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CATHOLIC YOUTH MINISTRY



Accompaniment Project Research

SUPPLEMENTAL DATA REPORT FOR THE PASTOR STUDY, AUGUST 2024

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Part One: Introduction to Qualitative Study

Research Purpose: This qualitative study seeks to understand pastors’ points 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.

Research Reports: Two reports have been published from the Accompaniment Project Pastor Study. The primary report, *Executive Summary: Pastors’ Perspectives on Accompanying Young People*, presents nine key conclusions for reflection, dialogue, and further research. The second report, the *Pastor Study Supplemental Data Report*, offers supporting data for the conclusions, detailing findings by question and including sample quotes from pastors to substantiate the results. The quotes provided are conversational and have been minimally edited to preserve the participants’ original ideas and expressions.

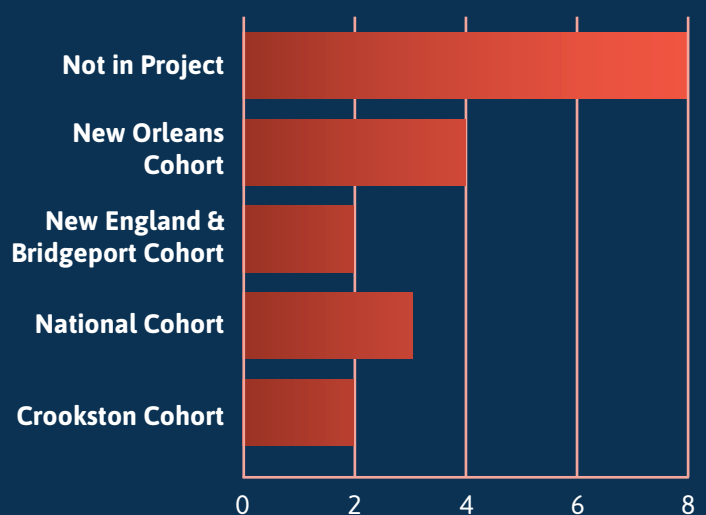
Research Structure: The principal researcher conducted the interviews, which were recorded and took approximately 45 minutes each. A total of 24 pastors were registered by a member of NFCYM or self-registered, with 19 completing the interview process from 10 different dioceses. The six significant areas explored mirrored, in part, a recent [National Study of Pastoral Leaders Serving Young Catholics](#). The AP Research Team identified 15-20 general questions to be used depending on the pastors’ experiences and knowledge of youth and young adult ministry. Data analysis—such as coding, reviewing interview data, identifying findings, and forming conclusions—was conducted by the researchers and the Accompaniment Project Research Team.

Sample: The goal was to engage at least 15 to 20 geographically and culturally diverse pastors in the inquiry. The final sample included 19 pastors from throughout the country, with a slight majority coming from the Midwest (See Chart 1).

CHART 1: REGIONAL BREAKDOWN OF PASTOR LOCATIONS



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



An additional goal of the sample was to have at least half of the pastors come from Accompaniment Project parishes. The final sample had 11 pastors from Accompaniment Project parishes and four of the five cohorts were represented, the strongest being the New Orleans Cohort (see Chart 2).

In examining the ethnicities of the pastors in the study (See Chart 3), the majority were Anglo-Caucasian at sixty-three percent. It is essential to note in this research that the input of the pastors from the Bi-Racial, African-American, and Pacific Islanders & Asian American communities had a significant impact on the findings of the study due to two factors: their cultural experiences of the Church community and family, and the fact that the pastors from these communities were generally younger in their priesthood than their Anglo counterparts. Six of the eight pastors with ten years of experience or less as a priest were from these communities (See Chart 4). The experience range was from two pastors with three years of experience to two pastors with over 35 years of experience nearing retirement.

After several attempts to reach out to Hispanic or Latino pastors, none were included in the final research sample. The Accompaniment Project is seeking funding for an additional study focusing on Hispanic and Latino Pastors to include their perspectives in the overall research.

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

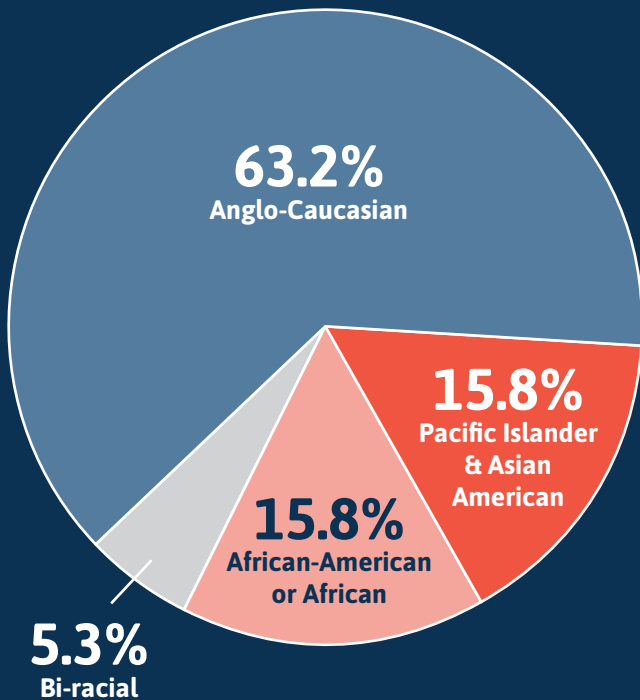
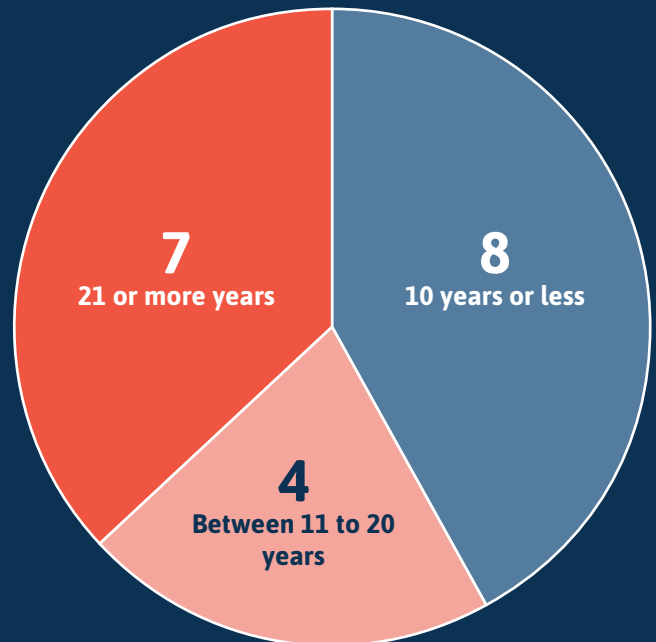


CHART 4: NUMBER OF YEARS EXPERIENCE AS A PRIEST





Part Two Research: Pastors' Vision and Challenges of Accompanying Youth and Young Adults



MEANING OF ACCOMPANIMENT:

What does it mean to you to accompany youth in faith? Is there an image, scripture passage, or ministry example that summarizes your understanding?

Two aspects of accompaniment emerged from the pastors' understanding of accompanying youth and young adults. Both are familiar images and meanings of what accompaniment has come to mean in ministry. Since all understandings of accompaniment are rooted in forming trusting relationships, it seemed like splitting hairs to define differences further. Yet, beyond the initial focus on building caring relationships that begin with accepting young people where they are in their lives and faith journeys, two clear paradigms or mental models emerged in their understanding.

The first paradigm followed the Emmaus journey rather closely, reaching out to hurting and wounded individuals, listening to their stories, connecting their stories to the Paschal mystery, and then helping them encounter the Lord's mercy and love. The difference in the second understanding was the number of pastors who mentioned that accompanying young people includes them feeling like they belong to an accepting community that will be intentional and consistent, and over time, they will grow in faith and become transformed.





Accompaniment Finding One:

Relationships that Foster an Encounter — Walking with Young Disciples in Their Woundedness

The first step, as pastors emphasized, is focusing on the hurting and wounded individual—listening to their story, connecting it to the Paschal Mystery, and guiding them toward an encounter with the Lord’s mercy and love. While the choice of the Emmaus Gospel story is a familiar reference in youth ministry circles, its frequent use by pastors suggests it remains a powerful and unifying framework for theological reflection. This enduring relevance underscores its value as a shared foundation for those invested in youth and young adult ministry.



“...the most poignant image in scripture is the road to Emmaus. At least right now, it’s fitting because the apostles were walking away from Jerusalem, and many of our young people and young adults are walking away from the Church.”



The pastors articulated that the starting point of accompaniment was accepting youth where they were amid their brokenness and woundedness. Another passage with this theme mentioned by two pastors was the parable of The Good Shepherd, and one said, "I always come back to **the good shepherd, seeking, encountering the sheep where they're at, searching for the lost.**" Continuing on with the shepherd metaphor from Pope Francis, this pastor said the starting point is being with them and getting to know them, "That word accompaniment is good. It certainly falls into what our Holy Father calls us to do. **Get the smell of the sheep, be with them. And just that we need to know our young people and let them know that we need them and that they are valuable in this place.**"



One pastor shared that the Emmaus journey is one where Jesus indeed models accompaniment, "...the most poignant image in scripture is the road to Emmaus. At least right now, it is fitting because the apostles were walking away from Jerusalem, and many of our young people and young adults are walking away from the Church. Interestingly enough, they discuss all of the things that they experienced in the life of the Church as they walked away, and the same thing is true for those disciples. It's sort of the model appearing where they are, **sort of setting up shop where they are, and then walking with them as they walk, even in their walking away.** Walking with them and just being a part of that conversation opens up the door for something greater, a greater exploration of something that may or may not pull them back. **Who knows? That's the work of the Holy Spirit. But because you've been walking with them along the way, even as they have walked, walking away, that can pull them back.**"

Listening first, not by teaching, is the way to start where the youth and young adults are in their lives and faith. It was explained this way by one, "What comes to my mind immediately is about the accompaniment that Jesus Christ had with his disciples on their way to Emmaus. Those disciples were discussing what had just happened and seemed to be at a loss. They didn't seem to understand what happened, and then Jesus Christ just accompanied them. He just walked with them without saying anything, listening to their conversation. **And then after listening, Jesus Christ began talking to them about what they were discussing.** So for me, when I define accompaniment, as walking together with somebody, listening to the story that person has, and sharing my thoughts about the issue there."

The pastors noted that the story doesn't end there, "I just see how Jesus casually accompanied them on that journey to Emmaus and how He listened to them. And then obviously, as they listened to Him too, which they recognized later, weren't our hearts burning? **I think that accompaniment is not about telling people what to do but asking where you are now and how can we walk this journey together.** Jesus was walking with them and in their own Good Friday mentality, so eventually **opening them when they were ready to the truth** of what Easter and Resurrection mean and so the truth **of who He was.**"



Accompaniment Finding Two:

Belonging and Relationships That Lead to Transformation



“I’ve had a number of mentors, priests, and lay people in my life who have just been present, and that makes a huge difference. The consistency in presence is what allows for that accompaniment to happen.”

The second understanding of accompaniment emphasizes creating an environment where youth and young adults feel genuinely at home within the parish. It encompasses themes such as mentorship, the warmth of family gathered around a table, authentic outreach, intentional follow-up, and fostering a consistent, welcoming presence. Central to this approach are relationships that nurture a deep commitment to Christ and the Church, ensuring that young people remain connected to the faith community. Scriptural references, such as *The Vine and the Branches* and *Let the Children Come to Me*, beautifully illustrate this vision of accompaniment, underscoring the importance of connection, inclusion, and spiritual growth.

Intentional and consistent actions in building relationships with young people help them feel a genuine sense of belonging and acceptance. These efforts foster connections with an authentic community of peers and adults within the Church, creating a supportive environment where they can grow in faith and feel fully embraced. Ten out of the nineteen pastors talked about this understanding of accompaniment. One pastor used the parable of the vine and branches to describe this connectedness: *“The vine and the branches... I love that interconnected image of us being connected to the community of faith and Jesus as the vine and the branches.”*

One pastor explained it this way, *“I think being intentional. When I was a senior in high school, the youth minister accompanied me on the Steubenville retreat, and I’m so grateful. She wasn’t a theologian, but she made us feel like we belonged, and because of that, the fruit of her youth ministry was three priests, I’m sorry, four priests. One left, but three of us remained. She has four priests, and we attribute her discipleship to our formation because she gave us a home, which was intentional, and she followed up with us. And so, to me, it’s intentionality. She was such a great witness of intentionality.”* A different pastor with the same experience said, *“I’ve had a number of mentors, priests, and lay people in my life who have just been present, and that makes a huge difference. The consistency in presence is what allows for that accompaniment to happen.”*



Most of those ten pastors shared how this experience of community and connections should in some way lead to transformation or faith growth for the youth and young adults. The examples given most often by the pastors as they spoke of this type of accompaniment were success stories of transformation coming from these deeply authentic connections. These pastors indicated the relationship must lead to something of substance in their faith, one stated, *“A relationship that cultivates a commitment. Right. And that’s what we keep talking about around here: How do we develop relationships that result in commitment to the Christian way of life, to a relationship with our Lord that is real and sustainable? Again, it’s about **a relationship that fosters a commitment to Christ.**”* Mentoring was crucial, as well as getting adults engaged with youth. *“I think part of that is looking at the word accompaniment, and not only accompaniment but mentoring. If we can do something with the adults of the parish and other groups, the youth will be visible, they’ll be valued, and they will actively participate in what’s going on.”*

This pastor’s sharing of his understanding of accompaniment outreach calls for more inclusion of younger people in the life of the Church. He references the scripture passage, where Jesus instructs His disciples to let the children come to Him, as he applies it to today’s reality of accepting young people into our churches. *“The image for me is Jesus seated there, and the apostles are trying to keep the kids away from him, and he says, no, suffer the little children and let them come unto me. I use that image because when I arrived here, and even still a little bit today, I heard from the young people, but also from the young adults how they felt. Their voice wasn’t always heard, or they were maligned in a particular place. I think it is not particular to the experience, but a universal experience. **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.**”*



VISION AND GOALS OF MINISTRY:

What are your vision and goals for youth and young adult ministry?

What influenced this vision of ministry?

Even though this question on vision seems similar to the one on accompaniment, for the most part, the focus was on accompanying individual young people or young people as a group. However, this question focused more on the vision for ministry efforts of their parish(s) to these age groups. Simultaneously, this is a broader view of their vision and goals for the entire effort, along with practices and actions. Although similar themes initially emerge, the descriptions of these differ. These two interview questions generated five findings within these three distinct ministry visions. The other findings examine the influences of these visions and the recognition by some of the pastors that there is a need for change, especially from their initial visions.





“So that was one goal, to put kids in front of Jesus as often as we can.”



Vision Finding One: **Encounter Jesus and Develop a Personal Relationship with Christ**

The first vision mentioned most often by pastors is to help youth and young adults develop a relationship with Christ. This vision was evident and easy to identify because of its frequency. Succinctly put by one, “So that was one goal, to put kids in front of Jesus as often as we can.” This pastor explains the process may differ, but the focus must stay on Jesus. “I think the biggest emphasis that needs to happen, whether it’s suburban or rural or urban, is that teens might have the opportunity to know Jesus as a person and then learn how to follow Jesus as a disciple. I think maybe the way by which the method that occurs is going to be different and particular to each parish, but the primary emphasis is on Jesus and just being able to learn that he’s a person who loves them and who wants to be able to journey with them. All of the fun and all the games, like, everything is focused on getting to that point, you know? And so, that’s hopefully the message that can be embraced and received.”

Interestingly, two pastors saw the vision of youth and young adult ministry as the same as the vision for their entire parish community. **“For me, it’s not just for the kids. It’s for every person in the parish. It’s about journeying with them in their faith relationship with Christ. To me, the whole point of what I’m trying to accomplish is to get people to open to their personal relationship with Christ, to have truly a deep and intimate relationship with Christ. And our job is just to help facilitate that, no matter what someone is.”** This pastor explains his vision and how it has become a measuring stick for ministry, “Our parish mission is forming disciples and leading all to Christ. That’s it. That’s the parish mission. That’s who we are. That’s what we want to point to. Everything we do, youth ministry or whatever ministry, is to form disciples and lead people to know Jesus. I meet with my youth minister. She’s passionate and great. She comes up with ideas for ministry and says here it is, this is how I see it fulfill that mission of how we’re forming them and leading them to Jesus. I’m like, amen, that’s awesome.”

A few pastors, such as this one, intertwine in their vision the focus on their relationship with Christ and that the young people feel like they belong in the church, which leads to the following vision that pastors had: “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.*”



Vision Finding Two: Creating an Experience of Belonging, Home, and Ownership

Many of the pastors' visions of youth and young adult ministry included creating an experience of community that gave youth and young adults a sense of being welcomed and accepted, at home with family, and at a place where they belong. This aspect of creating a home and sense of family for the young people was mentioned by the African-American, Pacific Islander, and Bi-Racial pastors, all who grew up with some type of youth ministry experience and/or had a family influence that gave them a strong sense of home at their parish. One Bi-Racial pastor stated it most clearly, *"Well, so my vision for the youth, so particularly I got teenagers, is that **the church is home**, that they find a home, and a lot of it comes from own experience. I'm the pastor, and this is my home parish. One of the things that defined our youth ministry was that sense of home. [Some of the youth] came to youth group, but they didn't go to church. **But they came to youth group because that was home. I find that a lot of our teenagers, particularly, are searching for a sense of home; part of it is because they don't get it at home. But in the world of social media, where everything is so there's a disconnect, even though there's so much connection, there's such a disconnect that there is no sense of home. Well, why not be home here? Right, why not find that space here?"***

This vision of belonging to the Church was not just for the young people but for the adults and community. One pastor explained this part of his vision, *"I want them to feel they belong to the church, to this community of faith, and their voices matter. So, for example, in our parish council, we have two teenagers who are adjuncts. **We did the survey, and more than 1000 parishioners responded. Youth ministry, getting youth involved, is one of the top priorities. It's not just my vision, it's the community of faith's vision.**"*

This pastor explained the importance of caring and being authentic as part of his vision, *"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 and everything, but not academics. I mean, 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.**"*



"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."



Vision Finding Three: Engage Young People in Good Things —Conventional Youth Ministry

The final vision that surfaced was more of the conventional activities associated with youth ministry or youth groups. The commonality within this vision is that these pastors want youth to be engaged in good things related to faith and the Church, such as formation, service, and community. Those with this vision tended to have more pastoral experience and learning, however they remained focused on what worked in the past. While, at times, they utilized the language of accompaniment, their vision for ministry with youth had remained the same, that of age-specific group programming in formation, social justice, social activities, and fellowship.

Here is a clear example from one pastor, *“I came up with formation, service, and fellowship. Our model is about going out in the community and being socially active in the community. I wanted to implement that part of the general vision and make that part of our program.”* Another seasoned pastor explained how his goal is the same as in his previous parish, *“It’s always a goal to try to create the same thing, but I guess in a different environment, it’s more challenging.”*

A few pastors spoke of engaging youth and young adults in social justice and service. One pastor shared multiple examples of young adults in his parish serving others and provided it as the rationale for his vision. *“I find that **youth today, and young adults, even more than youth, are interested in being part of a parish that serves someone else.** For a parish like this, I see something for youth and young adults where there’s service to the larger community. I know this is more about youth, but I see young adults and churchgoers wanting to be part of some organization that serves and cares for others.”*

The formation of young people was also included in the vision for some pastors, though not many pastors spoke of it, and only one spoke of part of their vision as helping parents be better formators. However, this pastor spoke to it directly, while cautioning how we teach the faith, *“I think my vision for a youth group is **teaching them the foundations of their faith in a very lived context,** you know, not in a context of, like, religious education or catechism, but in a more real-life integration, and then allowing them to do things like trips or special things that allow them to see that Catholicism is much bigger than what we have here in the diocese and to be a part of the universal Church.”*



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



Another pastor, who had a goal of formation, discussed the struggle of meeting the needs of youth where they are, especially in the Sacrament of Confirmation, and how often the Church limits ministry leaders and pastors by their own rules. *“A second goal would have been borrowed from my experience in the RCIA process, **trying to meet kids where they’re at and develop a formation for them according to their needs.** And that’s easier to do in the setting of small parishes that I’ve served versus if you’re dealing with a couple hundred kids, you know, that’s not a very realistic approach. For example, I think you can argue successfully for any confirmation age. You know, the Eastern Rite churches confirm a baptism at birth. Latin rite can push it into a senior in high school. I think you can argue any age you want. So, putting that aside, what we have is high school, late high school. I wanted to introduce to the parish that it was a two-tier system with two things. One would be like, we engage every kid where they’re at, and you must be kind of agile in a catechetical approach because the needs, you know, are different every year, and the needs can be different within a year. So, that is different than preparing for a sacrament. In RCIA, you invite people to sacraments when they’re ready.”*



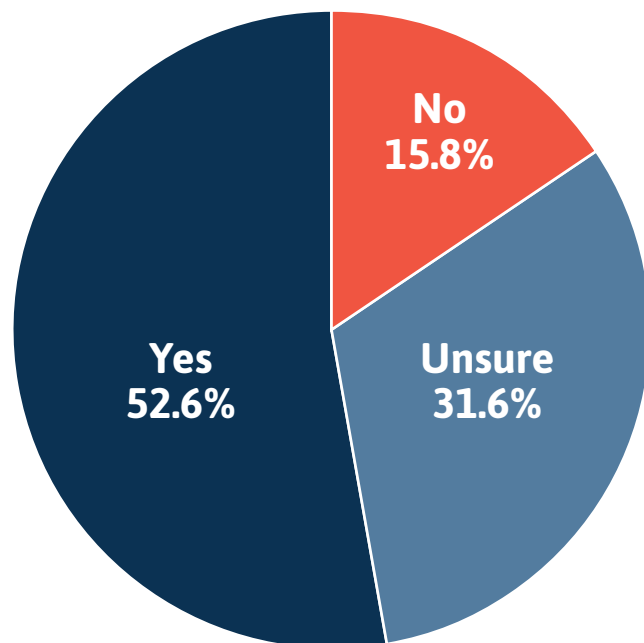
“...a lot of that stems from my experience as a teen in my youth ministry program.”



Vision Finding Four: Influences on Pastors' Visions and Goals

Pastors' experiences and relationships influenced their visions and ministry goals with youth and young adults. Experience participating in Catholic Youth Organization (CYO), youth ministry, or campus ministry significantly influenced their vision. Over fifty percent of these pastors were products of some type of CYO or youth ministry, campus ministry, or young adult ministry experience (See Chart 5.) For some pastors, their CYO or youth ministry experiences provided a model they wanted to recreate for their community's youth and young adults. For others, it drives their passion to have and actively support ministry to youth and young adults in their parishes. One stated, *“It was through my personal experience that sometimes the youth have been treated as visitors in the church, and that influenced me to say that, no, I think the youth, together with the others, are not visitors to the church. But we all want the church. We all belong to the church.”*

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



One pastor explained it best, “You know, **a lot of that stems from my experience as a teen in my youth ministry program. Our youth minister met us as we were and didn’t start with, hey, you need to read your Bible. He went sledding with us. He told silly jokes and had Mountain Dew drinking contests with us. He met us as teens. And that’s what Jesus did. That’s what St. Paul did. That’s what many of the saints have done. They enter into people’s lives, encounter them first, and then propose the method of living. And I think what was so attractive about what that first youth minister did and then the subsequent one who was my coworker, was that we were able to see teens come to know the Lord, whether it was me or whether it was our teens in the ministry program, through our joy and our example, so that witness first as a proposition for the Gospel, as a way to be able to propose it to them.**”

Learning from youth ministry leaders was another source of influence for their visions and goals. “After a few years, I was assigned to my current assignment. **I met my youth minister on the first day, and I felt tremendous relief because this was someone [from whom] I learned a lot about what successful youth ministry looks like.**”





*“I think right now we are in a phase of trying to figure out what it means to minister to this next generation. In his book *Divine Renovation*, Father Mallon says, we went into the locker room at halftime playing soccer and came out playing rugby. We were doing alright while playing soccer, but we are getting our tails kicked in rugby. How do we figure out how to reach out to the younger people and acknowledge that there is a difference?”*



Vision Finding Five: **Time for Change in Vision**

The more seasoned pastors repeatedly explained how young people and the culture have changed, so the visions, goals, and methods must also change. However, for some, this conclusion took time to be accepted. As this pastor explained, *“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.”*

However, for some pastors, their vision has had to evolve. One stated, *“I would say my vision has gotten more focused over the years. So initially, how can we just get the teens excited to come and excited about their faith and meet them where they are? **The culture has changed dramatically in the last 22 years. It was a lot easier to convince teens to come.** They were more readily willing to be a part of anything and everything as long as they saw it applied to them, right to their lives.”* Accompaniment has become the new way of thinking for this pastor. *“I’ve had just some of the different experiences where it used to be easy to say, hey, we’re doing this event, this program, everybody come. **Everybody came, and they would just show up, which doesn’t work anymore.** And so you’ll get just a few, but what really works is, I would say, **the laser focus, which has to be the personal invitation, the one-on-one accompaniment with each person.**”*





Different times call for different responses, a lesson this pastor learned: *“I was a priest who believed in the numbers model. You did youth ministry on Sunday or Saturday evenings, bringing in 30, 40, and 50 kids. You had the entertainment, and you had the speaker. So essentially, we are living Renewing the Vision. You met all the requirements. I will be very honest; I was doing it out of the checkbox mentality. I remember when someone came to help me at one of my parishes as we established a leadership team of adults to work with youth ministry. She mentioned the small group model and how we’re moving to a more five-to-one mentality. We want every young person in our parish to have at least five adults wrapping them with love, support, and accompaniment with that journey. I was resisting because I thought, well, how does this work in this age of safe environment, in this age of reckoning with all the abuse of the past? How do we bring this to life? **Seeing more and more in the schools, in the parish, young people are not showing up for youth ministry meetings like our generation did because they have so many options to do other things. It has helped me to solidify. We can’t just rely on what we provide. They don’t come. We have to provide what they need at this moment.** That has been the impetus for me to make this shift from the Renewing the Vision model, which was great and provided a wonderful sense of foundation for a number of us, but it is not where young people are today.”*



Challenges:

*What challenges do you regularly see youth and young adults facing?
How has that impacted ministry with them?*

Pastors highlighted the challenges posed by the pervasive influence of popular culture on the lives of young people and their families. Rather than framing it as a straightforward cause-and-effect dynamic, they described it as a complex, reciprocal relationship—a push-and-pull interaction where culture shapes young people, and they, in turn, engage with it. Pastors acknowledged the intertwined nature of these challenges, particularly in areas such as sports and technology. While they did not condemn these aspects of modern life as inherently bad, they stressed the need for balance, emphasizing the importance of helping young people navigate these influences thoughtfully and purposefully.





Challenges Finding One: Changing Priorities



“...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.”

Pastors described the entangled relationship between sports and faith, describing how great a pull sports seem to have over their values, impacting decisions about their assets such as money and time. The pastors who identified this challenge do not believe the excuse that there is no time, but rather that it is a result of poor choices. This pastor explains the problem, “I’ve noticed that faith used to be more important, and parents used to put a premium on their child to come to youth ministry, and now we are competing with everything and especially, seeing how young kiddos are starting to select sports. Sports are the new idol, The new everything. Some parents travel three weekends a month for their hockey, baseball, whatever, or basketball. Meanwhile, to give an hour or two on a Sunday or a Thursday for the middle school, it’s just like, no, 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.”

This pastor calls for balance, “It’s a town where hockey is almost above everything, sports. So you have to balance these things. We need these sporting activities, but how do we balance them with church activities that the youth are supposed to be involved in at the church?” However, for this pastor, the issue is much bigger than seeking to find balance but to also help parents make better choices for their children. “Number one is parents are not making choices that are actually for the good of their kids. **They are driven by some other type of value set, and I don’t know if I can articulate what that is. For example, we have six-year-olds who travel every Sunday during the winter months to participate in hockey programs, little kids who are not coming to Mass, and the parents will say, well, there’s just no time. The issue is they’re not making choices. I don’t know the dynamic that drives parents to this hyperactivity for their children. I don’t know, but I understand that. Maybe it’s inaccurate to say they don’t want to make choices. Maybe it’s something else, but kids are stressed, and the reason they’re stressed is because they don’t have discretionary time. They don’t have unstructured time. They don’t have time for any creativity. They don’t have time to sleep. We have kids on a hockey rink at 04:00 a.m. because the venue is fully scheduled, and that’s the only time.**”



“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.”



Challenges Finding Two:

Intertwining Impacts of Digital Technologies with Social Skills and Mental Health

The intertwining of issues and behaviors impacting the youth and young adults were most notable around digital and social media technologies and their mix with the rising issues for these generations around their social skills and mental health. Almost every pastor mentioned either technology or these issues of lacking social skills or mental health as one of their top challenges, and many said they did not separate these issues when discussing them. The impacts of digital and social media mentioned included anxiety, being socially awkward, being over-driven and overwhelmed, being addicted to their phones, being exposed or addicted at early ages to pornography, and being bullied.

This pastor learned the hard way... *“The proximity to social media and the phone, the maturity level of this generation is so far behind. I made an 8th-grade field trip last week, so I let the kids have their phones because I wanted to take pictures and post their experiences on Instagram throughout the day; it was good publicity for the school. But the second I said, you can have your phones, every single kid sat in their friend group and then put their heads down the whole bus ride and didn’t talk to each other. My nephew, even I’m noticing he doesn’t have great social skills. He loves video games. He loves all of it, but in a real sense of all the connections social media is supposed to bring people together, they’re actually more disconnected from reality and from real people. Conversions happen within real-life relationships, and friendships happen within face-to-face interactions.”*

This pastor sees the addiction and the disconnect socially... *“They’re very busy. I would say that post-pandemic, a whole lot of social skills have been completely lost. I don’t know if they were good before, but they’ve been weakened. And just the tremendous addiction to smartphones. So, there is a real disconnect between socialization right now and these devices.”*



This pastor worries about the constant 24-hour everything... *“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.”*

This pastor sees a great tug of war between reality and make-believe... *“It is the screens of the supercomputers in their pockets and purses. It is putting up a wall between them and the world. It is this bifurcation of reality and fantasy or make-believe. This great tug of war between reality and make-believe within them. Make-believe is so thrilling, and it definitely changes their brains. I’m sure it is. How do we help them choose the good, want the good, choose reality and the gifts they have been given when the world says, choose make-believe.”*

This pastor sees a confused understanding of intimacy... *“Have you ever heard of a guy named Simon Sinek? In a TED talk, everyone gets a trophy. They messed up a lot of people. Helicopter parents, being addicted to their cell phones, how to have crucial conversations, having a confused idea of what intimacy is about. They think it’s being intimate and vulnerable, sitting on their phone and doing a video, versus actually having a conversation with somebody and all. Ultimately, I think they live in a world where people are told they’re valued by what they do and what they produce, and no one can ever live up to those standards. So, how do we get them to understand their love for who they are? God created them good. As Romans 5 says, proof that God loves us is that he died for us while we were still sinners.”*

This pastor sees addiction to social media... *“Technology and particularly pornography, the average exposure of pornography is somewhere between the ages of eight and ten. Our kids, I presume every kid I encounter has a technology addiction. And I’m not saying only pornography but some type of social media screen time addiction that governs their life, that has already wired their brain in a way that makes living in community more difficult for them.”*

This pastor sees bullying from a screen generation... *“Bullying is big bullying, and a lot of kids are experiencing it. There’s a disconnect because I think everybody’s online. There’s this phenomenon with the COVID kids; it’s just that they don’t know how to interact in real life, you know, that screen generation.”*



Challenges Finding Three:

Struggling with Sexual and Gender Identity

Youth and young adults struggling with their sexual and gender identity or the Church accepting their LGBTQ+ friends was a challenge identified by one-fourth of the pastors. This pastor explains a unique aspect of this challenge for himself and the Church: *“This morning, I was on the phone with a transgender person that I’m dealing with, a young man who’s 25... Now, that’s a small percentage, but a high percentage of young people have a friend who’s gay or transgender. And, if you reject their friend, you’re rejecting them. And so that’s the dance the Church does. How do you see the modern world? What are those values and principles we want to live by? And it’s not easy. We say everyone is welcome, but how do we live that?”*

Another pastor explains that it is something his parish wants to address, but it seems like it is an issue of belonging, not programming. According to him, *“I think one of the things, this wouldn’t be, like, a major concern, but I know that it is for some of our teens who are dealing with their own sexual identity, and we don’t have a particular ministry. We talked about this recently at a long-range planning retreat to develop an outreach here at the parish for the LGBTQ+ community. Some people who were part of that group told us they are not looking so much for a particular ministry but just the fact that they could be who they are and belong.”*

However, for this pastor, he sees it as a hot topic right now: *“People are facing challenges today, and they’re searching for it because they’re asking about it; they’re inquisitive about it. Of course, it has to be in areas of sexual morality. That’s a big hot topic.”*



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



Challenges Finding Four:

Faith Questioning, Division, and Decline Amidst Faith Questions and Yearning



“...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.”

The challenging dynamic identified in the faith experience of youth and young adults was these seemingly two opposite realities. On one hand, youth and young adults question whether God is real, contributing to the general decline in faith-related activities in our society. On the other hand, contrasting this is a collective yearning for faith and seeking the answers to deep questions. Of course, these two things can be accurate simultaneously, which adds to the complexity of ministering to these age groups.

One pastor names the decline... *“The decline of faith in general. Everything is changing from the inside of parish life—for example, the celebration of funeral rites. I don’t know how it is where you are, but that is an experience that is evolving so quickly that we can’t even see the changes as they come. For example, five years ago, families would have celebrated more funeral rites.”*

One pastor names the doubt in God... *“When I started this, I saw kids struggling with fitting in, and a lot of them used youth ministry as a place to connect with their friends, looking to date, looking for people to support them, especially kids who had a lot of struggles at home. Nowadays, I’m finding that kids mostly come from families that are pretty put together. But the kids struggle today with the question, is God real? Is faith real? Is this just a way to correct my behavior, or is there really a God? I see those kinds of questions in the little bit I still do with youth ministry compared to what I did. **I think kids are struggling in metaphysical ways that kids didn’t have to do in the past, that 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.**”*

One pastor names polarization and division... *"The one thing is that we're a little bit unique, we have a lot of young people, tons, but they typically come to the traditional Latin Mass. We have two altar boys for our 10:00 English Mass and our big family Mass, and then we have 15 altar boys who serve at the traditional Latin Mass, and some of them are starting to go up to the choir and sing. It's been interesting and difficult at the same time because one of the things I'm very aware of is that there's just this pain, hurt, and sadness. **There is grief. I'm shepherding these two communities that worship in different expressions, different and unique expressions of the Roman rite. When we try to do things together, it can be really hard. We can't go to Mass together, so we pray the rosary.**"*

One pastor names that youth are seeking... *"Young people today come with questions that are sometimes silly, but they also come with questions that are very deep, and I have to think about how I answer. I also see it in our confirmation students. I started our confirmation interviews. One young man said, 'when did you know you wanted to be a priest?' **These are not the questions I anticipated. It's this yearning. It's this desire for proximity, but not so much. They want to come where we are.**"*



Part Three Research: Creating Change Towards Accompanying Youth and Young Adults

One aspect of the Accompaniment Project Research Plan is identifying effective ways to create positive change in how parish communities accompany Catholic young people. To that end, this section of the report highlights insights from the pastors on strategic aspects of change planning.



CREATING CHANGE:

When creating change in youth and/or young adult ministry, what factors contribute to success and what barriers or obstacles must be overcome?

Creating lasting and effective change in youth and young adult ministry was a topic pastors had many insights into, while also identifying challenges. Clearly, those pastors who had experienced change effectively in ministry understood the importance of developing ownership and buy-in through planning with a diverse team that listens to God and the community. One of the biggest challenges to overcome was the “mindset” against change, typical of the common phrase, “We’ve always done it this way.”



Creating Change

Finding One: It's a Mindset

Among the key insights shaping the experience of “change” in ministry was the recognition of a “mindset” about change. Pastors frequently identified this mindset—manifesting as resistance to new approaches or adherence to the familiar—as a significant challenge. They described encountering it in various forms within their communities, often encapsulated in sentiments like, “We’ve always done it this way.” Addressing and overcoming this mindset was seen as essential for fostering meaningful and lasting change in ministry practices.

Again and again, change, pastors said, was about a mindset. One noted, *“Change is not something that is very simple. Change sometimes is difficult. I think for me, it’s all to do with mindset. We have also 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, the culture is changing. The way the youth understand those things that are changing. I think we also have to change our mindset and probably find new ways of addressing new problems, new challenges.”*



“I do think we could be adverse to change. We live in a busy, complicated world, and so many of us, our time is of the essence. And to create change in a paradigm shift takes a lot of time and effort and energy, and it can be very frustrating.”



A few pastors identified it as a generation challenge, with one stating, “Probably the biggest obstacle is change itself. No one likes change. **My parishioners, mostly in their late sixties, know we need to reach out to young people and get mad because we seem to be focusing more on the website than the Parish bulletin. How do people not understand that change is inevitable and that we’re doing this because we want to bring the next generation up? So, change is probably the hardest thing. We like our comfortableness. We like to be stuck in our routine.**”

This pastor agrees change is inevitable and can have big consequences: “It’s a big question, and it’s a generational answer. So, number one, parishes are boomer experiments, right? Baby Boomer experiments. Everything we do in a parish was an experiment a Baby Boomer came up with, and they are very attached to their things, and they are also very unable to adapt because they are now really just holding on to what is familiar, and unfortunately, there’s nothing after them. I’m Generation X, and if I look for people my age in church, we would barely have one Mass if we all gathered together on a Sunday. I have six Masses on a weekend. But we wouldn’t; my generation wouldn’t even come close to filling in this church for one Mass. Then, the generations are smaller, but the money and the priorities still follow the Baby Boomers. So, our grade schools are successful, at least in our archdiocese. We’re struggling to keep them a success, but they are only successful because Baby Boomers still support them disproportionately. They pressure their children and their grandchildren to send their kids to Catholic schools. And when they’re not here anymore, the whole thing will collapse, and we’ll have to do it differently.”



Creating Change Finding Two: Shared Vision and Leadership Team

Grassroots, buy-in, ownership, collaboration, leadership team, shared vision, and mission were all words used to describe the keys to successful change in most pastors' interviews. Central to all these actions was to build trust in the change. As one pastor put it, "You have to have them buy-in for it and tell them to trust this change. So definitely, it would be a buy-in for the program or buy-in for the ministry." One said that trust was a factor because of the past, "the challenge was regaining the trust because a lot of them were hurt by those past ministers."

Many pastors emphasize the importance of prayer, discernment, and creating a diverse leadership team to develop buy-in and ownership. According to the pastors, this team should collaborate, evaluate, and respond with additional changes when needed. One experienced pastor clearly defines effective change and how to get there: "Success is when you get people to share your vision and get on board. Everything else follows. Personal testimony is the best for that."

"The second [thing] is to find good leadership," simply answered another experienced pastor. Expanding on this answer, these two pastors emphasized the importance of leadership teams over one building around a single leader. **"One of my biggest lessons was that I can never build a ministry around me. It has to be from the people in the community, and they have to have their team of people who will keep it, especially if it's something that's working really well for them. Do not build it around a person; that was heartbreaking. All the work we did then the next year it was done. The new priest came in, 'I don't want to do that,' and it all went away, and so that was it."**

GRASSROOTS EFFORT...

One pastor states: "The success of an effort has to have a grassroots component. The leadership cannot be top down." According to this same pastor, "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."



"Not only is a diverse team with input needed, but one that prayed together as well. We would plan our year of events with a prayerful team that was very different, even politically and ideologically different. I needed all those different voices in the body to see good fruit. We would get buy-in because then they tell their friends we are on this leadership team, et cetera. So that, to me, was when we bore the most fruit: we prayed and collaborated with a diverse group of people from different backgrounds, different ages, etc. When we did not bear fruit, we did not collaborate well, and we did not pray well."



COLLABORATION AND DIVERSITY...

Another pastor explains: *“Collaboration. Whenever we have had on our pastoral council representatives from every group possible, you know, we’re all in the same vision mission, but people who buy into the mission and then inviting, like, I would have a high school student, a college student, black, white, Latino, Asian, male, female, young, old, single, married, divorced, widowed, but we tried to pack up with twelve people who were different, who were all praying together. That way, we were able to find the blind spots, you know, like things that I, as a man, I would never think of, [and] a woman would be like, Father, that’s not it, I never thought about that.”*

LEADERSHIP TEAM AND HONESTY...

This pastor notes: *“You have to build a leadership team, and not just for youth ministry, but for the entire running of the parish life. But to do these cultural shifts, you need a strong team who are able to say to you, Father, that’s not going to work or, Father, you may think that what you’re saying is this, but what we’re hearing is this, you need to really craft that message better.”*

LISTENING TO PEOPLE...

This pastor said: *“Things that work the best are things that come from the people. I think about our parish council. There are sharp people on that, every one of them is smarter than I am. They are in professional positions where they’re doing big things every day and are also part of our community. They can look at it and say, it might be better if we do something this way or whatever, and I just find any time I kind of yield to what they think would work the best, that’s what usually works the best. It took me years to learn that, but because I’m a priest, I don’t have all the answers. I don’t have the best ideas. I’ll help you make it work. I’ll do my part, but I need to get out of the way. We all do, there’s so many priests that they just think they have all the answers, and you know what? They don’t.”*



Creating Change Finding Three:

Listening Deeply and Avoiding Complacency

Pastors emphasized two critical elements for effectively navigating the change process: First, listening to God and the people being served. This involves discerning God's guidance and genuinely understanding the community's needs rather than relying on preconceived notions. Second, a willingness to reevaluate and adapt, reflecting an openness to evaluation and making adjustments when necessary. Together, these elements not only help address resistance to change but also foster greater buy-in and a sense of ownership among those involved in the process.

Listening deeply to God in prayer regularly as a team leads to change and helps to discern a path forward. Additionally, listening to the people being served and identifying the actual needs, not preconceived ones, is crucial. One pastor puts it this way: *"But just attending, I think that personal relationships still must happen. And then **before we could put it into a program, sometimes as a church or parish, we're so used to just building programs and then hoping people show up, but why don't we go and ask the people what it is that they're hungry for? And, then, come build the program instead of... the reverse. Nobody asked for a swimming pool, so we're building a swimming pool. Also, instead of asking, do you need a swing? We say, what kind of swing would you like?"***



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





In addition, it is crucial to listen to the feelings behind the mindsets, including those resisting change, and be patient. As this pastor says, **“Don’t be afraid of resistance. Resistance doesn’t always mean that people don’t want it. It means they can’t see it yet.”** He continues about facing resistance and the consequences of giving in, *“And, here at my parish, we’ve had some. My predecessor had been 52 years old, so there was a lot of resistance in the beginning to just me because I was so different. If I had listened to that resistance, we wouldn’t be where we are today. I wouldn’t have done anything. And yet we’ve made some good strides to become a more vibrant community.”*

Another pastor agrees, *“Be patient and be willing to stick to your guns even if people get upset.”* He gave this example, *“When we started our new model of faith formation, I knew people were going to get upset. I knew we were heading in the right direction, and I knew because people do not like change. I said to the people that we’d been doing the same things for 50 years, and it hadn’t worked. Why do we think it’s going to keep working? ‘Father, this is how we’ve always done it.’ Is what we’re doing working? If it’s not, then we need to do something else.”*

This pastor indicated that for him, success in change is about the willingness to evaluate ourselves regularly, *“You know, after every school year, faith formation year, first communions, I always meet with the teachers, the volunteers, and I always ask, what worked, what didn’t work, right? I think where success comes in is the willingness to change. I think where programs fail is when it has that reluctance to change. We have to constantly evaluate ourselves, right?”*

Although multiple pastors indicated that the change process must be ongoing, everything is not constantly changing, according to this pastor: *“You also have to be willing to tweak things. So we started this new model about three years ago. We’ve tweaked it every year. We haven’t changed it out and out, but we have tweaked it as we’ve heard what people have told us about what they thought was working and not working. We’ve made adjustments. So, though you stay the course, you must also be flexible enough to adjust where you’re adjusting. Don’t undo what you’re trying to do, but also be willing to look and recognize if it is working. If it’s not, you can’t make that decision in a year. You’ve got to keep whatever you’re doing. It’s like a football team. Keep changing everything every year and nothing’s ever going to work. You’ve got to give it three or four years to see if this works or doesn’t work. And if it doesn’t, then you need to start the process of looking for something new.”*



MINISTRY SUCCESS:

How do you measure success in ministry with youth and young adults?

Measuring success in ministry was an engaging topic to discuss with pastors. They provided various responses, ranging from not measuring success and trusting that the seeds planted will bear fruit one day, to measuring success through the encounters and conversions they have witnessed or heard about among young people. However, some of the pastors stated that there is a struggle to measuring the passing on of faith without relying on numbers.



Measuring Success Finding One: **Don't Count Numbers! Plant Seeds of Faith.**

At least a fourth of the pastors responded, **“Do not use numbers”** or something similar because they believed they were planting seeds and that God’s role is to reap. Those who did not want to use numbers as a measure seemed adamant about it.

One pastor states: **“Not numbers. It can't be numbers for me. It's not about quantity. What are the seeds that you may have planted? I'm trying to be present, especially for the bigger things, the retreats, and in that one talk that so and so gave or that you gave to us. I saw that impact on the kiddos and they may not know it right now, but it is going on. It planted seeds that 'let's just keep praying that the Lord will keep watering those so that it could come to fruit.' Getting to know them, being a part, walking that journey of faith with them, **planting that seed**. Another thing I was thinking about with this accompaniment project is in RCIA, where we have the sponsor, that person who's walking along with somebody. **My initial gut reaction is there's a danger if we make it a numbers game.**”**





“I don’t want to answer this with numbers. I think that it would be an injustice to answer that question with well, you know, if we went from 50 to almost 300 kids. You know, on some level, that would be a success. But my initial gut reaction is how do you measure passing on the faith?”

Another pastor says: **“I don’t measure success.** The way I look at ministry... **my job is to plant seeds,** and it’s God’s job to reap however He chooses. I may not see the fruit of what I’m doing right now. My job is simply to be the instrument that God is calling me to be right now in the life of the people I’m called to minister to. I may see nothing from that, and I’m okay with that.” This pastor goes on to give an example of how he gave a workshop in a diocesan position: *“I had two people show up, and that was good enough for me. Those were the two people who needed to hear what I had to say. **I am not someone who is caught up with numbers** because I look at things this way. So those two people were there. Whatever I taught them, they can now share with someone else. And it goes, Jesus started with twelve, and there are 1.4 billion Catholics. It works.”*

Many pastors who didn’t believe in counting numbers focused on looking at the relationships that were formed that led, as this pastor explains, to encounters with an individual. *“This is hard. At my last parish, I worked with altar servers. This young kid, who’s in high school now, asked me to be his Confirmation sponsor. That’s how I would measure success. That’s how I’m going to try to answer that question: You are welcome into the family. It’s not a name on a page. It’s a person; there’s going to be those relationships that you make, and that’s how I personally would measure success. **I don’t want to put it to a numbers game. I don’t want to put it to a dollar amount.** It’s the encounter with an individual.”*

Another pastor states: *“Maybe some of my brothers in ministry, pastors would be able to hear this. **It would be helpful that numbers are not the end goal** because I’ve seen vibrant youth ministries that have had 150 at the retreat, and that’s a beautiful thing to have that many be able to experience the retreat. But I would rather have a smaller group that comes to know the Lord and comes to live life for him to allow those seeds, as it were, from the Gospel to take root as opposed to an effort that perhaps misses out on the invitation and the encounter and the forming. That’s not to say that it is very important to emphasize. This is not to say that the broader reach efforts are in vain. I just think we’re fooling ourselves if we think we had X many on our retreat and, therefore, or X many in our ministry effort, that is enough. Because we can brag about Christmas and Easter numbers at church, but, you know, we want the deeper encounter. We want the actual witness. So I think that’s the metric that I would hope that we could start to use as a Church is how are we growing disciples here and allowing the Gospel to be spread.”*



Measuring Success Finding Two: Counting Numbers And More

On the opposite end of the first findings on measuring success, some pastors indicated that numbers count. However, they often look at numbers in addition to something else. The pastors' attempt and struggle to balance using numbers as measures of success was apparent.

One pastor says: *"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; I would like to see gradually 10 to 15 or 15 to 20, with the recognition that it's hard for these kids to get here, but I want to increase the number. I would like ten kids to go on a service program in the summer instead of 2 or 3. So numbers count, but also the quality [matters]."* He explains how the numbers have not equated to the quality or faith outcomes he had hoped for so far: *"I haven't seen it since I've been here. I do see a good number. We have a Sunday supper program for the homeless, and a good number of our teenagers are there. Of course, they're getting service hours from their school, but I would like to see them convert that into retreats or prayers and even a vocation that hasn't been cultivated well. I don't hear kids say, after college, 'Father, I'm interested in joining a religious community.'"*



"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 really 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."



The same was true for this pastor from a small rural parish who was looking at numbers and seeing the need for more than that. He states: *"In the first place, I'm thinking of numbers that I would like to see many of the youth participating, but also the levels of commitment. Right now we have some participating, but the number is not as big as I expected. I'm looking at the numbers, but also the levels of commitment. I could give you an example. Some youth come from serving at Mass, but sometimes, we find that those young people are not available. They are not there. So, we are not sure if we are going to have them today or tomorrow. So that level of commitment, and also because we have a lot of young people, but those that are [serving] are just not accountable. **They are just very few. That's why I'm looking at the numbers, but also at the level of commitment, understand? So, for me, that probably indicates some success.**"*

It is a dilemma even for pastors who don't want to count numbers. This pastor shares how he does not want to use numbers as a measurement, and yet it can be a factor in unsuccessful programs. He states: *"The first measure is to be diligent in prayerful discernment about what you want as a vision for two or three years, then put forth a good effort. I stopped counting a long time ago, but the success of something has little to do with it. Well, it's not true! You can't offer something because you've discerned that it is a movement of the Spirit; then, if you're expecting 30 people and five show up, then what do you do? Or maybe we're right about the discernment, and people just aren't cooperating. We were clear in the commitment. It's like, no, we believe this is what is to be offered. So, the second year and the numbers, 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 staying the line?"***



Measuring Success Finding Three: Visibility and Stories of Growth

One pastor states: “Yes, [it is] a little hard to measure. Well, I can tell that’s happening **because I know disciples are being grown.**” This pastor summarizes this finding excellently. It is hard to measure, but he knows when he sees and hears it happening. Pastors in the study measure success in ministry by seeing the presence and engagement of youth and young adults in their faith communities **and** listening to their stories about their encounters and discipleship experiences.

Visibility is one way some pastors indicated that success could be measured. One says: “Measure success in ministry with youth and young adults, if they go to college, if we see them again, **when they come back home**, when they come back to visit, then it’s a success. There are not a lot of follow-ups on my part, and that’s something that I could use some accompaniment with to see if there are some ideas regarding that.” This pastor wanted visibility plus involvement in the community in some way, stating, “I think for me, what would be a **success is the visibility of the group; that they are involved and then visible in the parish.** So, we have the room where they meet. But where are they in the church? How are they helping? We had two fish dinners sponsored by our men’s club and Knights of Columbus. We had one teen helping with his service hours or something. However, there was no incentive, even from the program, to let our youth help with busing the tables or visibility t-shirts that identify them as the group where we worked on the Emmaus as a kind of branding. Still, there’s no visibility in the parish yet. So it’s like we talk about [the] youth group, but we never see them.”



“For me, success has always been about individual stories, not numbers. You could have a huge group attending an event, but if they’re not having an encounter with Christ... Also, if a youth minister moves on and it all falls apart, then there’s something wrong. Success, to me, has always been about individuals growing in their faith and everything.”



Listening to and then sharing their stories seems to be a robust measure of success for some pastors. One states: *“What I did this year is I sat down with the youth group, the ones that had gone to Steubenville and the ones that went to One Bread One Cup, and that was pretty much the entirety of the youth group. I remember when I sat down to see what they had learned from the summer and their different trips. They also had gone to the diocesan youth conference. **Those kids were just bursting at the seams. They just couldn’t stop telling me about the stories and the people they met and what they learned, and they were just so excited and, you know, so I think I try to measure the success by talking to the youth.**”*

Another pastor says: *“I touched base [with] youth, with the parents, too, and the youth director, and see what have [they] learned? What are [they] experiencing through our youth group? What are [they] taking away from it? So I think about that trip on Good Friday to the shower power that they did. The kids came back just so excited. **I think just talking to the youth and seeing what they’re learning and what they’re taking away from it is, to me, how to judge success and how engaged they are.**”*

One pastor states: *“It begins with questions. It’s the questions that teens might ask about prayer, or that they might ask about the Gospels or scripture in general, or that they might ask, which suggests a hunger in them. So that would be one thing. **I also think it would be that parents or a parish or teachers could notice and witness the change in that person.**”*

Another pastor says: *“Sometimes, when we’re living out of that grace and receiving that grace, there is a noticeable shift. Maybe not overnight—sometimes that happens—but that quality of a young person and who they’re becoming is something; there’s a lightness, too.”*

One pastor says: *“Well, for me, is the number good? When do you see the increase in numbers? You do this retreat, 75; the next one may double that amount. But for me, **how I measure success is when you see the young people come back and do more than what they’ve done; you see them grow in their faith and grow in maturity.**”*



Measuring Success Finding Four: Creating Missionary Disciples

Did the youth and young adults participating in the ministry become missionary disciples who actively lived their faith through prayer, Sacraments, participation in parish ministries, and service to the poor and marginalized? If yes, then these pastors would consider the ministry successful. The difference between this finding and the ones before is that this is about taking the final step into “owned” discipleship beyond visibility and growth in faith. For some pastors, the emphasis was more on integrating youth into parish life and ministries. One says, **“Having them living out that faith, so not relegating to a youth Sunday for lecturing and ushering, but that they are embedded in those ministries across the board.”** He continues, **“To have young people who are willing and able to speak for themselves and be a part of the advisory bodies of the parish and to sit at the table, not just speaking on the youth issues, but also of how the parish is engaging with our community at large, how do we think about liturgy? How are we thinking about service? How are we thinking about even funeral celebrations?”** Simply put by this pastor, **“The success metric is Sacraments. It’s vocations.”**



“Success is that they fall in love with Jesus, and the sign that they’re in love with Jesus is they’re not only coming to Mass on Sundays, but they’re cultivating a relationship with Jesus Christ. A personal relationship, by praying, however they pray best. They have a consistent relationship with the Lord. They are rooted in the Sacraments and in service to the poor, and they went out and did what Jesus told us to do.”

These pastors agree and describe what this participation looks like, “I’ll be happy to see the youth that can **participate in all the ministries of our parish**, like, without being forced, if I may use that word. They’re able to do it freely, as I said, with joy and dedication, and they own the parish.” For this pastor, it includes articulation of their faith: “I want to see young people engaged in ministry across the board. And so first, we have young people who understand that they are disciples, they’re in relationship with Christ just like they’re in relationship with others, and that they can articulate that as well as they can articulate that the Eucharist is the body and blood of Jesus Christ.”

Going out into the community is essential to others, who state, “**They are prioritizing Jesus Christ on the calendar in prayer, and they’re imitating Jesus Christ by prioritizing the marginalized, disenfranchised, and oftentimes ostracized people in our community.** So they’re really plugging in, we have a big homeless population, and so they’re plugging into other people who are also suffering. To me, that’s fruit.” Another pastor shares, “There would be a response in that individual who is affected in a positive way by the ministry program to be able to serve in a more social justice-oriented manner. We hear St. Paul say that we’re not supposed to forget about the poor, and Jesus says we need to be able to look after those who are least among us. So, to put our money where our mouth is, you know, so to speak, I would be compelled to give back.”





DECISIONS:

How are strategic decisions about youth and young adult ministry made in your parish community?

Insights into the pastor's leadership style emerged through discussions on how strategic decisions were made concerning youth and young adult ministry. This revealed a spectrum of pastoral leadership and decision-making approaches, ranging from a more autonomous or detached style to a collaborative, team-oriented approach.



Decisions Finding One: Spectrum of Leadership and Decision-Making

Leadership, involvement, and decision-making in youth and young adult ministry followed a spectrum. On one end, pastors shared their vision or ideas, identified leaders, provided necessary support, and empowered youth to take initiative. In this approach, while pastors retained ultimate decision-making authority, their involvement in day-to-day activities was more limited, focusing instead on guiding and equipping others to carry out the work. On the other end of the spectrum were pastors involved directly in ministry with youth and young adults. This approach to leadership and decision-making would be considered a team approach. Although the pastor's role seems to vary in this approach, he was clearly actively involved and shared decision-making.

Collaboration, or some version of that word, was used to describe their behavior and thinking across the entire spectrum, making it challenging to understand what pastors meant by "collaboration." For some, it meant empowerment, for others working together, and for others listening. However, this pastor reminds us that his role is to accompany leaders: *"So, it's not just accompanying the youth for me; I think we also have to accompany the leaders. Sometimes, as pastors, we're so focused on the youth that we forget that without your team, leaders, or adults, you don't have anybody to help the youth."*





“One of the things is [being] collaborative. You know...if someone has a good idea and they’re willing to share it, I’m willing to listen.”

ON THE EMPOWERMENT END...

One pastor says: “Basically, what I did was I put the youth ministry and my associate pastor in charge of it. I asked five or six different people to help, to be part of a board for developing where youth ministry was going to go. I sat down with them in the first meeting. I gave them my vision of what I was thinking it should be doing and where it should be going. And then I left it up to them to decide what they were going to do. And I didn’t go to another meeting after that. They knew I would come. I think they asked me to go back to one other meeting because they had some questions, and I went back to answer whatever their questions were. But at that point, I’m very hands-off. As I say to people, if I have to make all the decisions, I don’t need you. **I trust these people. I believe I picked the right people to make it happen, and it’s their job to make it happen.**”

Another pastor states: “It’s myself and our DRE, but ideally, what I would like to see is myself with the team of that demographic, so myself and the young adults, myself and the teens, that **it’s a collaborative effort**. Even more so, I’m empowering them to craft what it is that they want to see, what speaks to them.”

This pastor says: “And of course, we talk, and I put my two cents in, and, I mean, there’s some things that I want to see. She [the youth minister] is my right-hand person here in the parish, even though I also have an associate pastor. She and I work very closely in all aspects of the parish life and [we are] just still experiencing some of the frustrations of when this is going to get off the ground. We have a lot of ideas, but things that have been tried just don’t seem to be working yet as far as getting people here.”

Another pastor states: “I’m into real collaborative ministry, so it’s not just what I want to do because **I’m not an expert in youth or young adult ministry. So, I’m learning.** I went to the Religious Ed Congress, and I took a couple of the sessions to have my eyes opened up as well. I look to our other staff and pastoral associate for parish operations here. She has a wealth of experience behind her as well. It’s all of us working together. Mostly, though, as far as the leadership goes, she is the leader.”



THE TEAM APPROACH

One pastor says: *“That was a great question. How does that happen? Yes. It was messy because, in the beginning, I did not communicate well, and then, when we began to drive better, it ended up being great. In the beginning, I didn’t know what the heck I was doing. There were many tears in the beginning, but we worked it out and became very close. Once we all embraced our place and we’re like, all right, I’m not going to have a vision anymore, and then galvanize, until it goes through the discerner. The discerner then brings it to the administrator by getting to the helper so we can have a model that we begin to work with. But in the beginning, it was so messy, and there were so many tears, misunderstandings, and terrible communication on my end, so **we learned and grew together.**”*

Another pastor states: *“There are three of us. Our faith formation director [and]our youth coordinator are under the umbrella of faith formation. I’m a very involved priest, which some people might not like, especially individuals who have done things on their own and made decisions on their own. But I’m more involved. **The three of us always get together and do our planning, and I would do a follow-up.** For example, on the second Tuesday and the fourth Tuesday of the month, we have our youth nights, so I would get together with them on a Monday and say, okay, what is the plan for tomorrow? Then, we will brainstorm and throw ideas. We usually take turns.”*

This pastor says: *“I think that I truly want to work with them, you know, as a team and to **include me as a part of that team.** I’ve seen, too, I’ve come into a parish where I’ve seen lay people. They don’t really want the priest involved. They just want to, you know, this is my ministry, and I want to do it my way. And I just think I want them to know how important it is to me for all of us to work together. **We all should be working towards the same goal and working as, you know, one unit together.**”*



FAITH COMMUNITY:

What needs to change in the minds and hearts of the faith community for them to say yes to accompanying youth?

First, they discussed reminding the faithful of their baptismal call to discipleship and sharing that faith with others. Second, a reminder that everyone has different gifts, and some people may not have the gifts to accompany young people in faith directly.



**Faith Community Finding One:
Baptismal Vocation - All Are Called**

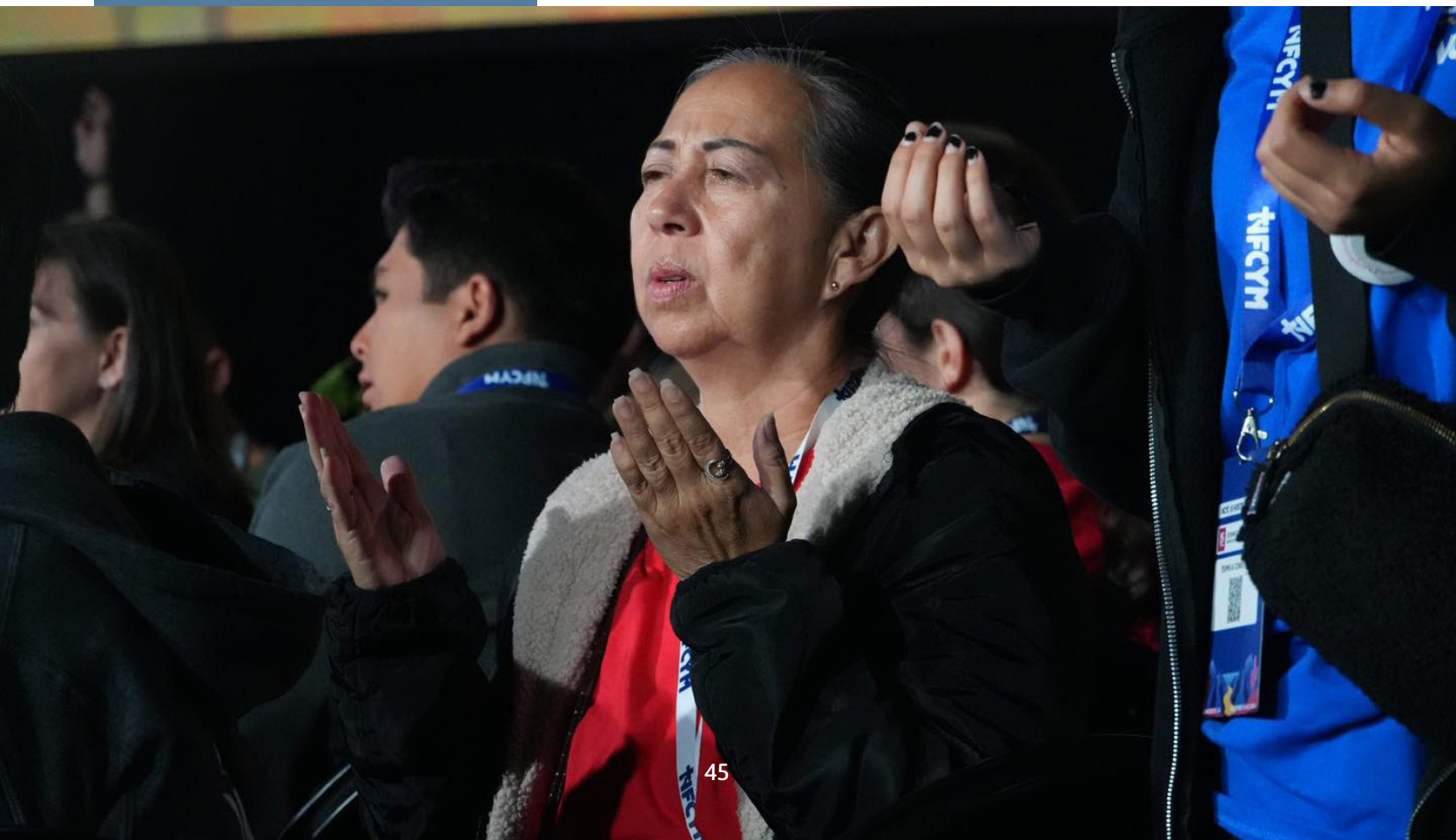
The primary call of Baptism to be disciples of Christ and share that faith with others is what some pastors said needs to be the focal point if we are to convert members of parish communities to accompany young people in faith. As one pastor puts it, *“And it’s again getting people to begin to realize 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. Basically, it’s getting people to understand what that baptismal vocation is, and that is the primary vocation of our lives. And everything else comes out of that, whether it’s marriage, whether it’s the priesthood, whether it’s single life and being, say, in the medical field or whatever, a teacher, everything should be coming out of that baptismal vocation. And until we see it that way, while we see the Sacraments as something we just check off rather than a way of living, we’ll be kind of stuck. And it’s trying to bring them to that point of seeing it as this is about encountering Christ in order to have that relationship with Christ, in order to bring Christ to others.”*

“

“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.”

This pastor gives his own life as an example of being a missionary disciple: *“Secondly, I have to go to the Bible or the Church’s teachings to understand that we are all missionary disciples. And now, if 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. And maybe from my experience, that’s one thing that encouraged me to come here, though. I know I’ll be changing the environment. I’ll be leaving my family, my siblings, and my culture. I’ll be leaving my beautiful weather in Africa and then embracing snow. But then I had to accept that by the end of the day, I must be a missionary disciple to others. I have to preach the word of God to other people, not only to myself. So that was a kind of motivation for me. And I think maybe you also try to show the youth that. They are supposed to be disciples to the other youth, and sometimes the youth can be guru disciples to their fellow youth more than maybe we old people can be.”*

One pastor felt that parents needed to be the primary accompaniers of their children and that we need to help them in that effort: *“To reiterate something I said before, I don’t want to just do something for the sake of doing something really helpful and wanted and needed, which is to support our families. My vision, ultimately, is to give gifts to our families to help them be primary formators for their children. So, it is a family style of accompaniment at the heart of my vision, but completely open to say, well, family, we want them to learn.”*





Faith Community Finding Two:

Not All Are Called to Accompany Directly, But All Are Called to Share Gifts



“I want to be clear about who’s called to be the intercessor for the young people and who’s called to be the actual, like, disciple maker and the one who accompanies...”

A few pastors were very direct in their belief that not all may have the gifts to directly accompany young people. One pastor says: “I want to be clear about who’s called to be the intercessor for the young people and who’s called to be the actual, like, disciple maker and the one who accompanies and who’s called to just like, be a hospitality person, provide meals for the things, but not talk to them because some people are awkward. God bless them in the body of Christ, and we need them. Everybody has different gifts, so it’s like not expecting everyone to be the person who’s doing the pastoral formation, but encouraging people to discern their gifts. Right. And like, oh, this is my personality, this is my charism. This is my love, my passion. Where do I fit in here with making sure our young people are staying?”

This pastor suggested considering a personal invitation rather than an “all-call” from the pulpit for recruiting adults to accompany young people, believing this would help discern if the person has the right gifts for the role. He says: “That’s what the council instructs us to do, to be able to recognize that it’s not just Father up there doing all this stuff and, so, by extension, it’s not just the youth minister who is in charge of all the kids, that’s not some babysitter. I think the way that we do that is for us to be able to say there’s a new youth minister to be able to encounter not just the teens but the parents, but not just the parents, but the broader parish community. **For them to make those relationships on their own and invite other people into the ministry, there has to be a myriad of non-teens who have benefited from youth ministry programs.** And why? Because they were invited in. Whether it’s maybe to start to be a chaperone, just to make sure you’ve got enough adults in the room, but then having seen the Gospel in a [new] way that perhaps, maybe they didn’t have the opportunity based on their own personal background or experience or even generational things.... I’m being invited into this, so the caution with that is that there would have to be the appropriate people going up to the pulpit and saying, I need other people to help me with that. Maybe that’s not the best play, but building those relationships in the parish is like, oh, there’s something about this woman that could do it. She’d be a good core team member, better than she would be able to help me accompany youth.”



PASTOR SUPPORT:

How do you get pastor support for the youth and young adult ministry and the ministry leader?

It can be said emphatically that every pastor in this study supports youth and young adult ministry. Even though not all of them had an active ministry in their parish, all were interested in having one. The support question was asked in various ways, including what advice would you give a ministry leader working with a pastor who is not supportive or is unengaged in their ministry?



Pastor Support Finding One: Being Pastoral to the Pastor

Pastors emphasized that fostering greater support for youth and young adult ministry from their fellow pastors begins with a personal invitation and relationship-building. They stressed the importance of not assuming that pastors are fully aware of ministry activities or uninterested in participating. Open communication and active listening were identified as key strategies for engaging pastors effectively. Persistence was also highlighted as essential—continuing to reach out and involve them, even if initial efforts are met with hesitation or limited response.

One pastor says: *“You have to pray for them; that’s the biggest thing. I think each priest is different, but maybe he was the youth ministry priest and did CYC types of things in the sixties, but now he’s tired. 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.”* Developing a personal relationship with the pastor was important to many who responded, which started with invitation and listening.





“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?”

One part of being pastoral is assuming the positive instead of the negative and helping the person become better. This pastor advises using this strategy with unsupportive pastors: *“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. And so, like, 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?”*

As hard as it may seem, being honest with pastors might be helpful. One pastor states: *“I know this will vary from individual to individual, but I think there would be some pastors, not all, that would be open to listening to someone say, Father, I need to sit down and talk to you. You’re kind of, you know, you’re the stumbling block here. And, you know, we have a lot of sharp people here with good ideas. I got to open the door a little bit and let them know I would welcome anything like that. If I’m the problem, I need to know that. And not every priest would be open, but I think more than you might think.”* He says that some priests may not be able to work with young people because of their rigidity: *“I’m going to put a caveat on that. People my age, priests my age, I’m hearing different stories from very young priests who are so rigid, who have all the answers that get into the pulpit and say, forget about anything you’ve heard before. Now, I’m going to teach you what the Catholic faith is. You know, you’re not going to get anywhere with people like that. And Pope Francis has been so clear about the danger of that kind of rigidity. He’s been pretty clear about, you know, clericalism, which is our biggest downfall. Or maybe come and sit down in a circle with them and take all their questions and, you know, don’t be afraid of their questions, whatever they are. And if they’re about celibacy or about sex or whatever, answer them honestly, you know.”*



“And I’ve seen it both here at this parish. The pastor is the greatest advocate and success for youth ministry, and the pastor is the obstacle, which only makes it challenging for me. What am I going to be? Am I going to be the springboard for success, or I am going to be the obstacle?”



Pastor Support Finding Two:

Will I be the springboard for success or the obstacle for failure?

Pastors articulated their understanding of their role in making a ministry successful and how they can also be an obstacle if they are not careful. Admittedly unconventional, this pastor said, don’t let someone stop you from sharing the Gospel with young people. As he puts it, “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, your job 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, if there is an energy, there is fertile soil, cultivate it, even if that means cultivating it out, you know, outside of the church campus.”

This pastor provides an example of how a pastor can make or break a ministry effort: **“I just think over all these years, one of the major successes has been giving young people a space that they can 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.”**



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