

The Moment: National Leadership Forum for Young Adult Ministry

White paper on national realities and social concerns and their impact on young adult ministry.

Written by: Rosie China Shawver

Defining young adults in the context of the Catholic Church and society is complex. This submission will focus on young adults in college (18-25). While this demographic is limited in scope, it is a microcosm of young adult ministry around the country. There is a misunderstanding in the Catholic young adult world that Catholic college students are taken care of by the Church. The reality is the opposite. Catholic campus ministry only exists on one in four, four-year institutions.¹ Only one in sixty-four community colleges have a Catholic campus ministry presence.² On the campuses that have a Catholic ministry, if the campus ministry is doing well, it reaches only 10% of the Catholic students on their campuses. What is keeping college young adults out of our Churches and away from growing in their Catholic faith? This submission will begin with a description of a typical college student, then highlight some of the national realities and social concerns that impact young adults and young adult ministry, particularly on college campuses, and end with ideas on how to best minister to college students.

When students arrive on colleges campuses they are seeking meaning, acceptance and forming their identity. Others are lost, not sure of their major and indifferent to religion. For many students, this is their first time living outside of their parents' home. Due to rising cost of education and financial hardships approximately 50% of all college students live at home and commute to campus.³ While many college young adults have to live at home to save money, those that do not live at home have their first experience of independence. During this period of transition a lot is happening in their lives. They are discovering who they are and discerning careers and some even their vocations. And they hunger for love vis-a-vis authentic friendships and romantic relationships.

Discovering their identity in Christ is made more difficult due to a variety of national realities and social concerns. As a result of instamedia and the pull and push pressure to succeed young adults are strained to look and act a certain way, pursuing human made ideals rather than what God is calling them each to do. In our society, individualism is preferred over community. There is a dichotomy in young adult hearts of wanting to belong yet being socially isolated. Individualism in combination with the online culture debilitates young adults abilities, due to lack of practice, to form authentic friendships and build meaningful relationships. Dating, as an example, is not the norm. Hooking up, defined as one that accepts and encourages casual sexual encounters, including one-night stands and other related activity, without necessarily including emotional bonding or long-term commitment, has become socially acceptable. Young adults fear intimacy and go towards low-commitment relationships that in the short term fills a need, whether emotional or physical. College campus ministry and young adult ministry, through an encounter and relationship with Christ, are places where young adults learn skills such as discernment, prayer, and building relationships with one another, which includes how to date. However, if we are not relevant in our preaching and ministry about these topics we will be judged irrelevant.

When young adults have difficulty forming authentic community, anxiety, loneliness and depression settle in. According to the American Psychological Association for the last several years

¹ USCCB Study on college campus ministry, 2017: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EPVS0VmWPOc>.

² Ibid.

³ Ashford, Kate, "[More Millennials Living at Home to Save on College Costs](#)," 2014, Forbes Magazine.

millennials are the most stressed out generation.⁴ This is typically masked by addictions - alcohol, drugs, sex, pornography or situations as drastic as suicidal ideation or hurting themselves and others. Not only must we remain relevant about talking about these addictions with them, we must also help them heal and, if necessary, become better at referring them to seek help from professionals. These addictions need professional help and cannot be addressed effectively only through prayer or the confessional.

Many college students struggle financially. In 2017, I was asked by the United States Catholic Conference of Bishops (USCCB), in preparation for the 2018 Youth Synod, to collect data and survey students involved in campus ministries in California. Sixteen percent of the 413 students surveyed stated that money and financial aid is one of their biggest challenges as a college student. Many indicated that they struggle with paying for tuition and/or struggle with homelessness. At the University of Wisconsin, researchers surveyed more than 4,000 community college students across the country. Twenty percent of the students reported being hungry and thirteen percent homeless.⁵ Student debt post college is also a concern.⁶ On college campuses, these national realities present challenges for college campus ministers who find that many students just do not have time for campus ministry. How can a college campus ministry compete with a student's time if the student needs to work part or full time alongside taking a full class load? And do campus ministries have the capacity to address student hunger and homelessness?

Immigration is a national reality that has been at the core of our country since its inception. 1.1 million college students are international, here on F-1 visas.⁷ Approximately 124,200 college students are recipients of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA). Around 4% of DACA recipients complete their college education.⁸ Of the 50,000-60,000 undocumented high school graduates each year, most do not attend college. According to the UCLA Labor Center only 5-10% of undocumented young adults make it to college due to economic inaccessibility.⁹ DACA and undocumented students on our campuses need a lot of support, yet, they tend to be one of the most hidden populations on our campuses because of their desire to fit in, not to mention their fear for themselves and their families. How do college campus ministries find and support this hidden population?

Another national reality that we cannot ignore are the Catholic Church's sex abuse scandals. This abuse of power creates a mistrust of our Church in our young adult community. The college students I am interacting with today are confused or do not know what the facts are because they are only reading headlines. Even students who have grown in their faith due to the leadership of Pope Francis are struggling with the humanity of the Church. For others this is a reason to either mock the Church or shun it entirely. In a society that is already looked at through the lens of hyper-sexualization we as a Church must have a higher standard and live by it. This national reality must be talked about with our young adults. Authenticity goes a long way. We need to continue to be authentic to who we are, admit our mistakes, help

⁴ American Psychological Association, "[Stress in America: Coping with Change](#)," 2017, pg 6.

⁵ Carrapeza, Kirk, "[National Survey Shows Higher Rates of Hunger and Homeless Community College Students](#)," 2017, National Public Radio.

⁶ Friedman, Zach, "[Student Loan Debt Statistics in 2018: A \\$1.5 Trillion Crisis](#)," 2018, Forbes Magazine.

⁷ Zong, Jie and Jeanne Batalova, "[International Students in the United States](#)," 2018, Migration Policy Institute.

⁸ Zong, Jie, Ariel Soto, Jeanne Batalova, Julia Gellat and Randy Capps, "[A Profile of Current DACA Recipients by Education, Industry and Occupation](#)," November 2017, Migration Policy Institute.

⁹ 15 Eye-Opening Facts On Undocumented Students. (2018). Retrieved from: <https://www.onlinecollege.org/2011/10/19/15-eye-opening-facts-on-undocumented-students/>.

make visible changes to structures in the Church that are not transparent and healthy for the people of God, and empower young adults to take roles in our local Churches. This reality cannot be ignored.

The national reality of the ‘nones’, those unaffiliated with organized religion, is also something we must recognize. There is an apathy towards anything religious and as a Church now is the time to take action. St. Mary’s Press’ study, *Going Going Gone*, describes three different groups of young adults that have left the Catholic Church, the injured, dissenter and drifters. The injured are those who have been hurt by the Church, dissenters are those who disagree with Church teachings and decide to leave the Church, and drifters are those who are apathetic and do not see Church as relevant. We see all these realities on college campuses. If we look at the groups described in the study and consider the national realities I have described above, our action must be one of accompaniment. No matter what a student is experiencing we must meet them where they are, patiently introduce them to Christ, and help them grow and flourish into whom Christ created them to be. The Catholic Church has always served those in need. It has always been a place of refuge. What is preventing us from authentic accompaniment is ourselves; we focus too much on programs or fight among ourselves rather than accompanying young adults.

In conclusion, while this white paper is not an exhaustive list of national realities and social concerns that are keeping young adults out of our Churches, action in reaching out to and accompanying young adults is similar in all scenarios. In the context of college campus ministry, we must first know and listen to our community. If our campus has a higher number of low-income students that are struggling with paying their tuition and with homelessness, the approach towards reaching them will look different than an approach taken on an affluent college campus. If our student population is largely one ethnicity the way that those students encounter and experience Christ might be different than another ethnicity. If our undergraduate community is largely focused on Greek life and athletics, such as the University of Southern California, our approach must be different than a campus that is primarily focused on academic research, such as University of California, San Diego. Contextualization is important. Knowing our communities and listening is crucial.

Accompaniment flows from the initial encounter with a student. This is sometimes where students get lost in the shuffle. Why host an event for students if there is no follow up with each individual student? We must be intentional with all students who we encounter on campus or in our church. The accompaniment must have a purpose and direction in which we are pointing students towards. All baptized persons are called to grow in discipleship and friendship with Christ. Accompaniment should build a relationship with God, in prayer, through the Sacraments, community, intellect, virtue, and through the discernment of gifts discovering each person's apostolic call within the Church and vocationally outside of the church walls.

Nationally we need to have a radical shift in the way we do college campus ministry. Focus on our students and their growth as disciples and concurrently evangelization, as opposed to a focus on programs and staying comfortable in our offices and churches, needs to be the primary lens of college campus ministry. In the 1985 USCCB document *Empowered by the Spirit* our bishops state that college campus ministry is the breeding ground for leaders in our Church and world. They also state that Catholic college campus ministry has the potential to be on the forefront of ministerial innovation. As called for by both Pope Francis and our US bishops at the Convocation of Catholic Leaders, now is the time for us to pave the way on how to do ministry in a way that forms and builds missionary disciples. This will be a game changer!