

Article

# Ministry with Young Adults: Toward a New Ecclesiological Imagination

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**Abstract:** Pope Francis is urging ministry leaders to become a more synodal church, one where the people of God journey together as a faith community to create a more just and compassionate world. This calls for ministry leaders to embrace a paradigm shift, to not just rename their programs or develop new ones, but to develop a new worldview from which to understand and engage the New Evangelization as envisioned by Pope Francis. However, the 2018 Synod on Young People revealed that the current parish and diocesan programming with young adults are inadequate in: (1) curbing the increasing tide of religious disaffiliation in young adults and (2) addressing the real and felt needs of contemporary Catholic young adults. This article argues for a new ecclesiological imagination that enables ministry leaders to go out into the world to fully engage young adults in the life of the Church.

**Keywords:** young adult ministry; young adults; imagination; evangelization; synodality; synodal church; ecclesiological imagination; missionary discipleship; ecclesiology

## 1. Introduction

Throughout his papacy, Pope Francis, writes of and models a style of ministry rooted in dialogue, listening, and accompaniment. He encourages faith communities and ministry leaders to ensure that young adults<sup>1</sup> have access to quality mentors who will accompany them in life and help them become rooted in community.<sup>2</sup> To do this, Francis urges ministry leaders to embrace the New Evangelization in a way that enables them to become a more synodal church, one where the people of God journey together as missionary disciples to create a more just and compassionate world.<sup>3</sup> The 2018 Synod on Young People, the Faith, and Vocational Discernment (*Synod 2018*) and research in the field of young adult ministry, however, reveal that young adults report feeling deeply lonely and that they continue to struggle to find quality mentors or companions.<sup>4</sup> Many also state that they feel the church is unwelcoming and that they do not feel a sense of belonging in their faith communities.<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile, research shows that the presence of just one mentor or trusting adult in the lives of young people reduces their feeling of loneliness by half.<sup>6</sup> Herein lies a disconnect between the needs of young adults and parish life and ministry.

This article argues that what ministry leaders need today in order to create a more inclusive faith community of belonging that welcomes young adults and builds up the common good is a shift

<sup>1</sup> This essay follows the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), who define the young adult years as between the ages of 18 and 39, whereas youth or adolescents are considered those of ages 13–18.

<sup>2</sup> (Francis 2019, pp. 244, 179).

<sup>3</sup> (Francis 2013, ¶ 24).

<sup>4</sup> (Francis 2019, ¶ 244; O’Keefe 2018; Parks 2010).

<sup>5</sup> (Pew Research Center 2019; Packard et al. 2020).

<sup>6</sup> (Packard et al. 2020, p. 48).

in worldview: an ability to embody an ecclesiological imagination. Using the qualitative method of practical theology, this article describes contemporary young adulthood and the current ministry practices found in most Catholic parishes in the United States to explore their assumptive ecclesiological worldviews or ways of being church. The article then unpacks these “theory-laden practices”<sup>7</sup> or the assumptive worldviews operative in ministry with young adults using a theological and ecclesiological analysis. By exploring the operative worldview behind the New Evangelization as imagined by Popes John Paul II, Benedict XVI, and Francis in depth, this article proposes a way to rethink ministry with young adults grounded in an ecclesiological imagination capable of engaging and empowering Catholic young adults to live in inclusive faith communities of belonging for the common good.

## 2. Contemporary Young Adulthood and Parish Life

Ministry leaders can all agree that coming of age as a young adult in 2020 is no easy task. In a word plagued by the COVID-19 pandemic, young adults’ dreams of entering the workforce, going to college, or starting a career are beyond bleak given the high rate of unemployment.<sup>8</sup> Even before the pandemic hit the United States, young adults were already the most vulnerable population in terms of economics, with approximately seventy-five percent of young adults of ages 18–34 reporting a tremendous rise “in anxiety about paying bills.”<sup>9</sup> Adding to these realities are the challenges that young immigrants and migrants are facing—in particular, the uncertainties around recipients of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program (DACA) in the United States<sup>10</sup> and the fear facing African Americans who live in a country disproportionately prone to shooting unarmed black men and women, many of whom are young adults.<sup>11</sup>

Amidst these socioeconomic and cultural realities in the United States, developmentally, the young adult years consist of periods of transition, identity formation, and a search for a faith they can call their own.<sup>12</sup> Theresa O’Keefe notes that the process of growing towards young adulthood involves “questions of identity, vocation, purpose, desirability, belonging, and romance...”<sup>13</sup> Moreover, this process of self-discovering typically unfolds in the context of healthy meaningful relationships with others, showing a strong need for mentors in the lives of young people.<sup>14</sup>

However, data from the Springtide Research Institute reveal a pervasive sense of loneliness, with one third of those of ages 13–25 reporting that they have no trusted adults in their lives to count on or to talk with about meaningful issues.<sup>15</sup> These realities, coupled with the ongoing challenge of religious disaffiliation in young adults, have raised alarm bells with ministry leaders since researchers started tracking the decline.<sup>16</sup>

The response by ministry leaders to these increasing trends in disaffiliation is typically grounded in what the Church refers to as the New Evangelization. The New Evangelization, as coined by Pope John II, expands on the missionary activity of the Church as described in the Second Vatican Council.<sup>17</sup> Pope John Paul II and later Pope Benedict XVI, in response to what they perceived as the growing secularization of society, called for a “New Evangelization”, or a new approach to the missionary style, and efforts by the Church to reach those baptized Catholics who have fallen away. From this

<sup>7</sup> (Browning 1991, p. 6).

<sup>8</sup> (Department of Labor 2020).

<sup>9</sup> (American Psychiatric Association 2018).

<sup>10</sup> (Redden 2018).

<sup>11</sup> Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, Michael Brown, and many others were young adults when they met their untimely and unjust deaths after encounters with police.

<sup>12</sup> (O’Keefe 2018; Kegan 1994; Parks 2010).

<sup>13</sup> (O’Keefe 2018, p. 5).

<sup>14</sup> (O’Keefe 2018, pp. 7–8); see also (Kegan 1994; Parks 2010).

<sup>15</sup> (Packard et al. 2020, p. 18).

<sup>16</sup> Approximately 35 percent of Catholic youth and young adults (ages 15–25) no longer identify with any religion at all, while 29 percent left the Catholic faith for another Christian tradition. See (McCarty and Vitek 2017, p. 6).

<sup>17</sup> See, in particular, the Decree on the Church’s Missionary Activity (*Ad Gentes*), ¶ 6.

ecclesiological initiative, many ministry leaders believe the way to curb the tide of disaffiliation is to ensure that young people know the faith—that they are well catechized.

Most parishes in the United States focus their energy and resources on sacramental preparation programs and/or catechetical classes that aim to prepare people of all ages to receive the Sacraments, often with a strong emphasis on learning doctrine. While, theoretically, catechesis is a mode of evangelization, in practice, it too often comes across as mere religious instruction—an effort to ensure that young people “know” the faith intellectually with few opportunities to encounter God or to explore the contours of faith in one’s life beyond the parish. An example can be seen in Fr. James Wehner’s statement on Catechetical Sunday in 2012. In discussing the history leading up to the 2012 Synod on the New Evangelization, he states “if Catholics are not able to understand, articulate, explain, and defend their faith, then evangelization cannot occur.”<sup>18</sup> There are two noteworthy assumptions implied here: first, that catechist and catechetical leaders are well catechized, and second, through these catechetical programs, their students will be prepared to evangelize others. There is little to no reflection on assessing the extent to which students have already had profound encounters with Christ prior to catechesis. While catechesis and evangelization should never be separated, it would seem that the outward face of the New Evangelization focuses on the importance of knowing doctrine while presuming that those being catechized have been evangelized.

Catechesis is intended to engage the lives of the faithful as a natural result of evangelization. It is upon first encountering the transcendent love and compassion of God that disciples of Christ yearn to know more—yet, as Pope John Paul II observed in his *Catechesis Tradendae*, this is seldom the practice in parish sacramental preparation programs.<sup>19</sup>

From these observations, coupled with the reality that there are few parishes with a paid young adult minister on staff, let alone other opportunities for young adults to grow in their faith outside the Mass, it seems that ministry leaders hold an implicit belief that if only adolescents receive enough instruction in the faith from their youth, it will sustain them in their young adult years.

Overall, the hope is that by providing more religious instruction as a form of evangelization, Catholic young adults might stay tethered to the Church. Unfortunately, research shows that this style of programming does not correlate with greater participation in church life.<sup>20</sup>

Therefore, this article asks: Where is the disconnect between the lived experiences of young adults and the Church’s programming efforts at catechesis and evangelization? How is it that the Church’s efforts at the New Evangelization are, thus far, (1) unable to reverse the trend in disaffiliation and (2) fail to provide pastoral care to young adults and ignite their hearts with the joy of the Gospel? That is, how did we get here as a Church?

The next section provides a brief overview of the history of the New Evangelization, then provides an analysis the ecclesiological assumptions undergirding efforts to practice this new style of evangelization.

### 3. The Ecclesiological Worldviews under the New Evangelization

Catholic ecclesiology, as described in the Second Vatican Council, pertains to the purpose, structure, and role of the church in the world, including its missionary activity and ecumenical and interreligious dialogue.<sup>21</sup> In 1979, Pope John Paul II, in response to what he perceived as a decrease in religiosity in the modern world, spoke about the need for a “New Evangelization” in the mission and life of the Church.<sup>22</sup> Inspired in part by Pope Paul VI’s encyclical *Evangelii Nuntiandi*,<sup>23</sup> John Paul II would go

<sup>18</sup> (Wehner 2012).

<sup>19</sup> See (John Paul II 1979a, ¶ 9).

<sup>20</sup> (CARA 2008).

<sup>21</sup> See, in particular, *Lumen Gentium*, *Nostra Aetate*, and *Unitatis Redintegratio*.

<sup>22</sup> (John Paul II 1979b), “Homily”.

<sup>23</sup> (Paul VI 1975). See, in particular, p. 60.

on to described this as an effort to reengage those baptized Catholics who have fallen away from the church by proclaiming the Gospel using “new” modes and expressions to ensure that Christ continues to be present in the world and in the building of God’s kin-dom through the Church’s missionary activity.<sup>24</sup> The ongoing national surveys and polls<sup>25</sup> documenting the increasing trends in religious disaffiliation, particularly with young adults, supported the continued need for a “New Evangelization” as a new way for ministry leaders to address these alarming reports. Pope Benedict XVI, therefore, brought this initiative forward during his papacy, convening a synod of bishops to address the topic of the “New Evangelization” in 2012. Then, after Benedict XVI stepped down, Pope Francis continued the work of the synod through his post-synodal papal exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*.<sup>26</sup>

Steven Bevens, tracing the history of the New Evangelization, describes how Pope Benedict XVI’s initial emphasis leading into the 2012 Synod was similar to John Paul II’s understanding that the New Evangelization should be about proclaiming the Gospel unapologetically with “ardor” or “boldness.”<sup>27</sup> Some bishops pushed back against this approach, suggesting that the Church should instead adopt “a new attitude of humility, gentleness, and listening,”<sup>28</sup> “calling for the church to listen first before speaking.”<sup>29</sup> Pope Francis has carried this posture of openness and dialogue through his papacy, particularly in his *Evangelii Gaudium* and again through the 2018 Synod on young people. Recognizing early on that “young people often fail to find responses to their concerns, needs, problems, and hurts in the usual structures,”<sup>30</sup> Francis writes:

We need to practice the art of listening, which is more than simply hearing. Listening, in communication, is an openness of heart which makes possible that closeness without which genuine spiritual encounter cannot occur.<sup>31</sup>

What began under Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI as a “bold and even ‘apologetic’ approach” to evangelization<sup>32</sup> with fallen-away Catholics, should now, under Pope Francis, be understood as an approach rooted in listening and accompaniment. However, this rather dramatic change around 2013 from boldly proclaiming the Gospel unapologetically to now listening first to the people of God has, according to the 2018 Synod, yet to be fully realized in most diocesan and parish programs.<sup>33</sup>

From three different popes, we can trace three different approaches to evangelization and how to *be* church in the United States. Paul Lakeland describes these influences as three distinct types of apostolicity. The first is an “apostolicity of maintenance”, or the “build it and they will come” approach to ministry and evangelization, which advocates for the fervent upholding of doctrine as a way to preserve the apostolic roots and pass this doctrine on to the next generation.<sup>34</sup> The second ecclesiology is “the church of the New Evangelization”, which focuses on the dwindling participation in church life, such as those parents who want their children baptized, but do not come to mass, or young adults disaffiliating from the church.<sup>35</sup> This way of being church focuses on renewing or deepening the faith of those who are less than active or just “checking the boxes.” To this model, Lakeland makes an astute point:

<sup>24</sup> (John Paul II 1983, ¶ 9).

<sup>25</sup> *The National Study of Youth and Religion* surveyed the Millennial generation from youth through young adulthood from 2001–2015. <https://youthandreligion.nd.edu/>; (CARA 2018); (Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life 2012). For recent trends, see (McCarty and Vitek 2017).

<sup>26</sup> (John Paul II 1983).

<sup>27</sup> (Bevens 2015, p. 8).

<sup>28</sup> (Bevens 2015, p. 8).

<sup>29</sup> (Ibid., p. 9).

<sup>30</sup> (Francis 2013, ¶ 105).

<sup>31</sup> (Ibid., ¶ 171).

<sup>32</sup> (XIII Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops 2012, ¶ 138).

<sup>33</sup> See, for example, (Francis 2019, ¶ 30, 202).

<sup>34</sup> (Lakeland 2015, p. 26).

<sup>35</sup> (Ibid., p. 33).

The new evangelization movement seems to have little sense that its message need be any different from that of the old evangelization. “New” seems largely to mean a new attempt, rather than an attempt to do anything new.<sup>36</sup>

What we have instead, argues Lakeland, is a “remedial evangelization” that focuses more on parishioners with little attention to the “world beyond the church.”<sup>37</sup>

In contrast to this understanding, Lakeland discusses a third framework, which he calls a “kenotic ecclesiology,” or “the theological commitment of a humble, de-centered church.”<sup>38</sup> This way of being church “understands concern for the world beyond the church to be the primary if not exclusive meaning of apostolicity” that engages in “an evangelical dialogue . . . in which the church does not simply bring the grace of God to the secular worlds, but also finds it there waiting for us.”<sup>39</sup> This approach echoes Pope Francis’ desire for a more synodal church, one that listens to the needs of others and journeys together to create a more just and compassionate world.<sup>40</sup> It is a posture of listening and dialogue that enables us to see how God is already active in the lives of those we meet and in the world more broadly. Such listening is not a passive activity, but an intentional practice whereby we practice the art of accompaniment, always attuned to the deeper meanings embedded in young adults’ stories of friendship, loss, hurt, family life, and identity.<sup>41</sup> It is in listening that we hear where they experienced God’s grace in their lives. Such openness to God’s presence also allows us to see a fuller range of diversity inherent in all God’s creation.

The first two models of apostolicity focus on maintaining and/or spreading the Gospel. Both of these ecclesiological ways of embodying the missionary activity of the church, however, overlook any emphasis on dialogue, humility, or listening. Moreover, Lakeland notes how Pope Francis’ ecclesiology draws inspiration from the Vatican II Decree on the Church’s Missionary Activity through his “call for the church to understand itself as a ‘community of missionary disciples’ . . . in light of missiology.”<sup>42</sup> In this way, efforts to embrace a New Evangelization that help young adults remain committed or come back to the Church rest on the assumption that ministry leaders are tasked with bringing God to others, all the while failing to see that God is already present there.

While parishes and dioceses across the country make use of Pope Francis’ language of missionary discipleship in their programming,<sup>43</sup> it is not evident that their programs take into account the fullness of Francis’ ecclesiological worldview and subsequent approach to evangelization. Renaming a faith formation program to be “forming missionary disciples” does not correlate with the imperative to “boldly take the initiative, go out to others, seek those who have fallen away, [and] stand at the crossroads and welcome the outcast . . . ”<sup>44</sup> If they did, one would presume to see these programs extended out from the parish, with efforts to engage young adults in the community, where they live, work, and socialize; however, the 2018 Synod reveals that this is not the case.

What, then, would it look like if ministry leaders adopted a more “kenotic ecclesiology,” or an ecclesiological worldview that better resembled the Church that Pope Francis is urging us to become? How would parish programming and ministry with young adults change?

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<sup>36</sup> (Ibid., p. 34).

<sup>37</sup> (Ibid., p. 35).

<sup>38</sup> (Lakeland 2015, p. 36).

<sup>39</sup> (Ibid., p. 35).

<sup>40</sup> See (Francis 2019, ¶ 206).

<sup>41</sup> For an example on how to listen for deeper meanings in young adult stories, see (Janssen 2015, pp. 148–50).

<sup>42</sup> (Lakeland 2015, pp. 12–13).

<sup>43</sup> A simple Google search for “Missionary Discipleship + Diocese” reveals the language of missionary discipleship on over 400,000 websites, with the most common or popular hits for diocesan websites.

<sup>44</sup> (Francis 2013, ¶ 24).

#### 4. Reimagining Ministry from an Ecclesiological Imagination

Adding to the aforementioned discussion on the New Evangelization and ecclesiology, Richard Gaillardetz offers a thick description of how the Catholic Church has and continues to live in its mission as a people of God, both gathered and sent.<sup>45</sup> The predominant model of church in the 21st century focuses on church gatherings and on liturgical celebrations, sacraments, and catechesis with the aim of sending people out to evangelize what is viewed as an unchurched world. Gaillardetz, however, in what he calls “dialogical mission,” notes that God is already present in the world, that our way of being church, both its particular and universal expressions, “is enriched by a courageous and respectful engagement with the diversity of created reality out of the conviction that God’s Spirit will create something new and wonderful out of this engagement for the benefit of both church and creation.”<sup>46</sup> In fact, diversity is the condition from which the Gospel first spread and continued to spread up until the seventeenth century.<sup>47</sup>

Gaillardetz grounds his discussion in a rich understanding of intercultural and interreligious dialogue. In this way, ministry leaders, by looking at the culture and experiences of young people, can take an analogous approach to the methods of intercultural dialogue by seeing in ministry with young adults an opportunity to encounter God’s presence among us and to uncover the deep culture, meaning, and grace-filled experiences that encapsulate their living, knowing, and doing. In listening to young adults sharing their stories, ministry leaders can listen for the meaning and value revealed through their experiences from the way they tell their stories. From these powerful encounters with the lives of young adults, ministry leaders are open to the Spirit of God at work among them.

The Gospel, then, becomes less about something to give or pass on, but more about something to experience, to translate, embody, share, and enliven—capable of transforming oneself and society towards the common good. “What is demanded,” according to Gaillardetz, “is a style of dialogue that recognizes we cannot anticipate in advance the outcomes of the conversation”; rather, that our encounters, fostered by radical listening and authentic or “reciprocal dialogue”, have the capacity to point us to a new, even deeper experience of God in our midst.<sup>48</sup> This new framework, by envisioning the church as “missionary by its very nature,”<sup>49</sup> focuses not on how passionately Catholics can witness their faith to others, but on how they can begin to truly meet people where they are, always open to the presence of God that is active among us.

We are not bringing God to anyone; God is present in the world, in all people and all of creation.<sup>50</sup> If our mission is to evangelize young adults, then we must first, according to Phan, “search for and recog[nize] . . . the presence and activities of the Holy Spirit among the peoples to be evangelized, and in this humble and attentive process of listening, the evangelizers become the evangelized, and the evangelized becomes the evangelizers.”<sup>51</sup>

To conceive of missionary discipleship as actively going out with the purpose of encountering the transformative power of God’s “boundless compassion”<sup>52</sup> in young adults and others in our community demands the power of imagination—an ecclesiological imagination born of “careful, respectful, and reciprocal dialogue,”<sup>53</sup> one capable of growing a new creation of shared meanings about God’s transformative power in our lives and in the lives of those who came before us. The mission of the Church is not directed towards converting people to Catholicism, but aims at building up God’s kin-dom, on earth as it is in heaven. In this way, young adults will find in ministry leaders

<sup>45</sup> (Gaillardetz 2008).

<sup>46</sup> (Ibid., p. 36).

<sup>47</sup> (Ibid., p. 35).

<sup>48</sup> (Ibid., pp. 72, 70), respectively.

<sup>49</sup> *Ad Gentes* ¶. 2.

<sup>50</sup> See (Phan 2003), as cited in (Gaillardetz 2008, p. 62).

<sup>51</sup> (Phan 2003, p. 43); as cited in (Gaillardetz 2008, p. 62).

<sup>52</sup> (Boyle 2010).

<sup>53</sup> (Gaillardetz 2008, p. 71).

mentors—accompaniers—who listen deeply to their lived experiences, and who can journey alongside them as they explore how they might make the faith their own. As Pope Francis states, our primary concern should not be about whether or not a young person accepts the full teachings of the Church; rather, we should embody a ministry that “can open doors and make room for everyone.”<sup>54</sup>

This underlying worldview can radically alter ministry with young adults under the New Evangelization. If parish leaders engage in ministry with a posture of wonder and awe at the thought of encountering God’s profound mercy and love, they will actively *go out*, encounter young adults, listen to their stories, and walk beside them like Jesus with the disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13–35). In doing so, they open themselves up to what I call a new ecclesiological imagination.

### 5. Nurturing the Capacity for an Ecclesiological Imagination

This posture of reciprocal dialogue, so necessary for interreligious and intercultural dialogue, can become an inner disposition of missionary discipleship in ministry with young adults. When young adults trust us enough to be vulnerable, to share their stories of hurt, hope, sadness, and joy, we cannot not be moved. In reflecting on my own listening sessions with young adults, I recall feeling a profound presence of God in those grace-filled moments where I was honored to see into the lives of young people.<sup>55</sup> This encounter also put me into their lives—I am now a part of their story, and they mine. I was not bringing the Gospel to them, they were showing me where God was working in their lives and how the scriptures connected to their lives—in time, as the relationships grow, we help one another make those connections between their story and the Great Story more explicit.

We are all on a spiritual journey in which not one of us has “arrived,” and to get a glimpse of a young adult’s journey, in all its ups and downs (especially the downs), we become witnesses of God’s boundless and unwavering love and mercy. My life is forever changed from these encounters, and I grow ever more excited to go out again, to peel the infinite onion of compassion that is God, or, as Fr. Greg Boyle writes, “being in the world who God is.”<sup>56</sup> Moreover, it is only from these initial conversations that trust can be built and mentoring relationships can begin to take shape.

Openness to this Spirit, the sheer possibility of a new creation—as well as new meaning and insights into God through our attentiveness to the lives of young adults—taps into the affective dimensions of our lives—our imagination, an ecclesiological imagination. Imagination, according to Maxine Greene, “permits us to give credence to alternative realities . . . [and] allows us to break with the taken for granted, to set aside familiar distinctions and definitions.”<sup>57</sup> Similarly, John Paul Lederach draws inspiration for his work in international peacebuilding in what he calls a “moral imagination” which “seeks and creates a space beyond the pieces that exist.”<sup>58</sup> Like our capacity for encountering God in multiple forms and contexts, imagination is “not confined by what is, or what is known, imagination is the art of creating what does not exist.”<sup>59</sup>

Each young adult we come in contact with has a different sense of identity, personality, spirituality, and history of experiences. Every person is unique while also made in God’s image and likeness, bringing with them a full range of experiences born from the intersectionality of our lives—from our gender, ability, race, age, culture, socioeconomic status, and ethnicity—and from the way in which our identities shape our sense of self, our relationship with God and others, and our place in the world. God, therefore, is active in our lives in unique, new, and insightful ways, if only we have ears to hear and eyes to see.

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<sup>54</sup> (Francis 2019, ¶ 234).

<sup>55</sup> If you have ever heard religious educators such as Dr. Dori Baker or Rev. Dr. Tamara Henry speak of their encounters with young people, you may sense a similar reverence and depth in their ministerial experience.

<sup>56</sup> (Boyle 2010, p. 77).

<sup>57</sup> (Green 1995, p. 3).

<sup>58</sup> (Lederach 2005, p. 28).

<sup>59</sup> (Ibid.).

An ecclesiological imagination, then, is a way of being church, a posture that sees in every moment an opportunity to see and experience glimpses of God. It is a radical worldview open to wonder, to being surprised by just how compassionate and loving God is. Ministry with young adults can be transformed by an ecclesiological imagination that propels the internal disposition of ministry leaders to “go out to others, seek those who have fallen away, stand at the crossroads, and welcome the outcast.”<sup>60</sup> Rather than an ecclesiological worldview aimed at conversion or helping young adults better understand the Church’s teachings, an ecclesiological imagination invites ministry leaders to form relationships with young adults while being attuned to God’s presence in our midst and in each encounter we have.

## 6. Conclusions

The pastoral conversion needed to embrace Pope Francis’ vision missionary discipleship requires a new way of thinking about God’s presence in the world. The response from ministry leaders, however, has been to change the names or formats of their programs rather than to change their style of ministry or ecclesiological worldview. Programs do not necessarily show young adults that they matter. Packard et al. write, “in our interviews, the young people made it clear that when they encounter a group in which they find belongingness, it’s because of the people and the relationships they experience. In other words, belongingness is generated by relationships, not programs.”<sup>61</sup> An ecclesiology centered on Pope Francis’ vision of missionary discipleship, which is grounded in dialogue and deep listening, has the capacity to nurture such trusting relationships with young adults.

Embracing a “kenotic ecclesiology” requires a radically different worldview. What is needed is the ecclesiological imagination to think and act differently in order to transform the Church’s ministry with young adults and our faith communities. Further research would include strategies or pathways towards shifting one’s worldview and practices around such a shift. This might include insights from constructive–developmental psychology or transformative learning within the context of ministry and religious education.

Overall, an ecclesiological imagination recognizes that God’s creation is not just abundant and inherently diverse, but ongoing—unfolding before our eyes. God is full of surprises. The universe is expanding, new life forms emerge, and new encounters with others are pregnant with possibility. Each new encounter becomes a site for new discovery, a new way to experience God’s limitless love and compassion. In developing an ecclesiological imagination, we nurture the capacity for wonder, to “find God in all things,” and to be arrested by transcendent encounters with others and the natural world. If we can envision ministry with young adults through an ecclesiological imagination, we actively go forth and, through the invitation to dialogue, search for the ways in which God’s abundance shines in the lives of others and in the world, so we may begin the journey towards more trusting relationships that form communities of belonging with young adults committed to furthering the kin-dom of God on earth as it is in heaven.

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<sup>60</sup> (Francis 2013, ¶ 24).

<sup>61</sup> (Packard et al. 2020, ¶ 42).

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