In October 2018, the Church will gather as a synod of bishops to consider young people, faith and discernment. The outcome of this gathering is a process of transforming the way that the Church engages with young people so that youth and young adults are more guided as they hear and respond to God’s call and join with us in sharing the Good News.

“…the Church has decided to examine herself on how she can lead young people to recognize and accept the call to the fullness of life and love, and to ask young people to help her in identifying the most effective ways to announce the Good News today.”  
(Preparation Document, Page 1)

Some in youth ministry might think that this is just another theme to acknowledge or that the synod is just another meeting of Church leaders. I don’t think so. I think this is a radical challenge to take a step back and really look at our stance and everything we do in ministry with youth. This is how I summarize the preparatory document:

God has begun a conversation with young people; our job is to pay attention to what God is doing and walk with youth as they grow in discipleship. We are called to accompany them as they discern their response to God’s plan for their life.

How is this different? It’s all about stance. A typical story of youth ministry goes something like this: I have an experience of faith which leads me to become a youth minister. I work to create programs where young people can experience faith and I try to get youth to join in those programs. This process relies upon the personality of the ministry leader and the convergence between young people’s interests and the programs that are created. In this model, we must initiate a relationship with a young person, help them trust us, and sell them on joining a program. We lose a lot of youth in the process, not necessarily because youth aren’t interested in faith or God, but maybe they don’t relate to our faith journey and the programs we have created.

The process suggested in the synod document is different. It is telling us that accompaniment is our model for ministry with youth and their families which means
we need to *start by paying attention to the conversation that God initiated with a young person.*

It all starts with listening. Because we love young people and we long for them to experience the embrace of Christ as disciples, we focus our attention on helping youth listen to God with their “inner self.” We help them notice what God is doing and notice their choices to see the possibilities for their life and for their life in Christ.

“…understanding that the vocational experience is a gradual process of inner discernment and growth in the faith, which leads to discovering the fullness of the joy of life and love, making a gift of oneself and participating in the proclamation of the Good News.”

As a church, we also pay attention: we want to listen to young people. In November, Papal Nuncio Christophe Pierre gave an address today at the USCCB that is a preview for the upcoming Synod on Youth and Vocation: We are called to listen. "We have been describing young people and their relationship to the Church. If we are to help young people discern God's plan for their lives, we might ask: what are they looking for? They are looking to be heard. Earlier I mentioned the idea of accompaniment, which implies going to them and being with them. To this, we add listening to them. Listening is an important element of discernment. Pope Francis said: 'I think that in the pastoral ministry of the Church many beautiful things are being done, many beautiful things... But there is one thing that we must do more, even the priests, even the lay people, but above all the priests must do more: the apostolate of listening: to listen!' (Incontro del Santo Padre con i partecipanti a/ convegno per persone disabili, 11 giugno 2016)"

Listening is the starting point for all ministry. What does it mean to really listen to young people? We need to pause in our quest of sharing with them all the things that they need to know and take some time to really hear their story. Where do they see God? How do they experience our parish? What is their experience of youth ministry? Let the conversation go where it will. As you discern and plan for your ministry time with youth in this new year take some time to truly listen to youth and their families; I believe that if we do, we will see our ministries with youth transformed.

**Young People in Today’s World**

Part of listening to youth is paying attention to their experience of the world, to see the change, the diversity, and the complexity. We are guided to really look at the world of
youth today, to see the gifts of this generation and their willingness to participate and help change things for the better. We are also challenged to see the youth on the margins and those facing challenges that can lead to despair and discouragement. These are some of the areas that are highlighted by the Preparation Document:

- **A Rapidly-Changing World**
  The pace of change in today’s world is astounding. Though they are adept at change and embrace things that are new, young people are also particularly vulnerable to changes that increase “social unease and economic difficulties.”

Part of the changes that young people are experiencing relate to discoveries and attitudes towards science. For many youth, there is a tension between awareness of scientific truths and engagement in faith. This is a pastoral challenge that we need to address.

- **New Generations**
  This generation of youth are growing up in an amazingly diverse and complex world. Young people are culturally diverse and within that diversity, there are “special features” for youth are second generation. They may be the same cultural background as their parents but they are growing up in a culture different from their parents because they were born here.

There are many wonderful attributes to this generation of youth, including their openness to learning, their embrace of technology, and their desire to make a difference and change the world. There are also many youth who are living on the peripheries and face economic and educational challenges.

- **Belonging and Participation**
  Young people want to belong and take an active role in making a difference. Some become discouraged. “The discrepancy between young people who are passive and discouraged and those enterprising and energetic comes from the concrete opportunities offered to each one in society and the family in which one develops, in addition to the experiences of a sense of meaning, relationships and values which are formed even before the onset of youth.”

- **Personal and Institutional Points of Reference**
  Clearly young people are ready to jump in and participate in faith and in the world, but they need a hand.

- **Young People and Choices**
  Young people continue to be fascinated by the person of Jesus and the Good News that he proclaimed, but this message is often obscured by the distractions of the culture and the real challenges that young people face. One way to awaken the idealism of young people and reignite their faith is to engage them is
solving the problems of the world, in particular by using the tools of social innovation.

**Faith and Discernment**

Vocational discernment is “the process by which a person makes fundamental choices, in dialogue with the Lord and listening to the voice of the Spirit, starting with the choice of one’s state in life.”\(^v\) In our ministries we often narrowly think of vocations as recruiting young people to consider priesthood or religious life. The Synod document writers show a great insight into what it means to walk with youth as they consider their response to God’s invitation to a joy-filled and rich life.

“For each person, the vocation to love takes concrete form in everyday life through a series of choices, which find expression in the states of life (marriage, ordained ministry, consecrated life, etc.), professions, forms of social and civil commitment, lifestyle, the management of time and money, etc. Whether these choices are willfully made or simply accepted, either consciously or unconsciously, no one is excluded from making these choices. The purpose of vocational discernment is to find out how to transform them, in the light of faith, into steps towards the fullness of joy to which everyone is called.”\(^vi\)

Vocation is not something new to be added to the ministry or the faith life of an individual. It is a process of paying attention to the dialogue with God, to hear his invitation, and to see the pattern of our loving and life-giving choices. At a certain in our life, we look at our pattern of choices and make a decision about our state in life: what state will help me make the most life-giving, loving choices? Vocational discernment is about listening, paying attention, and ultimately about taking a risk.

**Accompaniment**

“Accompanying young people requires going beyond a preconceived framework, encountering young people where they are, adapting to their times and pace of life and taking them seriously.”\(^vii\)

The Preparation document proposes accompaniment as the model for our ministry with young people. This is really a perspective, not another program. We provide communities, programs and opportunities for involvement to create the possibility for developing relationships of
accompaniment. These relationships are built on respect for the young person and his or her freedom to respond. There is no coercion in the love of God, though there is persistence!

The roots of the word “accompany” is to share bread with. It means to walk along side, not pulling or pushing. As when Jesus accompanied the disciples on their journey to Emmaus, it means listening to questions. When we walk with youth, we pay attention to what God is doing and then try to lead them to Holy, where they experience encounter and mission.

We are guided to minister to youth by going to where youth are and by taking them seriously. We engage in creative, personal responses and we going beyond our ordinary methods of ministry. This will mean avoiding anything that makes the Church outdated and makes people feel hemmed in. It also means empowering youth as agents of their own salvation. We go out, beyond our usual activities and minister with youth.

In these relationships of trust, we spend time with youth. We listen to them and respond to their experiences and their story. We empathize, that is, we try to feel with the young person demonstrate that we care about what they are experiencing and their perspective on their experience.

Walking with youth, we can help awaken their response to God’s loving voice. We can ask questions without pre-determining the answer.

**Which Young People do We Accompany?**

We are guided to accompany “all young people without exception.” We recognize that youth don’t need to “join” our ministries – many of them already joined by baptism. The Church is geographic, which means that we stand with our bishop as responsible for the salvation of the souls of all of those within the boundaries of our local Church, paying special attention to the youth who are on the margins.

**Who Accompanies?**

The whole faith community walks with their young members. Families have a particular role, as do “shepherds of souls”, pastors, bishops and vocations ministers. Teachers also have an opportunity to accompany students.

Young people need “persons of reference”: adults and peers who are “close-by, credible, consistent and honest.”
“The role of credible adults and their cooperation is basic in the course of human development and vocational discernment. This requires authoritative believers, with a clear human identity, a strong sense of belonging to the Church, a visible spiritual character, a strong passion for education and a great capacity for discernment.”

This description for a person of reference is a tall order. People who accompany youth will need support, guidance and training to stand in this important role and avoid manipulation or coercion.

**What Does All of This Mean?**

This was the question that was asked by those who witnessed the Pentecost. That’s what we need, a new Pentecost. To head in the direction suggested by the Preparation document for the Synod, and transform our ministries, we will need to embrace the Spirit that calls us to do something new and to things in a new way.

“No seed for vocations can be fruitful if approached with a closed and “complacent pastoral attitude that says: ‘We have always done it this way’” and without people being “bold and creative in this task of rethinking the goals, structures, style and methods of evangelization in their respective communities” (Evangeli gaudium, 33). x

Part of being new is recognizing that programs and pastoral activities are intended to initiate the process of accompaniment.

“Pastoral activity with young people, which is called upon to start processes more than to dominate spaces, shows, above all, the importance of service to the human growth of each individual and the educational and formative resources that can support it.”

In other words, we put young people at the heart of the ministry, we pay attention to God’s journey with them and we walk. It’s all about creating the possibilities for youth to encounter God’s love and to experience companions as they seek their response to God’s invitation.

Young people will be formed in the Joy of the Gospel, they will be formed as Missionary Disciples when they have encounters with Christ, when they have relationships with disciples who witness and care and pay attention, when they are formed in the practices of discipleship – when they learn what disciples do and when they are charged up for their mission, for the way God will work through them, when they discern and follow God’s path for them.
There are challenges in the way we are currently forming young people. The process of engaging and forming the next generation of disciples should be amongst the highest priorities, and amongst the most significant way we celebrate who we are as a community of Disciples. We have relegated this ministry to one or a few programs and delegated it to a few people with activities that appeal to some youth. We also catechize out of fear – we’re afraid and concerned because of what young people don’t know, what they aren’t doing, and what’s not happening at home. We are also catechizing youth who haven’t been evangelized – we’re giving answers to questions they haven’t asked yet. For too long we have waited for youth to participate, to come to us, to be part of our pre-selected activities and communities.

Instead, we use the Emmaus model. Provide lots of opportunities for youth to seek and ask questions, to be companioned and formed, to be led to encounter and Eucharist, and to be sent in mission. We engage a whole community of active disciples to walk with youth in their holy questions, to pay attention to their lives, to mentor them in the faith, to pray with them, serve the poor with them, spend time with them in adoration and in the sacraments. We need to move beyond the program and walk with youth.

*Websites and links in this session were accessed successfully prior to publication.*
Ideas for You and Your Team to Prepare for the Synod on Young People, the Faith, and Vocational Discernment

Read the Preparation Document in Sections and have a discussion as ministry team. You can find the entire document available online here (http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/documents/rc_synod_doc_20170113_documento-preparatorio-xv_en.html).

Use the questions below to guide your discussion.

**Discussion 1: Pages 2-3, Introduction**

- How would you describe the purpose of the Synod to someone who was not familiar with the Church?
- How would you describe it to youth?
- What do you think the Church needs to pay attention to?

**Discussion 2: Page 4, the Beloved Disciple**

- What do you notice about the vocational journey of the beloved disciple?
- How does his journey compare with your personal journey?
- What does this tell you about ministry with young people?

**Discussion 3: Pages 4-7, Young People in Today’s World**

- How do your experiences with youth match with the descriptions in the document?
- What are the gifts you notice in youth today?
- What are the challenges they face?
- Exercise: Create a mindmap to explore the World of Young People Today, use this explanation for this exercise: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mind_map
- After you complete the mindmap, discuss: what do you notice? What do you feel? What does this tell us about ministry with youth?

**Discussion 4: Pages 7-11, Faith, Discernment, and Vocation**

- What is vocation? What is your experience of the path of vocational discernment?
- What is the difference between deciding and discerning?
- What is your experience of being accompanied? What is your experience of accompanying youth?
Discussion 5: Pages 11-15, Pastoral Activities

- To walk with youth, we are told we need to go where youth are. Where are young people today?
- What does it mean to be a person of reference?
- What are some ways to engage the faith community in walking with youth?

Overview: Climbing to the Balcony

- This article suggests that this is a new way to look at ministry with youth:

It is telling us that accompaniment is our model for ministry with youth and their families which means we need to start by paying attention to the conversation that God initiated with a young person.

Part of being new is recognizing that programs and pastoral activities are intended to initiate the process of accompaniment.

... we put young people at the heart of the ministry, we pay attention to God’s journey with them and we walk. It’s all about creating the possibilities for youth to encounter God’s love and to experience companions as they seek their response to God’s invitation.

- What are some ways that our ministries lives the model of accompaniment and puts young people and relationships first?
- What are some ways that programs “dominate spaces”?
- What should we do to transform our ministries using accompaniment as a model?
- What should we stop doing?

Endnotes


iii Preparation Document, Page 4

iv Page 5

v Page 9

vi Page 3

vii Page 11

viii Page 12

ix Page 6

x Page 13

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