

Discussion Guide for Catholic Parish Staff, Volunteers, Councils, and Committees

Suggested Discussion Settings

This discussion guide is a companion to *Going, Going, Gone: The Dynamics of Disaffiliation in Young Catholics* (2018, Saint Mary's Press). This report is on the findings of a national qualitative research project of Saint Mary's Press and the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) at Georgetown. Here are some suggested settings to consider for facilitating discussion on the report with your school faculty and staff.

- **Staff Professional Development:** The report and discussion can broaden and deepen the level of engagement all staff have in forming the faith of young people. This discussion can help staff better understand the role they have in accompanying young people on their faith journey, and better understand the dynamics that affect the faith of young people as well as their desire or lack of desire for religious affiliation. This format could be a 60–90-minute session, or it could be broken into multiple sessions, for example three 30-minute sessions at staff meetings throughout the year.
- **Faith Formation/Religious Education Volunteers and/or Committee Reflection:** For a more in-depth reflection, sessions could be scheduled throughout the year, 30-45 minutes in length, for catechists, volunteers, or committee members. These sessions could provide more time for specific reflection and discussion around the implications for youth faith formation/religious education and evangelization.
- **Half-day or Full-day Retreat:** Use the report and this discussion guide to lead an in-depth reflection and study session in a retreat-like setting. You might consider bringing in a guest speaker to lead the retreat; the Saint Mary's Press Catholic Research Group has several presenters available to present at half- and full-day gatherings. Inquiries can be directed to catholicresearch@smp.org.
- **Pastoral Council, Finance Council, and Parish Committee Meetings:** This guide could be used for mission development and formation as well as administration-level discussion and self-reflection to enhance strategic planning processes.

Read the Report before You Meet

For the most effective discussion, have every person who will participate read the full report, *Going, Going, Gone: The Dynamics of Disaffiliation in Young Catholics*, prior to gathering to discuss, minimally pages 4–33 and Appendix E. You may also wish to give the participants some questions, such as the following, to prompt reflection on the reading before you meet.

- What are your overall reactions to the report, especially your emotional reactions?
- What, if anything, surprised you or intrigued you while reading the report?
- What questions does the report, especially the quotes from young people, raise for you?
- What connections can you make with the lives of young people in your parish?



- What does this research call to mind for you? For example: Does it remind you of a particular church document? Statements of Pope Francis? An educational trend? A specific Scripture story? A sociological trend?
- Does the research call to mind the lived experience of anyone you know—whether a young person or an adult?

You may wish to encourage participants to write down their reflections on the above questions as a reference for when you gather with others for discussion.

Discussion Format

The following discussion format is one path you can take in discussing *Going, Going, Gone: The Dynamics of Disaffiliation in Young Catholics*. Adjust these steps as needed to work with your group and to fit your setting.

1. Welcome and Purpose

Welcome participants and introduce the two-fold purpose of the discussion:

1. To understand why young people leave the Catholic Church, as expressed in their own candid, honest, and open stories.
2. To consider how the Catholic parish community can best support young people in their faith and religious affiliation discernment, particularly in the midst of increasing religious disaffiliation.

2. Opening Prayer

We begin together † in the name of the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

R: Amen

Leader:

We gather to listen to the voices of the disaffiliated and to witness a new reality in our Church, in our schools, in our communities, in our nation, in our society. We seek to consider a new creation. And so we pray:

God of Grace, help us to listen to the voices and the stories of the disaffiliated. Dampen our impatience with the unknown. Give us the maturity to find wisdom and guidance. Sustain us as we seek to hold these stories as sacred. Shape us to recognize that, ultimately, the work is yours.

We ask this in faith. Amen.

3. Initial Small-Group Discussion

Start discussion by inviting participants to share their initial thoughts on the report in small groups of 3 to 7 participants. Guide the discussion by using these questions:

- What new understanding(s) do you have about the dynamics of disaffiliation after reading the report?
- What, if anything, surprised or intrigued you while reading this report?
- What further questions do you have in this moment?



4. Reflection on Young People's Stories

Now engage the participants in reflecting on the stories of young people who were interviewed for the report. Introduce this step in these or similar words:

- I want you to call to mind one young person (or young adult) you know who has disaffiliated from religion or even faith altogether. Call to mind their name and their story.
- What's different about this research is that it is rooted in the stories of young people—their real-life experiences. Behind all of the statistics and the charts and graphs are the real, often painful, and always multilayered stories of people's lives. Let's listen to some of their stories.

Listening to the Story of Beatriz

Play the video story of Beatriz found at <http://catholicresearch.smp.org/beatriz/>

After the video, invite comments on the following questions:

- Without making assumptions or casting judgment about Beatriz's story, what did you hear in her story that stood out for you?
- Are there elements in Beatriz's story that you think reflect the experience of our youth and young adults? Are there elements of her story that reflect anything in your own experience?
- Are there some practices or positions our parish or the Church holds that may be causing young people to feel left out, judged, distrustful, or hurt in some way?
- Imagine our parish as a place where young people felt free and encouraged to be in conversation about the things that really matter to them, including their doubts and those things they struggle with or reject. What would our parish look like?

Listening to the Story of Lauren

Introduce the second video in these or similar words:

- Let's listen to one more story of a young woman who isn't sure where she stands with respect to affiliation yet is clear about those things she struggles with and longs for.

Play the video story of Lauren found at <http://catholicresearch.smp.org/lauren/>

After the video, invite comments on the following questions:

- What elements of Lauren's story can you relate to? What elements reflect the experience, thoughts, and feelings of our youth and young adults?
- How can we accompany young people through significant experiences of questioning, doubt, and even rejection of certain practices and teachings of the Church?
- How do we encourage expanding our parish's circle of care to accompany those young people who feel on the outskirts or unaccepted by the Church?
- In what ways might Jesus in the Gospels provide a model for such accompaniment in our parish community? Where are we modeling accompaniment well? Where do we need to improve?



5. Where Are Young People Finding Authentic Community?

Introduce this step in these or similar words:

- The Rabbi Jonathan Sacks says this:
 - “All human persons long for community and connection. An authentic community is that place where I am known by name and missed when I am gone.”
- A key finding in the research is that disaffiliation often occurs not because young people don’t want community and connection; it’s precisely because they do long for an authentic experience of community and connection that they disaffiliate, because they are not finding these in the Catholic community. As some of the disaffiliated say, “I left the Church to find my faith.”
- So, given that young people seek authentic communities and connection, and many are not finding that in the Church, what implications might this have for us as a Catholic parish? Before considering this question, however, let’s ask ourselves where young people—our youth and young adults—are finding authentic experiences of community and connection. Invite the whole group to brainstorm some of those places.

6. Implications for Your Parish

Bring this all home with some reflection on the implications of the report for your parish. Do this by inviting small groups to discuss the following questions and generate at least three practical ideas to share with the larger group.

- What unique opportunity is presented to us as a Catholic parish to model and provide experiences of authentic community and connection for young people—creating a place where young people can freely, openly, and honestly seek to become their authentic selves, even when this might mean doubting, rejecting, choosing a religious expression outside the Catholic Church, or choosing no religious expression at all?
- How can we be a community of connection for young people where they are “known by name and missed when they are gone”?
- What are three practical and real things we can do or be in the lives of our youth and young adults?

Have small groups share their three ideas with the larger group. Then, conclude by asking the group what they want to do next as a follow-up to this discussion. Determine who will be responsible for the “next steps” the group would like to take.

7. Closing Prayer

Close your discussion by inviting group members to share their prayer intentions. Follow this by praying the Lord’s Prayer together.

To continue to receive up-to-date information and listen to new stories of young people, join the conversation at catholicresearch.smp.org.

