Accompanying Young People

Why is this study important? And why is it happening?

Pastors are the lynchpin to ongoing successful ministry with youth and/or young adults. Recently, this was confirmed by youth and young adult ministry leaders who made it clear that support, collaboration, and shared vision with their pastor positively impacted their ministry.[1] However, the lack of those things often led to a leader's transition and the end of the youth ministry program. One youth ministry leader interviewed offered an example:

"The main challenge is pastoral understanding. If you don't have a pastor who understands what ministry is and why it's important, it will be almost impossible for a parish to have a vibrant program. In a parish close by, their pastor doesn't care for youth ministry or see its value. Their youth minister gave plenty of notice that she would be leaving, and they still haven't hired a youth minister. It's been almost eight and a half months. And so, I'm seeing this program dying because there's no pastoral or parish understanding. So, I think a huge challenge for ministry is just that understanding between the two worlds."[2] Ministry leaders, despite feeling overworked, undervalued, and at times frustrated, continue to serve with a sense of joy when asked about their ministry with youth and young adults. They feel judged for having low numbers and having to justify their work if paid, yet they know what they do one-on-one is transforming the lives of the young people they accompany. Their resilience and dedication could be seen in their calls for change in how ministry is done, measured, viewed, and envisioned, and their passion was palpable in how they described all of it.

“No one understands the hours it takes. Others must understand that youth ministry is more demanding than one might think or than it looks. It is not just playing games with kids or taking them on trips. It is dealing with some real-life issues of things like depression and suicide, racism, gangs, and next-level bullying while trying to help parents who are overwhelmed by all of it. That is before you get to the rest of your job, which is running programs and anything else the church might have you do to justify your salary.”^[3] All of these leaders feel called to accompany individual youth and young adults in some way, and this was part of their vision, their practice, their measure of success, or the way they described their joy in ministry. At the same time, it is evident that this highly relational model and construct of ministry require different practices and mindsets versus programs focused on attracting large numbers of people. While a shift in practice and vision is being called for towards more of an accompaniment approach to ministry, many do not know how to implement it and convince others that this change is good and will shift the tide.

Due to the conclusion about pastors' critical role, as a thread throughout various questions and stories from ministry leaders, it was recommended that a similar research be conducted with pastors to obtain their view point on these issues.

Through the Accompaniment Project, NFCYM concluded that understanding the pastor's viewpoint is crucial, especially when it comes to creating a shift toward accompaniment practices and mindsets required by all those in parish leadership: pastors, ministry leaders, leadership entities, and the faith community. As a result, NFCYM has funded this qualitative Study on Pastors' Perspectives on Accompanying Youth and Young Adults as part of the Accompaniment Research Study.

As a researcher now and a former practitioner for more than 30 years, I am grateful for all those who help to advance our knowledge of how to better serve and minister to the young Church, especially by attending to those who so joyfully lead this effort on our behalf!

[1] McCorquodale, C., et al. (2024, February). A Study of Pastoral Leaders Serving Young Catholics: Examining Network Vulnerability Amidst a Web of Ministries, published. Ministry Training Source. p. 59.

[2] McCorquodale, C., et al. (2024, February). A Study of Pastoral Leaders Serving Young Catholics: Examining Network Vulnerability Amidst a Web of Ministries, published. Ministry Training Source. p. 60.

[3] McCorquodale, C., et al. (2024, February). A Study of Pastoral Leaders Serving Young Catholics: Examining Network Vulnerability Amidst a Web of Ministries, published. Ministry Training Source. p. 73. The third conclusion of the study found that “Pastors are incredibly integral to the Church's work with young people. And ministry leaders can feel helpless working with and talking to their pastors.”

Special Thank You to the Accompaniment Project Research Team Who Worked on the Pastor Study

Research Project Team Chair:

Dr. Patrick Donovan
Diocese of Bridgeport

Principal Researcher:

Dr. Charlotte McCorquodale
Ministry Training Source

Project Team Members:

Armando Cervantes
Diocese of Orange

Michal Horace
Archdiocese of Louisville

Dr. Chris Miller
Associate Member

Dr. Jodi Hunt
University of Dallas

Dr. Art Canales
Marian University

Cooky Perez-Eraci
Associate Member
Archdiocese of Chicago

Paul Jarzembowski
United States Conference of Catholic Bishops

Craig Gould
McGrath Institute

NFCYM Staff to Project Team:

Brigitte Burke
Senior Project Manager

Lesly Gonzalez-Barragan
Project Specialist

Introduction to the Study

This qualitative study sought to understand the pastor’s point of view on several critical topics related to accompanying youth and young adults. The research is part of a broader study with the NFCYM Accompaniment Project on how parishes can reimagine how they accompany young people as they encounter Christ and grow in discipleship.

Interview questions included asking pastors about their understanding of accompaniment, their vision of ministry with young people, how they see their role, the role of the ministry leader, and the role of the faith community. Their responses to those questions are linked closely to their responses to questions about the challenges youth and young adults face today and the challenges that ministry leaders and youth ministry are facing.

Other questions were a bit more challenging and included their insights on how change in ministry occurs and how to gain support from pastors who may not be as supportive of youth ministry as themselves. The most challenging question was how to measure success in these ministries with youth and young adults, especially as we move toward this more relational model of accompaniment.

Understanding the Pastors in the Study

Through this research, nineteen pastors were surveyed from throughout the United States. These pastors came from ten different dioceses, ranged in age from their twenties to their late seventies, and came from a range of ethnicities. They also included varying types of pastoral and parish experience and various levels of ministry experience with young people. Slightly over half of the sample (n=11) were part of the Accompaniment Project Pastors for comparison purposes. 63% of the sample was Caucasian, with a mix of other ethnicities making up the other 37%. While several attempts were made to include Hispanic and Latino pastors, none participated in the final research sample. The Accompaniment Project is seeking funding for an additional study focusing on Hispanic and Latino pastors in order to include their perspectives in the overall research study.

Pastors Who Value and Invest in Accompanying Young People

Simply put, the pastors in this study strongly supported ministry to youth and young adults. They understood and emphatically valued accompanying young people. Their levels of ministry support and involvement varied from direct ministry and empowering leadership to more indirect approaches. In every case, all of the pastors understood and could articulate the importance of accompanying youth and young adults in life and faith. Even if their parish did not have a youth or young adult ministry effort, they were eager to have one. Those who have a youth ministry program wanted to learn how to create more effective ministries. Youth and/or young adult ministry leaders whose pastors are not supportive of their ministry might wonder about the helpfulness of exploring a study on a group of pastors who are committed to supporting it. However, there is much to be learned from listening to these pastors. This Executive Summary synthesizes the conclusions drawn from listening to pastors who are allies to those in youth and young adult ministry. These allies address head-on how to work with their brother pastors who do not seem committed to youth ministry and, if everything fails, what to do next. To hear the pastors’ insights in greater detail, NFCYM provides a Supplemental Data Report on its website.

Supplemental Data Report: In addition to this report, there is a Supplemental Data Research Report for the Qualitative Study of Pastors’ Perspectives on Accompanying Young People. The Supplemental Report provides more detailed data than this Executive Summary and provides findings to support the study’s conclusions. It organizes findings by question and includes sample quotes (data points) from pastors to illustrate the results.

Research Conclusions

In this study, the analysis of the nineteen pastors' responses went beyond simply looking at answers to individual questions. The researchers, along with the Accompaniment Project Research Team, sought to derive conclusions that extended across multiple questions, thereby recognizing broader patterns. However, these findings are specific to the pastors involved in the study, and any conclusions must be considered in the context of other pastors who share similar values, commitments, and interests in working with young people. Therefore, the results are not necessarily universally applicable but are relevant to those in similar roles and with similar motivations.

CONCLUSION ONE:

Pastors use two prevalent approaches to describe what it means to accompany youth and young adults. Both methods emphasize relational ministry, either through one-on-one engagement or community-building, aimed at fostering spiritual growth and a deeper connection with God.

These two approaches can be summarized as follows, but each will be explained in greater detail below:

- 1. Reaching out to those in need of God's love and mercy:** This involves meeting young people where they are in their lives, listening to their concerns and experiences first, and then helping them encounter God through a trusting and personal relationship.
- 2. Creating an intentional, consistent community:** This focuses on building a stable and welcoming environment where young people feel a sense of belonging and security, which allows them to grow into who God is calling them to become.

Accompaniment View One: Reaching out to those in need of God's love and mercy

Pastors referenced their personal experiences of having been accompanied in similar circumstances, where they were lost or in need of guidance. This view of accompaniment is grounded in going where those who are in need are and finding them, listening with compassion and empathy, and focusing on helping young people who are hurting in so many ways. Key elements of this view include:

- 1. Outreach to the Wounded and Hurting:** The first understanding of accompaniment is drawn from gospel stories such as *The Road to Emmaus*, *the Good Shepherd*, and *Let the Children Come to Me*. These biblical narratives emphasize reaching out to young people in their time of need by meeting them where they are or finding those that are lost, then listening to them and walking alongside them as they journey through struggles, grief, or feelings of isolation.
- 2. Helping Youth Encounter God's Mercy and Love:** The second part of the accompaniment process involves building a relationship with young people that ultimately helps them experience God's mercy and love. After first meeting them where they are and listening to their needs, the focus shifts to guiding them toward a deeper encounter with the Lord.

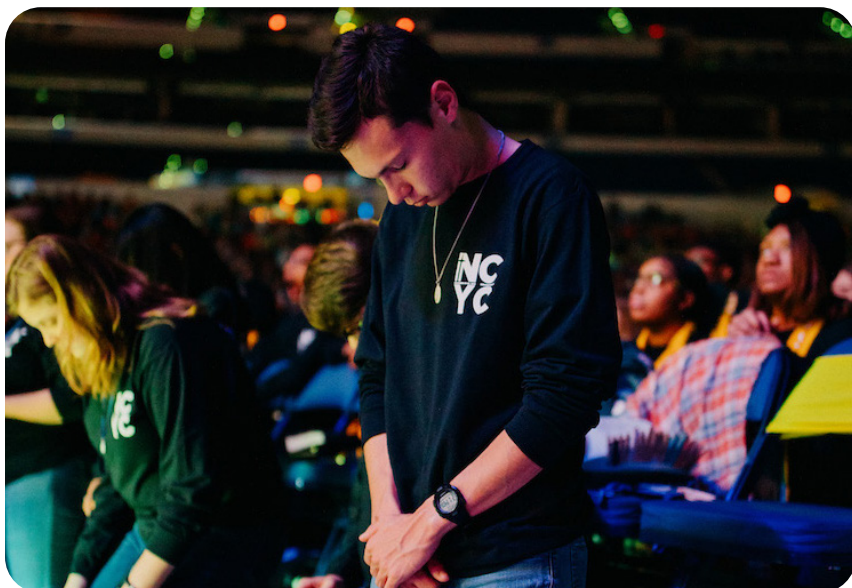
*“Setting up shop where they are, and then walking with them as they walk,
even in their walking away.”*

**Accompaniment View Two:
Creating an intentional, consistent community**

For another group of pastors, the primary emphasis of **accompaniment** centered around creating a sense of **belonging** within an accepting and intentional community. This understanding highlights the importance of young people feeling “at home” within their faith community. Key elements of this view include:

1. **Belonging to an Accepting Community:** These pastors focused on building a space where young people are welcomed and accepted just as they are. This intentional community becomes a safe and consistent environment that nurtures a sense of belonging, providing young people with the stability and security to explore their faith.
2. **Transformation and Growth in Faith:** Within this supportive environment, pastors envision that, over time, young people will grow in their faith, being gradually transformed into the individuals God is calling them to be. The process is seen as one of long-term accompaniment, where consistent relationships and the feeling of being at home play a crucial role in their spiritual development.

The imagery of “feeling at home” or “being at home” frequently arose in pastors’ descriptions, symbolizing a place where young people can truly be themselves and feel embraced by both their community as well as God. This approach contrasts slightly from the first, as it focuses more on community-based accompaniment rather than individual or one-on-one guidance, but both are integral to the larger understanding of walking with young people in their faith journeys.



“The church often wants young people, but we want them how we want them, where we want them, and when we want them. And so that image of Jesus saying, no, no, suffer the little children and let them come to me, not just in a particular place, but overall.”

CONCLUSION TWO:

Generally, there was consistency between the pastors' views of accompaniment with young people and how they envision the practice of youth and young adult ministry with two subtle but important differences.

Vision of Ministry Consistent with Understanding of Accompaniment

Many pastors' visions for ministry incorporated elements of their understanding of **accompaniment**, which included building trusting relationships, helping young people encounter Christ, fostering a loving and accepting community, and sending them forth as missionary disciples in service. Among these elements, the most frequently mentioned vision was helping youth and young adults develop a **personal relationship with Christ**. Closely following this was the goal of creating a place where young people could experience **belonging, acceptance, and a sense of being "at home"**.

This focus on creating a "home" environment, with an emphasis on a familial atmosphere, was particularly highlighted by African-American, Pacific Islander, and Biracial pastors. These pastors often drew upon their own formative experiences of youth ministry or the influence of family, which gave them a strong sense of community and belonging within their parish. For these pastors, having grown up with the experience of being part of a faith community that felt like home shaped their vision of ministry. They saw the Church not only as a spiritual refuge, but as an extension of the family, where young people could feel supported, loved, and guided in their journey of faith. This understanding highlights how personal and cultural backgrounds, including the role of family and community, deeply influence pastoral visions for youth ministry.



"My vision is that they will see Jesus Christ as their best friend, that they will know that He sees them, He knows them, He loves them, and that they belong here, that they belong in the church."

"Well, so my vision for the youth is that the church is home..."





**Outreach to Lost and Hurting
Not Mentioned in Vision of Ministry**

One of the two differences observed relates to how pastors articulated their vision for ministry versus their understanding of accompaniment. Initially, many pastors passionately described accompaniment as **reaching out** to those who are hurting, wounded, lost, and alone—actively going to meet young people where they are. However, this aspect of **going out to those in need** was not as strongly emphasized in their visions for ministry.

Instead, when this idea of accompaniment appeared in ministry visions, it was often framed as creating a **safe space at the parish** for teens to come to, rather than pastors or ministry leaders actively going out to meet them where they are. This shift from a more outward, proactive approach to a more inward, parish-centered approach reflects a subtle but important difference that warrants further study between how pastors understand accompaniment in theory and how they envision its practice in ministry.

The distinction suggests that while the desire to reach out to struggling or isolated young people is strong in a conceptual understanding of accompaniment, the practical application within ministry might lean more toward creating a welcoming environment within the church.



“I wanted to create an environment where teens and young people feel accepted, engaged, active, known, and if they’re in trouble, they could come to us. They need to know more about faith. I think catechesis is important, but first, they have to have a sense of belonging and that you care. I’m not the most energetic, outgoing, extroverted person. I think being authentic, being with the teens, and letting them know that I cared meant a lot to them.”



Articulating a Modern Understanding of Accompaniment with a More Conventional Vision and Model

The second subtle difference identified involves a subset of pastors who, despite articulating an understanding of accompaniment in which all young people are accompanied, often reverted to more conventional youth group models and young adult ministry. This difference highlights a tension between innovative approaches to ministry and the continued use of conventional methods, reflecting a broader challenge in adapting practices of accompaniment while continuing to have the support of these pastors. This group described their vision in terms of:

- 1. Age-Specific Programming:** Their approach focused on structured, age-specific groups and programming, which included elements such as formation, social justice, social activities, and fellowship. This conventional model reflects a reliance on established methods of engaging youth and young adults.
- 2. Reversion to Familiar Models:** When faced with uncertainties about how to effectively engage with young people, these pastors defaulted to their past experiences with conventional youth ministry models. This suggests a comfort with familiar structures and activities, even if they might not fully align with contemporary understandings of accompaniment.
- 3. Common Goal of Engagement of Youth:** Despite the reliance on conventional models, the underlying goal for these pastors remains consistent and faith-filled: to involve young people in meaningful activities related to faith and the church. They aim to foster engagement through various forms of programming that include spiritual formation, service, and community involvement.



“We want them to have time to have a good group of friends who will be involved in healthy activities and opportunities to serve.”



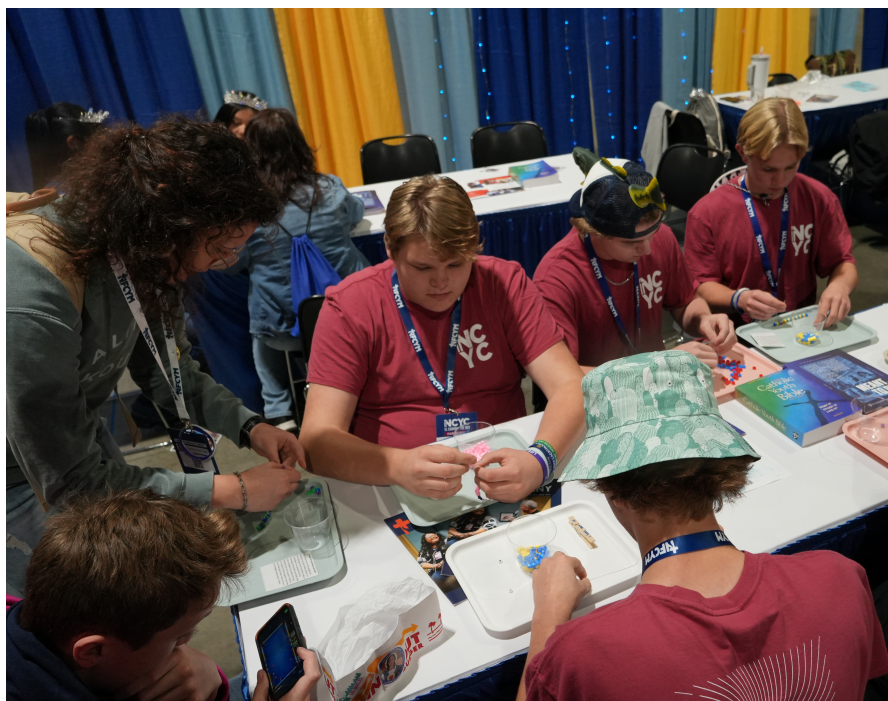
“...a lot of that stems from my experience as a teen in my youth ministry program.”

“I met my youth minister on the first day, and I felt tremendous relief because this was someone I learned a lot about what successful youth ministry looks like.”

CONCLUSION THREE:

The most significant factor shaping a pastor’s vision for accompanying youth and young adults is their own experience in ministry, followed by a working relationship with a youth or young adult ministry leader.

Over half of the pastors in the study were products of CYO, youth ministry, or campus ministry, and these experiences significantly shaped their vision. These personal experiences serve as a foundation for pastors’ approaches, helping them develop a deeper understanding of how to connect with and guide young people. For some pastors, their CYO or youth ministry experiences provided a model they wanted to recreate for their communities’ youth and young adults. For others, it drives their passion to have and actively support ministry to youth and young adults in their parishes. The second influence shared by pastors were those who had been mentored or worked closely with ministry leaders in youth or young adult ministry and were often formed and influenced by these relationships, impacting how they now envision and carry out their ministry with youth and young adults.



CONCLUSION FOUR:

Pastors demonstrated a deep awareness of the complex and interrelated challenges that young people and their families face in today's world.

Overall, this conclusion underscores the pastors' attentiveness to the difficulties youth encounter today, and how their awareness informs their ministry strategies, with a focus on balance and thoughtful engagement. Central elements of their awareness included:

- 1. Challenges and Their Impacts:** Pastors recognized the pervasive influence of popular culture on young people's lives, along with the challenges this creates. However, they described the relationship between culture and youth or young adults not as a simple cause-and-effect dynamic but as a more intricate, push-pull interaction. This suggests that cultural forces and individual behaviors influence each other in complex ways.
- 2. Understanding Accompaniment and Addressing Challenges:** While there isn't a direct connection between pastors' understanding of accompaniment and the specific challenges youth and young adults face, this understanding likely influences their motivation to reach out. The pastors' desire to help young people who are hurting, or create a space for belonging and acceptance may be partially shaped by their awareness of these challenges.
- 3. Balanced View of Popular Culture's Influence:** Pastors were careful not to demonize elements like sports or technology. Instead, they called for balance, recognizing that while these can present challenges, they are not inherently harmful. This nuanced approach reflects a reasonable and thoughtful way of engaging with the modern realities that youth face.

“...sports is more important right now. Trying to get the parents to fit in faith along with everything else is a major challenge. I just see the secular culture has way more power now than it did.”

Entangled Relationship Between Sports and Faith

One of the top challenges highlighted by pastors was the **entangled relationship between sports and faith**. These observations underscore the challenges pastors face in integrating faith with the contemporary lifestyle of young people, where sports and other extracurricular activities often take precedence. They also highlight concerns about the role of parental influence in maintaining a balanced approach to faith and everyday life. This challenge can be summarized in these two ways:

- 1. Impact on Values and Priorities:** Pastors noted that sports often have a significant influence on young people's values and decision-making, particularly regarding how they allocate their time and resources. The prioritization of sports activities can sometimes overshadow faith-related commitments, leading to a conflict between secular and spiritual priorities.
- 2. Lack of Faith Relevance in Families:** Pastors observed that many families struggle to maintain the relevance of faith in their daily lives. They felt that parents often do not make faith a central priority, which can lead to a lack of spiritual engagement and formation for their children.



“I think one of the big things is being overwhelmed and overpowered, but overpowered by life. There’s just everything. We live in a 24-hour news cycle, so everything is at our fingertips. Everything is urgent. Everything is there. And, that weighs on people, especially on young adults and young people who don’t necessarily have the bandwidth to process everything all the time.”

Complex Interplay of Digital and Social Media Technologies

The second major challenge identified by almost every pastor in some manner involves the **complex interplay of digital and social media technologies** with the emerging challenges faced by youth and young adults. These challenges reflect how digital and social media environments are deeply affecting young people’s lives, influencing their social interactions, mental health, and overall well-being. Pastors’ concerns highlight the need for addressing and recognizing the complex ways in which technology intersects with the lives of young people. Many pastors emphasized that problems related to technology and mental health are intertwined and not easily separated. The pervasive presence of digital media was linked by the pastors to a range of challenges, including:

- **Anxiety:** The constant connectivity and pressure to maintain an online presence can increase stress and anxiety.
- **Social Skills:** Technology use may impair the development of face-to-face social skills and contribute to feelings of isolation.
- **Overdrive and Overwhelm:** The fast-paced nature of digital interactions can lead to burnout and a sense of being overwhelmed.
- **Addiction to Phones:** There is concern about young people’s dependence on their phones, which can impact their daily lives and relationships.
- **Exposure to Pornography:** Early and often unfiltered access to pornography is a significant concern.
- **Bullying:** Cyberbullying and negative online interactions contribute to emotional distress and mental health issues.

“There’s a lot of anxiety among younger people. How much time are they spending on screens, video games, and chat rooms? There’s that loss of interconnectedness with people.”

“

“...a high percentage of young people have a friend who’s gay or transgender. And, if you reject their friend, you’re rejecting them.”

“

“... the kids who come to us today are coming with different questions or different needs. They feel an attraction to God, but they are not 100% sure if they can trust that there is one.”



Sexual and Gender Identity and Desire to Belong

About one-fourth of the pastors highlighted struggles faced by youth and young adults concerning their sexual and gender identities. These challenges include the Church’s acceptance of LGBTQ+ individuals and the difficulties young people encounter in reconciling their identities with their faith community.

One pastor observed that, within his parish, the issue wasn’t primarily about specific programming, but rather about a deeper desire to belong. This suggests that for some young adults, the challenge lies in finding a sense of acceptance and inclusion within the Church, rather than in the availability of targeted programs or activities. These insights underscore additional dimensions of the challenges young people face, emphasizing the need for a supportive and inclusive environment that addresses both identity concerns and the broader need for belonging within the faith community.

A Complex Dynamic of Faith Experiences

A smaller group of pastors highlighted the **complex dynamic of faith experiences** among youth and young adults as an additional challenge. They identified two main aspects:

- 1. Questioning Faith:** Many young people are grappling with doubts about the existence of God and the relevance of faith in their lives, which can contribute to a broader decline in faith-related activities and engagement.
- 2. Yearning for Faith:** Simultaneously, pastors saw some young people are deeply seeking answers to profound spiritual questions and yearning for a meaningful faith experience. This desire for understanding and connection with faith presents an opportunity for ministry to address these deep-seated needs.

CONCLUSION FIVE:

A broader discussion is needed among pastors and ministry leaders regarding the definitions and measurements of success in ministry, particularly within an accompaniment-focused approach.

The discussion around measuring success underscores a deeper conversation about what constitutes meaningful outcomes in ministry with youth and or young adults. The pastors’ responses regarding measuring success in ministry revealed a notable struggle and diversity of opinions, indicating that this is a particularly challenging area. Despite the various approaches and philosophies about measuring success, the issue of numbers kept resurfacing in discussions. This suggests that, even among those who prefer not to use numerical metrics, the influence of numbers on ministry evaluation remains significant.

The wide range of responses about measuring success reflects the complexity and difficulty pastors face in this area. The diversity of opinions highlights that there is no one-size-fits-all approach and underscores the need for a more nuanced exploration of what success means in ministry. Given the evident struggle and varied responses, it is recommended that pastors and ministry leaders engage in a more in-depth conversation about success measurement. This could involve asking different questions to uncover the nuances of the issue, such as the impact of paid versus volunteer ministry leaders on how success is perceived and evaluated. Elements of the discussion are summarized here:

- 1. Diverse Views on Measuring Success:** Pastors had varied responses about how to measure success in ministry. Some preferred not to use numerical metrics, believing that their role is to plant seeds and trust that God will bring about growth in time. Some preferred to use numbers, in addition to other measures.
- 2. Encounter and Conversion Metrics:** Others measured success through tangible outcomes, such as the encounters and conversions they witnessed or heard about among young people. This practical approach focuses on the observable results of ministry efforts.
- 3. Resistance to Numerical Metrics:** Approximately a quarter of the pastors were adamant about not using numbers as a measure of success. They felt that relying on numerical data was contrary to their understanding of ministry, which emphasizes spiritual growth and divine influence over quantifiable results.





Below are some of their reflections on this topic:

"I don't measure success. The way I look at ministry, all ministry, is my job is to plant seeds, and it's God's job to reap however He chooses."

"Not numbers. It can't be numbers for me. It's not about quantity. What are the seeds that you may have planted? "

"Well, I look at numbers, certainly the confirmation kids, 100, and working that up. But I would like to see ongoing programs instead of 5 to 10 a week, 10 to 15, and then 15 to 20 with the recognition [that] it's hard for these kids to get here, but I want to increase the number. So numbers count, but also the quality."

"The first measure is to be diligent in prayerful discernment about what you want as a vision, then put forth a good effort. I stopped counting a long time ago, but the success of something has little to do with it....but the second year, the numbers were low again, I don't know. I don't count the numbers as a sign of success. But eventually, you have to, when you step back and evaluate, it is a factor. It's like, is there something we could do that might be more fruitful than this versus you staying the line?"

"Yes, a little hard to measure. Well, I can tell that's happening because I know disciples are being grown."

"We shudder to think about how much money is set aside per soul, right? How much money per se? You don't want to think about that. No one likes that conversation. As a pastor, I feel like I have a responsibility to my staff to see them grow to their potential and what might be good for my particular parish. I need to be able to see the bigger picture of what the church's needs are."

CONCLUSION SIX:

A shift in the vision and practice of ministry with youth and young adults was called for in different ways by pastors.

A prominent theme that arose is the need to adapt to changing times. This conclusion underscores the importance of re-evaluating and updating ministry practices to stay relevant and effective in engaging with today's youth and young adults. Pastors acknowledge that current approaches to ministry are not effectively reaching the current generation of youth and young adults. There is a consensus that change is necessary to better align with contemporary needs and realities.

More experienced pastors noted that as youth culture evolves, so too must ministry visions, goals, and methods. This adaptation is seen as crucial for maintaining relevance and effectiveness. For some pastors, the acceptance of the need for change and the process of adapting their practices took time. The transition from conventional methods to new approaches can be challenging, reflecting a broader shift in mindset and strategy.



“

“I became pastor of a parish, so I had no full-time associates, so I ended up the youth minister again.

I did exactly what I had always done.

But I’ll tell you, in that decade, everybody else changed. And I could tell that my youth group was not mainstream anymore.

I could see other parishes doing it differently and having different goals.

Even doing the same old thing wasn’t getting the same results.”

CONCLUSION SEVEN:

Pastors shared that effective change in youth and young adult ministry involves addressing the mindset surrounding change and fostering shared ownership.

Successful transformation in youth and young adult ministry requires not only strategic adjustments, but also a shift in collective attitudes toward change. Clearly, pastors who had effectively experienced a change in ministry understood the importance of developing ownership and buy-in through planning with a diverse team that listens to God and the community. Some pastors stressed the importance of grass-roots leadership and not building the ministry around themselves, in case they moved on. According to the pastors surveyed, ministry teams should collaborate, evaluate, and respond with additional changes as needed. Three highlights stood out from the pastors' comments:

- 1. Mindset as an Obstacle:** A significant challenge identified by the pastors is the prevailing mindset of resistance to change, often encapsulated by the phrase "We've always done it this way". This mindset can impede progress and make it difficult to implement new approaches.
- 2. Building Shared Ownership:** For change to be effective and lasting, it is crucial to build shared ownership among ministry leaders and stakeholders. This involves engaging people in the change process and fostering a collective commitment to new methods and visions.
- 3. Overcoming Resistance:** Addressing and overcoming resistance to change is essential. Pastors recognized that changing deeply ingrained practices and attitudes requires thoughtful effort and the involvement of all those affected by the changes.

Some of their reflections were as follows:

"Change is not something that is very simple. Change is sometimes difficult. I think for me, it's all to do with mindset. We also have to change our mindset that the way we used to do things in the church 20 to 30 years ago cannot be the same way. Things are changing. The environment is changing, and the culture is changing. The way the youth understand those things is changing. I think we also have to change our mindset and probably find new ways of addressing new problems, new challenges."

"I think a core group to guide the project, our hope is maybe four or five or six, that all have to have a similar passion and a similar commitment, or it's going to be another program that just goes by the wayside, as soon as the one person with passion leaves or gets exhausted. There just has to be a movement. By that, I mean within the body of Christ that is not a mandate, so to speak, a movement, not a mandate. So success is grassroots."

"So it's just one of those things where I think we constantly have to reevaluate ourselves, and we can't get complacent."



“And it’s again getting people to begin to realize and understand that the Christian faith is called to be an active faith and one that is lived out each day and one where we are called to be servants, in other words, embracing our Baptism. It’s getting people to understand what that baptismal vocation is, and that is the primary vocation of our lives... we are to be missionary disciples, we don’t become disciples of ourselves. We become disciples to other people. We become missionaries to other people.”

CONCLUSION EIGHT:

A shared perspective among pastors is that all are called to share their gifts as part of accompanying our young people; however, some pastors think that not all have the gifts to accompany youth directly.

All the pastors underscored the importance of both recognizing individual gifts and reinforcing the fundamental call to discipleship as key components in building effective ministry with youth and young adults. Pastors agreed that all ministry members are called to share their gifts and act as missionary disciples, including accompanying young people directly in their faith journey.

Despite this universal call, some pastors felt that not everyone possesses the specific gifts required to effectively accompany youth directly. This acknowledgment points to the need for recognizing and nurturing individual strengths and roles within the ministry. To foster a culture of accompaniment, pastors highlighted the importance of helping faith communities understand and embrace the primary call of baptism. This call involves being disciples of Christ and actively sharing that faith with others. Emphasizing this foundational aspect can encourage more parish members to engage in accompanying young people.

“Maybe some of them are, maybe more than not, called to accompany young people if we’re going to, in fact, bring them all back to the Church.”



CONCLUSION NINE:

The necessity of a proactive and relational approach in garnering support from pastors who might be less supportive or involved in youth and young adult ministry was recommended by pastors.

A few pastors admitted they know that they and their brother pastors can either be a source of success or an obstacle for ministry, and understand that engaging pastors is critical for the success of the overall ministry. They shared strategies which highlight the importance of relational and persistent efforts in strengthening support and collaboration within the broader ministry context. They suggested the following strategies:

- 1. Personal Invitation and Relationship Building:** Engaging with pastors on a personal level and establishing meaningful relationships can bridge gaps in support.
- 2. Assumptions and Communication:** Clear and effective communication is crucial. Avoiding assumptions about awareness or interest and actively listening to other pastors can help address potential barriers. Many said not to assume the pastors always know what is happening or that they do not want to come to an event. One part of being pastoral is assuming the positive instead of the negative and helping the person improve.
- 3. Persistence:** Ongoing engagement and persistence are essential. Continual effort in relationship-building and communication can foster a more supportive and collaborative environment for youth and young adult ministry.



Reflections gathered on this topic included the following:

“So you can invite and encourage him and let him know we want him there, the invitation, which just seems silly, but is important. Say to him, Father you don’t have to give a talk, we just want you to come have pizza with us and spend time with us.”

“I’m going to use the term fundamental attribution error. I don’t know if you have ever heard that, but basically, we assume a negative intention in others and positive intentions in ourselves. So when somebody’s driving down the road, and they cut you off, you’re like, you jerk. When you cut somebody off, you’re like, whoops, sorry, or, I need to be there. So, assume the best in your pastor and that he is trying to do the best. He just needs help and guidance, or he’s been wounded or scared or knows somebody’s been wounded, dealing with young people or whatever, and is therefore afraid to engage, you know? And so, how do you help him become the best version of himself possible?”

“Don’t let someone stop you from sharing the gospel with young people. My advice may be a little unorthodox as a pastor, but sometimes, you have to use the early Church as a model. Sometimes, you have to go underground because your focus is on your job, which is the salvation of souls. And if that’s where your heart is, don’t allow the pastor to be an obstacle to engaging and saving souls. He has to answer for that. Don’t place that upon yourself. And so if, you know, there is an energy, there is fertile soil, cultivate it, even if that means cultivating it out, you know, outside of, outside of the church campus.”

“I just think over all these years, one of the major successes has been giving young people a space...that they could own, that they could take ownership of. I think about specifically our building. That was the youth ministry house. There was a fight in the parish because the food pantry was in there at one point, and all this happened. And the pastor kicked everybody out and said, this is for the youth. What then happened to the youth house was when a new pastor came, subsequent groups took ownership of that space, and then a major hit in our ministry was allowed to fall apart. So now young people don’t have space. The parish pastor let the space fall apart. I think that becomes a major obstacle at the same time if we’re going to be honest, the pastor can and is almost always either the greatest advocate for success or the greatest obstacle.”

Final Thoughts...

NFCYM and the fields of Catholic Youth and Young Adult Ministry are grateful for the many insights gained from these pastors who value and are invested in accompanying the young Church and all pastors like them who so faithfully serve the young Church. As the principal researcher, I would highlight a few things to conclude our shared reflection.

Returning to where we began, these pastors confirmed that in the experience of youth and young adult ministry leaders, they can be and in most cases are, the “lynchpin” of ministry efforts. As we heard in one pastor’s own words, **“To be honest, the pastor can and is almost always either the greatest advocate for success or the greatest obstacle.”**

As the researcher who studies both populations of pastors as well as youth and young adult ministry leaders, I see other similarities. These include the call for change in the way we engage young people and using the lens of accompaniment with similar meanings and visions to describe their ministries. However, how to make that change and the path to accompaniment still seem beyond agreement in both groups, and within the entire Church for that matter. Both groups were more likely than not to have been involved as young people in some type of ministry that has influenced them greatly in their call to ministry and continues to influence their views of ministry with youth and young adults. These pastors are passionate and articulate about accompanying young people, as well as about the interplay of some of the challenges that youth and young adults face.

Two areas were identified as needing more conversations to help pastors, ministry leaders, and parishes move forward toward the accompaniment of all their young people. These two areas include identifying who is called to accompany and what gifts or formation is needed to be effective. The second area follows the first: what does effectiveness or success look like in this new vision of accompanying all young people in faith and how will that success be measured or understood by all those with a stake in youth and young adult accompaniment? This topic is a pain point for ministry leaders and a struggle for pastors, so finding ways to discuss it and agree on common ideas will only help the ministry grow and potentially create stability.

I am most grateful to the 19 pastors who participated in this study, the Accompaniment Project Research Team who guided the research, and NFCYM for commissioning it. I look forward to sharing in the future the additional insights gained from these pastors.

Dr. Charlotte McCorquodale
Principal Researcher
Accompaniment Project Research

What’s Next in the Accompaniment Project Research

The Accompaniment Project will follow up on this research study and the National Study of Pastoral Leaders Serving Young Catholics by Ministry Training Source. This follow-up will consist of a targeted Accompaniment Project Supplemental Survey of pastors and youth ministry leaders. For more information on the National Study, go to ministrytrainingsource.org.

Additional questions and findings from this Pastors Research Study will be published later in the National Study of Pastoral Leaders and Accompaniment Project Research Reports. Finally, the Accompaniment Project will continue to explore ways to help the parishes in the project assess and evaluate their accompaniment efforts with young people. For more information, go to: nfcym.org.

Additional Study

Longitudinal Study Measuring Long-Term Impacts of Faith Accompaniment: One measure of success discussed by pastors in the study was when the youth came back to the parish and were active members, or they remained active disciples wherever they were in life. This type of longitudinal study is truly needed if we want to measure this type of impact.

Additional Qualitative Study of Pastors: More studies of pastors, including Hispanic and Latino pastors, as well as pastors representing other ethnicities and areas of the country, would be very helpful in fully understanding pastors' viewpoints and moving forward under their pastoral leadership.

The Relationship Between Accompaniment Vocation and Vision for Ministry: The relationship between accompaniment, vocation, and vision is a profound and multifaceted one, particularly within the context of youth and young adult ministry. The findings from qualitative studies of both ministry leaders and pastors reveal several key points for understanding and exploring this relationship further in future research.

1. **Ministry Begets Ministry:** Many pastors and ministry leaders trace their vocational call to ministry back to a moment of being accompanied themselves—whether by a mentor, youth minister, pastor, etc. This cycle of accompaniment highlights how transformative relationships can inspire new generations of leaders, creating a ripple effect within the Church.
2. **Vocation Emerging from Accompaniment:** The experience of being accompanied often serves as the catalyst for recognizing a vocational call. and call to ministry This underscores the importance of creating spaces where young people can feel heard, valued, and encouraged to discern their unique paths. Pastors and ministry leaders see vocation as deeply intertwined with relationships that nurture faith and encourage active participation in the life of the Church.
3. **Vision for Ministry:** The experience of youth or young adult ministry shapes the vision and commitment for future ministry. Both pastors and ministry leaders recognize the need for a unified approach that reflects the evolving needs of youth and young adults. Recognizing their mutual influence of experiences of youth and young adult ministry can provide a platform for deeper dialogue between pastors and ministry leaders. Both groups can explore how their shared experiences and understanding of ministry with youth and young adults can inform strategies for addressing key challenges, fostering innovation, and ensuring long-term impact.

Moving Forward:

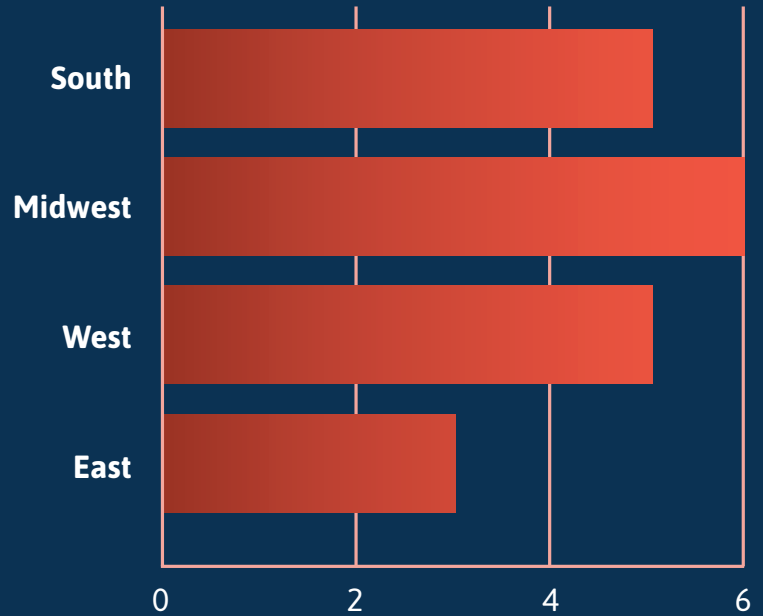
Further Study: The insights from these studies suggest a need for further exploration into how accompaniment influences vocational discernment and how this relationship can be nurtured to sustain ministry leaders.

Practical Implications: By identifying common experiences and values, pastors and ministry leaders can develop collaborative strategies that bridge gaps in understanding and foster more effective ministry practices.

Renewed Vision: Building on this foundation, the Church can articulate a vision for youth and young adult ministry that is both grounded in tradition and responsive to contemporary realities.

Appendix Charts

**CHART 1:
REGIONAL BREAKDOWN
OF PASTOR LOCATIONS**



**CHART 2:
IS YOUR PARISH
PART OF THE NFCYM
ACCOMPANIMENT
PROJECT?**

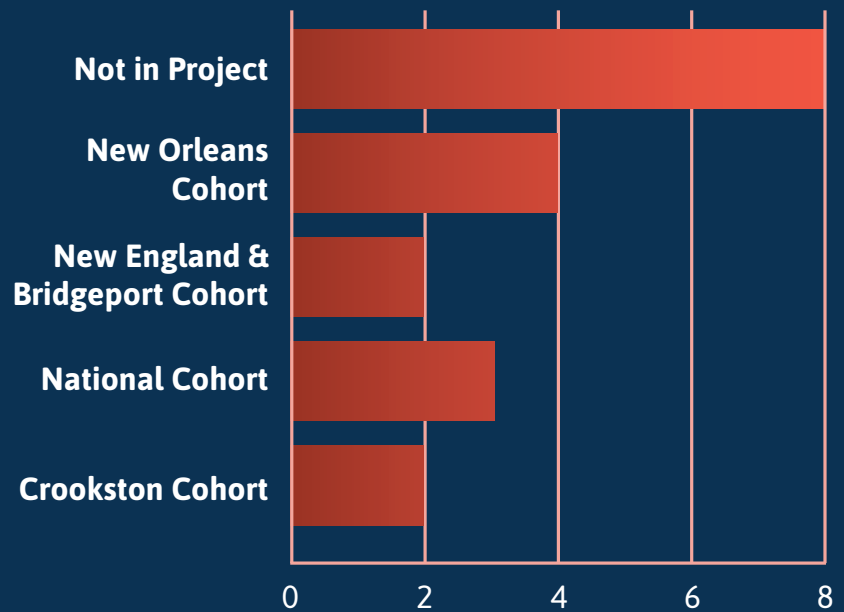


CHART 3: WHAT IS THE ETHNICITY OF THE PASTORS IN THE STUDY?

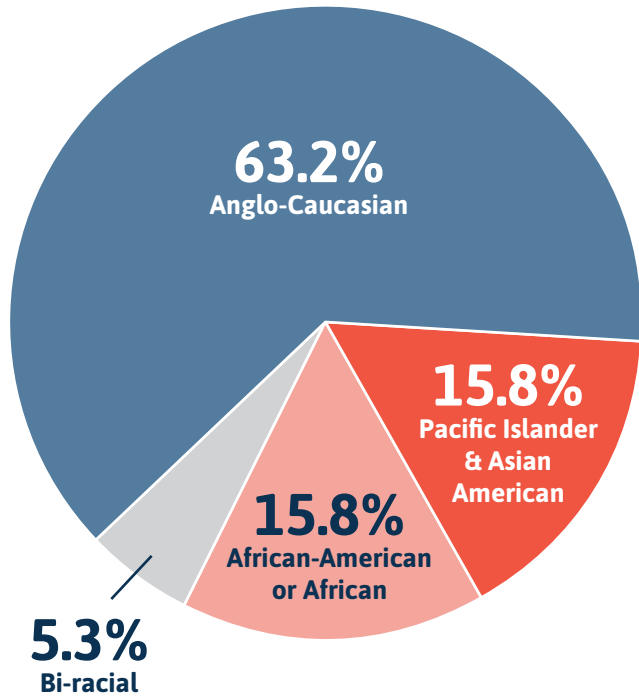


CHART 4: NUMBER OF YEARS EXPERIENCE AS A PRIEST

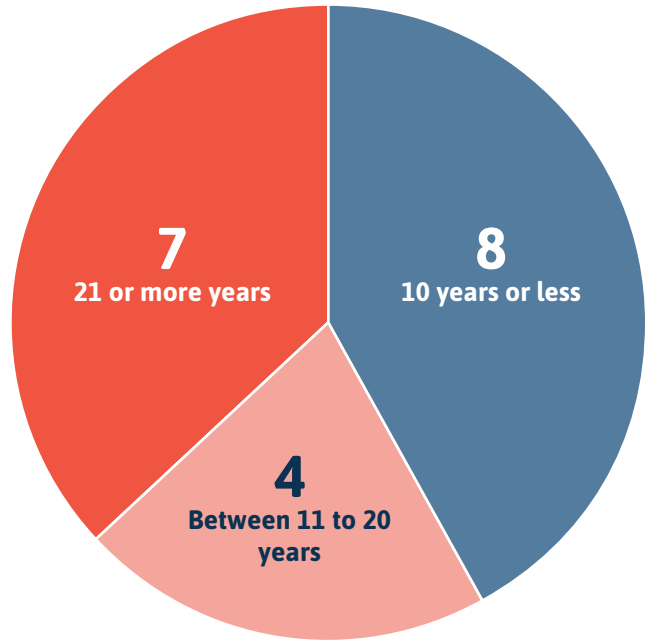
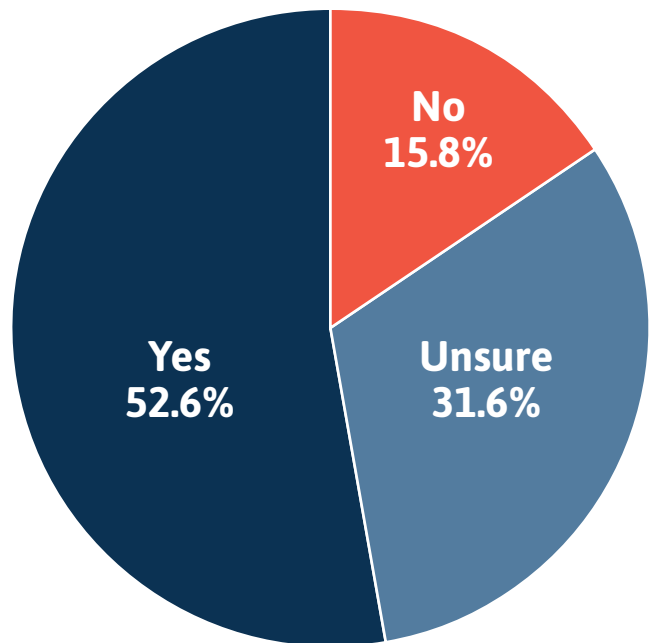


CHART 5: PASTORS WHO PARTICIPATED IN CYO OR YOUTH MINISTRY AS A YOUNG PERSON OR CAMPUS MINISTRY AS A YOUNG ADULT







Christ leads. We accompany.

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