

ONLINE YOUNG ADULT SEEKERS SMALL CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES AS PART OF THE 2021-2023 SYNODAL PROCESS



PART I -- INTRODUCTION

My name is Alloys Nyakundi, a graduate from Loyola University New Orleans, LA, USA where I got a Masters in Pastoral Studies with a focus on [Small Christian Communities](#) from the perspective of young adults because of my passion for leading and promoting Young Adults Small Christian Communities in nine countries of Eastern Africa under the AMECEA Pastoral Department. While doing my undergraduate studies at Kenyatta University in Nairobi, Kenya, I gained insight into the needs of Young Adults through the Small Christian Communities for Young Adults that I facilitated at the Christ the Teacher Parish, Kenyatta University.

In 2016 I was introduced to the [Catholic Church Reform International](#) (CCRI) by Father Joseph Healey, MM a Maryknoll Priest based in Nairobi, Kenya who has also been my mentor in my journey of faith. During my six years of involvement with CCRI, I realized that most of the members were elderly people, and we had a few Young Adults who would attend from time to time. There was a disconnect between the elderly folks and the young people. At this point we realized that CCRI was not attracting Young Adults, and this was the genesis of the Online Young Adult Seekers Small Christian Communities Gatherings that comprise young people from the four continents.

CCRI recognizes the important role of young people and the current crisis in the Catholic Church where many young people have walked away because they feel unwelcomed and have no sense of belonging. The online platform created by CCRI is one of the ways we are responding to the needs of young people by offering them a safe place to share their concerns and find support for the life issues they face. As an international and diverse group that meets twice a month on Zoom, we are seeking to find our rightful place within the Catholic community. Instead of walking away, we have decided to be present and make our voices heard during this Synodal Process.

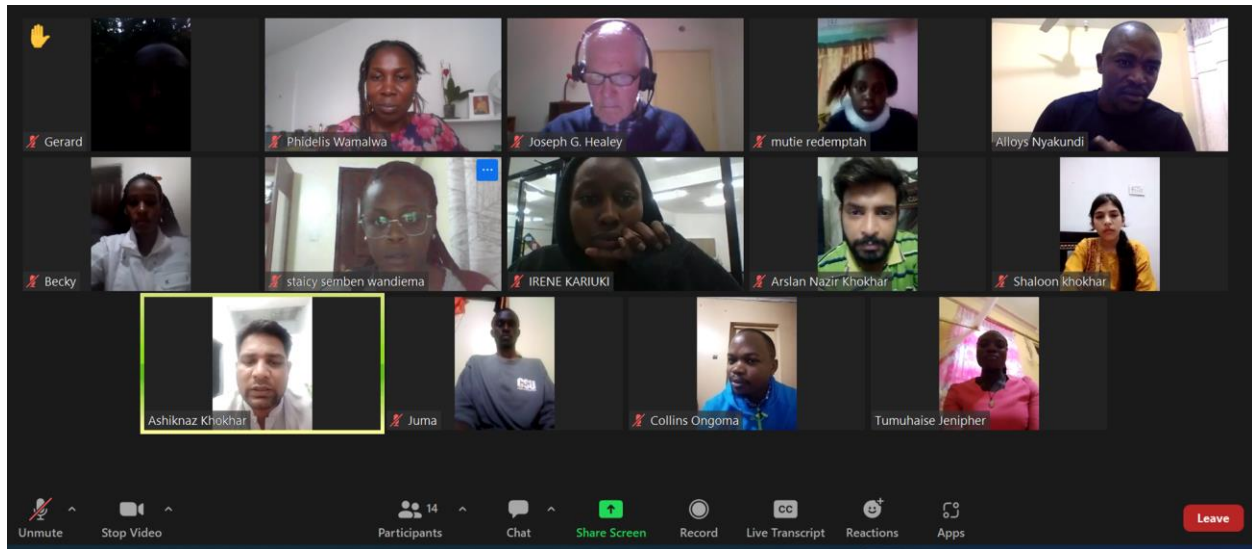
Young people are tired of being told that they are the future and instead they want to be recognized and given an opportunity to share their gifts and talents in the church now. They want their voices to be heard and to take part in the decision-making process now.

During the 2021-2023 Synodal Process many people have been searching for ways to attract and involve Young Adult Catholics. In 2016 Father Febian Pikiti, the AMECEA Pastoral Coordinator, conducted a survey about where you find Catholic youth and young adults on Sunday morning in Nairobi, Kenya, the largest city in East Africa. The results: “You do not find them outside of the Catholic Church after mass. You find them on social media.” The Center for Applied Research in

the Apostolate (CARA)'s Research in the USA in 2020-2021 shows that 60% of Catholic Young Adults' Faith Community Activities are outside the parish, many on social media. This is confirmed by our research in Eastern Africa.

So encouraged by CCRI we started an Online SCC specifically for Young Adults.

Image of one of the online gatherings of young adult seekers:



PART II -- PERSONAL TESTIMONIES

Young adults from different parts of the world, for example, Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Germany, USA, Mexico and Pakistan have contributed to this document. Here are their personal testimonies:

Redemptah Mutie, Katheka Parish, Machakos Diocese, Kenya

Poor leadership. This has been an incurable illness in my home parish. From time to time there are several misunderstandings arising between the young adults and church elders. Some of the elected leaders have to resign from office just a few days after the election after prolonged fights and misunderstandings. To make it worse the remaining youths reject youth responsibilities and those who are not strong in faith leave the church and find other denominations where things are done differently and they find satisfaction.

Adult and youth perception. Perception in my home parish can be viewed in two ways; youth-adult perception and adult-youth perception. The most common is the adult-youth perception where adults view themselves as the owners of the church. They see young adults as less educated people who need time to grow for them to be entrusted with bigger responsibilities. Some elders pass harsh judgment to the young adults which makes them feel uncomfortable hence, run away from the church. The young adult's perception arises when they see themselves as modernized while the church elders are less informed because of sticking to the old ways of life. This has created misunderstandings between the elders and young adults.

Modernization and technology. In the 21st century, technology has been of great help to many people globally. However, young adults tend to misuse technology through the overuse of their smartphones. In my home parish, I have witnessed some youths chatting in the midst of Mass. Others just hung around the church compound just to use their phones instead of listening to Mass. Another issue closely associated with modernization is dressing. This has been an ill ailment in my home parish. Some church elders criticize some kinds of dress codes, especially among ladies in that short dresses and trousers are not fit clothes to wear in the church. This has arisen fights which have resulted in some youths going to other denominations where they are not questioned.

Collins Ong’oma, St. Martin of Tours Sultan Hamud Parish, Ngong Diocese, Kenya

Most young people shun away from the church because they feel no one cares about their needs. If the church and its leadership, for instance, engage young people left, right, and center they feel needed, wanted, and appreciated, and find it a home away from home but when that is lacking, they find comfort elsewhere.

Sometimes the church is too demanding to the young people. This occurs when young people are forced to part with some good cash for them to be considered true members and friends of the church. A young person May be struggling to make ends meet but if things don't work, they end up not being closer to the church so as not to be considered failures.

The injustice nature of some religious men. Working in and for the church sometimes make some young people realize that the church is like a military institution. You mess up once and you're knocked out without even second thoughts. At times if you're not a friend to the man in a collar they end up sacking you or looking for a way of getting rid of you. Such experiences make young people despise them making it impossible to even listen to their hypocritical sermons.

Irene Kariuki, St. Joseph Mutunguru Parish, Nairobi Archdiocese, Kenya

Seated in the bus, going home after work, I was nostalgic about the happy moments I had when I was a young girl and a member of Pontifical Missionary Childhood (PMC) in my home parish. My Parish is part of the Archdiocese of Nairobi which is the Capital City of Kenya. Growing up, everyone dreamt of visiting the capital city, and occasionally we would an opportunity to visit the city through the PMC events that were organized by the Archdiocese of Nairobi. We would have a colorful mass presided over by the Cardinal. We would dress in beautiful PMC uniforms and we would dance during the processions. We always went back home excited and happy, and we lived for such moments.

When I joined high school, the connection that I had with my home parish events changed. All of a sudden, there were no longer events to attend. Very little was organized for the young adults unlike when we were in PMC. I went to a boarding high school, so I'd only attend my home church during the holidays. I slowly stopped attending Small Christian Communities (SCCs) gatherings with my parents because teenagers would no longer tag along with their parents to church gatherings. Talking with my friends, I realized that young adults felt uncomfortable sharing in SCCs with their parents because they would fear expressing themselves fully while with their parents.

It will be better if young adults are encouraged to have SCCs of their own where they will have meaningful gatherings that will capture their attention and sparkle a zeal to be in touch with their faith and spirituality. Clearly, this is lacking in my local parish because I haven't seen any significant effort by our leadership to encourage young adults to be part of the SCCs. It is through SCCs for the young adults that the church will get to understand the challenges young people are going through.

The current generation has evolved; the interests of young adults are diverse and have shifted. A good number of the young people nowadays cannot relate to the church teachings. There is a gap when it comes to matters that concern young adults during church readings and the homilies shared, and this may leave them with unresolved questions or feel unseen. They yearn to have homilies that focus on matters concerning love and relationships, work, success in life, studies, leadership, how to overcome life's challenges, and how to get closer to God. The church can also organize seminars that touch on these crucial matters which the priests might miss to talk about when giving homilies.

In my local parish young adults are not involved in church leadership and they are excluded from the decision-making table. This makes them feel isolated and find the decision made to be exclusive because the leaders did not ask for their input. I'd recommend that the church leaders recognize the special gifts we young adults bring to the church by involving young people in church leadership. One young woman and young man can be identified to sit on the Parish Pastoral Council to be the voice for other young adults in the church.

Ainembabazi Rebecca, Kyamugabo Parish, Mbarara Diocese, Uganda

Lack of motivation from bad church leaders: In some churches, there are pastors who are good at preaching but do contrary to what they preach. Many young adults love being inspired by what the Pastors do because they see them as their role models unfortunately, stories come out of the Pastors and church leaders as among the people who involve themselves with prostitution, witchcraft, and adultery. This discourages young adults from going to church due to loss of trust in the church leaders and pastors. Also, there are some church leaders who claim to do healing and, counseling services to young adults but instead of helping them, they take advantage of their privacy to make sexual advances on young women. This is so common in churches where men believe that they dominate women and believe that women are objects for entertainment and that they should always take commands from men without questioning.

Forced marriages. Most of the parents who did not go to school do not see the value of giving young women an opportunity to study. They think that young women shouldn't go to school and instead, they look for men to marry them so that they can get the dowry. They marry off their girls at an early age of 13 years. Some parents force their children into marriage to wealthy men who are far older than their girls so as to get financial help from the wealthy man to pay off their debts and support their daily life. Some young girls who have been forced into marriage at a young age feel ashamed to go to church because people might talk ill about them. They also fear associating with other young people because they see themselves as failures and some parents do not want to see them associating with their children because they think that they may influence their children negatively. This makes the young women live in isolation, and loneliness while enduring shame and suffering.

The church has done less to support the young women in my parish and some of them face a lot of domestic violence in their forced marriages. Many young adults have committed suicide because they can no longer hold on to the domestic violence they face in their forced marriages.

Juma Derek, Kamukuzi Parish, Ankole Diocese, Uganda

Bad examples portrayed by church leaders for example priests involving themselves with sexual scandals with women yet they have taken vows of celibacy make young adults lose trust in the church leaders. Young adults look to the church leaders as role models and as people who set the pace on what to do. They should lead by example since young people don't trust what the leaders tell them because of their unfaithfulness to the vows they took. As young people, we also feel okay engaging in such activities since the religious leaders are also engaging in such acts. This has led many young people to walk away from the church because they don't see any difference between the people who are Christians and the non-Christians.

The Generation Gap where most pastors in Uganda are elderly and they don't relate to the issues the current generation is facing. Young adults are very active on social media and the pastors should look for positive ways of evangelizing to the young adults instead of condemning them from using social media. Some elderly pastors give homilies that young adults do not connect with or refer to the examples of the old ways of life. Young people get excited with pastors who are current and embrace the use of examples on issues that are affecting them. Also, elderly pastors easily condemn the new fashion of young people something that makes young people uncomfortable because they don't want to go to church to get condemnation but to be accepted and loved.

Unemployment after college has led many young adults to severe poverty without no proper ways of taking care of themselves and their families. Some young adults are scared of starting families because they are not certain how they are going to provide for their families. Nowadays almost every Sunday there are so many fundraisings after mass and this has turned many young people away because they find it shameful when they are unable to raise some money when they are expected to give something. Those who don't have money to give choose to stay away from church because they don't want to go through the shame of not giving any money.

Ashiknaz Khokhar, Sahiwal Parish, Faisalabad Diocese, Pakistan

The Active Youth Group is a movement of Catholic Youth in Sahiwal Parish which is part of the Faisalabad Diocese of Pakistan. Our Bishop's name is Indias Rehmat and our parish is coordinated by the Dominicans. We founded Active Youth Group in 2005 with the vision to guide and lead the youth of the parish in social and spiritual activities. We are actively serving in the parish with a lot of challenges to which faced by religious and laity.

There is a huge gap between the Catholic Bishops and young adults because it's difficult to access bishops to plan a meeting. To access a bishop in my home diocese you have to get permission or recommendation from the parish priest who sometimes recommends people whom he feels don't threaten his work. Bishops and priests live like kings and they don't have an actual understanding of real issues facing young people. They only want young adults when they want to fundraise

money for various projects that they want to do but they do not have an active ministry with a focus on young adults.

People's opinions should be respected in the parish and bishops should inquire from time to time about the progress of each parish through the Parish Pastoral Council. Unfortunately, this is not happening anywhere in my diocese. The church likes to keep people who are always questioning far away from the church decision-making council to deny them an opportunity to raise their concerns. Young women and men should be given an opportunity to sit at the decision-making table because we are all equal before the eyes of the almighty God. Bishops and Priests should not feel threatened by people who disagree with them but take that as a special gift and a call to find a common ground through listening to the Holy Spirit.

Meg McCarthy and Tess Thapalia, St. Vincent de Paul Parish, Albany Diocese, New York, USA

This report has been written by Meg McCarthy and Tess Thapalia, two young women who work as lay ministers for the Church of St. Vincent de Paul in Albany, NY. Meg is the leader of the Young Adult Ministry, and Tess is involved with the Pastoral Council and the LGBTQ Alliance.

Both of us were raised Catholic and have continued to practice our faith in and through young adulthood. One of the biggest struggles for young adults in our parish is that our diocese, as well as the Catholic Church in the United States overall, is very conservative, and has politicized our faith in many spaces. Many young adults struggle to come back after Confirmation or college when they walk into what they're hoping will be a welcoming group and find people who are more concerned about how often you attend Holy Hour than how well you follow Jesus's teachings.

Our parish focuses strongly on the concept of Courageous Hospitality and the seven themes of Catholic Social Teaching that many young adults find very attractive in a faith environment. We focus on the actions and activities that carry out the teachings of Jesus that many of our young adults have said makes them feel closer to God and their faith. One parishioner remarked that they appreciated our emphasis on "social justice over the performance of piety."

Some of our young adults feel very isolated in their faith. When faith is made into a political statement, it stops being personal and becomes social in ways that can make many young adults uncomfortable, especially if the political statement being made is one that they themselves do not agree with. This isolation can be a large factor in young adults leaving the Catholic Church. Many young adults in our parish feel that their religion is intensely personal, and are uncomfortable with the tendency of the Catholic Church in the United States to insert itself into politics.

We know that this is not the challenge facing young Catholics in many other places, but in the United States, we have both experienced how the burgeoning politicization of the Catholic faith has driven many of our peers away from the Church.

Part III -- ACTIVITIES IN OUR FORTNIGHT ONLINE SCC GATHERINGS

Case Study No. 1: In our online session on Thursday, 4 August, 2022, the facilitator asked the young adults: "Imagine if one day you get an opportunity to have a meeting with Pope Francis.

What burning issue/issues will you raise on behalf of the young adults you work with? What are the changes you have always wanted to see in the church that you would recommend to him? Remember this is a lifetime opportunity that comes once. It was fascinating to see the different responses that the young adults gave and I have captured them as below:

Meg McCarthy, St. Vincent de Paul Parish, Albany Diocese, USA

The number of men entering the seminary has been steadily declining for the past few decades in the US and many other countries throughout the world. We must take an honest look at the priesthood and decide what our church can do to make sure that the sacraments continue on for future generations. Right now, many churches don't have a priest to say Mass on Sundays. Some parishes go weeks or more without receiving the Sacrament of Holy Communion. The issues we would like to raise are two interconnected issues: Married Priests and Women's Ordinations.

The celibacy of priests did not become a requirement of ordination until the medieval period. There are many other Christian Denominations (some of which are in communion with Rome) that allow for married priests. There are young men in our community that greatly considered the priesthood but choose married life instead and have made it clear that if they could do both they would. Why should these men be denied the joys of family and fatherhood? What makes a husband or father less able to serve the lord? God himself was a father.

The women of the church have worked hard for millennia to keep the institution running. Now more than ever churches, schools and missions are being run by women, both lay and religious. Women in our world are finding greater opportunities and are working closer to overall equality. We tell our young girls that they can be anything EXCEPT a priest. When our students preparing for Holy Communion learn about the sacraments there is always uproar when they get to Holy Orders. They all become very upset at the fact that women are barred from fully participating in the church. We know that there were many women among the disciples. That women were the first to receive the news of the resurrection and preach it to the rest. Why now 2,000 years later do we deem them unworthy or unfit?

Phidelis Wamalwa, Christkonigkirche-Eppelheim Parish, Freiburg im Breisgau Diocese, Germany

Young people don't feel appreciated in the church because they are not given major roles like leadership positions. Leadership is key because young people are embraced elsewhere and not in the church. Young people are there to listen to the clergy and leaders. This easily prompts young people to join protest groups because they feel welcomed and listened to by those groups.

Ashik Khokhar, Sahiwah Parish, Faisalabad Diocese, Pakistan.

The church should accept the new way of life by becoming a listening and inclusive church at the same time supporting women's rights. The lay leaders should be involved in decision making process so that they appreciate the sense of community in the church.

Stacy Wandiemba, St. Joseph Kahawa Sukari Parish, Nairobi Archdiocese, Kenya

The church is straightforward with matters of religion but silent on issues relating with humanity for example women rights, plight of refugees and hunger.

Alloys Nyakundi, Nyansiongo Parish, Kisii Diocese, Kenya

The church should be more listening than telling people what they should do before understanding where they are coming from. Also, let all people get equal space in the table of making decisions instead of having a few people mostly the clergy making decisions on behalf of the Christian communities.

Gerald Mang'era, St. Mary's Nyamaharaga Parish, Homabay Diocese, Kenya

Trust has been diminishing between the young adults and the church because of lack of clarity on issues to do with abortion, LGBTQ and the economy. I would also love to hear what the Pope will say about Tribalism in Kenya where people in the Catholic church are divided along the tribal line even though they belong to the same church. Lastly, the church should guide young people on how to balance the political life, Christian life and their personal life.

Collins Ongoma, St. Martin of Tours Sultan Hamud Parish, Ngong Diocese, Kenya

Some young people see priests as animals and terrible people instead of spiritual guiders because of the bad experiences they have gone through under their watch, for example, sexual abuse and harsh punishments given to the young people whenever they make mistakes. Also, I raise the issue of young people who have grown in the Catholic church and have embraced the Small Christian Communities and the Eucharist but disappear from church after they get married. Where do they go?

Irene Kariuki, St. Joseph Mutunguru Parish, Nairobi Archdiocese, Kenya

What actions has the church taken on the issues of mental health, family and unemployment among young people because these are issues that are making them lose their faith. I'd also encourage Pope Francis to encourage community prayer not only during mass and also encourage each church to have gatherings that actively involve young people.

Joseph Healey, Maryknoll Society, St. Austin Parish, Nairobi Archdiocese, Kenya

The Eucharist famine/hunger is now an emerging issue in the Catholic Church worldwide for different reasons. What pastoral solutions are you suggesting or proposing so that many more people in the world can receive communion?

Redemptah Mutie, Katheka Parish, Machakos Diocese, Kenya

Young women who give birth before marriage should not be denied the Eucharist and segregated from young adult activities but instead be welcomed. They do not get pregnant by themselves and they have sad stories behind their pregnancies which someone should listen to. The church should have activities that are meant to these young women so as to feel part of the church community.

Jenipher Tumuhaise, Rwenyanga Parish, Mbarara Diocese, Uganda

There should be equality between the priests and nuns more so on the educational matters because all are called by God and to serve God regardless of their gender. Nuns should also get equal opportunities to preach like the Priests. The Anglican church of Uganda has done it so well in that men and women get an opportunity to preach and this has attracted so many young people.

Case Study No. 2: At the second online encounter of the Online Young Adult Seekers Small Christian Community on Thursday, 23 June 2022 participants were asked to come with an image

of Jesus Christ that comes to their mind or reflects the work that they do. Each person had three minutes to interpret the image and how that image reflects him or her. Here are the responses:

Ashik: Shared that he visualizes Jesus as a farmer who provides food, water, and shelter for his people.

Collins: Allegorically compared Jesus with a ‘Donkey’ that despite how the ‘load of salvation’ was, he never bolted out but persevered it all.

Joshua: Savior because Jesus sacrificed his life for our sake.

Becky: Jesus is her savior, protector, and guide in her life.

Alloys: Considers Jesus as a sister. Her three sisters played an important role in his life and gave him the accompaniment when he had ups and downs with life.

Staic: Considers Jesus as an unconditional friend. She loves having a conversation with Jesus as a friend.

Gerald: Sees Jesus as a Safari-park guide. At the park is where Jesus Christ lives while the safari is the journey of life young people are making.

Joseph: Considers Jesus as the Eldest Brother and Chief Intercessor that are two images in Scripture and are widely used by the Sukuma people in Tanzania.

Summary: The above activity confirms that young people might not like the Institutional Catholic Church but they accept and like Jesus Christ.

PART IV: CHALLENGES

1. Financial support: The young seekers meet on Zoom every fortnight and they have to be supported with money for the internet because majority of them are not employed or have low salaries.
2. Internet connectivity: Some young people, especially from the Global South countries, encounter poor internet coverage during the gatherings and sometimes it takes long for them to find a good place with strong internet connectivity.
3. Language barrier: It has been difficult to reach young people from other parts of the world because of language. In our online gatherings we use English which is widely spoken but there are some young people from some countries who don’t speak English such as Spanish-speaking young people in Mexico.

PART V: DEFINITION OF TERMS

ZOOM – It’s a social media application that enables people to interact online/virtually/digitally when they are not able to meet in person. The app is able to host small, medium and large gatherings with minimal interruptions. Also, it allows people to keep in touch/meet anytime they want.

Seekers – This describes people who are looking for or trying to find something. CCRI decided to use this word to describe Young Adults who are always searching.

PART VI: SUMMARY

In summary, using the “See, Discern and Act” reflection method, CCRI members are committed to embracing community life in our local regions of the world. When we see social injustice issues both within and outside of the Institutional Catholic Church, we will stand in solidarity with those being violated, thereby living the Gospel values of Jesus Christ.

Recognizing in our synodal gatherings that we have different viewpoints within our communities, we are committed to bridging the gap among these traditionalists, middle of the road Catholics, and progressives. In Eastern Africa Small Christian Communities provide equal airtime for everyone during the regular gatherings. The key to this working well is having the proper training for Small Christian Communities Young Adult members where they learn how to disagree with respect and not demean other Young Adults’ views (“disagreeing with love”). Facilitators also learn needed skills through the continuous training that is conducted by the Eastern Africa Small Christian Communities Training Team.

During this 2021-2023 Synodal Process we are committed to answering to the call of Pope Francis that the Catholic Church should create a safe space for listening to young people. The dynamics in life are changing so quickly and that’s why things that used to work a decade ago are not working with the current generation. The church should be creative in order to accommodate the new ways of life. This is the rationale behind our Online Young Adult Seekers Small Christian Communities Gatherings.

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