NATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR
MINISTRY WITH
YOUNG ADULTS

TOOLS

Young Adult Listening Session Guide

How to plan, lead, and follow up on a listening session that helps your parish hear young adults in their own words

Before
A six-week planning timeline and team roles

During
A 90-minute run of show, ground rules, and a question bank

After
Notetaking, finding themes, and closing the loop

A free resource from the National Institute for Ministry with Young Adults · ministrywithyoungadults.org

WHY LISTEN FIRST

Start the way Jesus did

On the road to Emmaus, Jesus did not open with an answer. He walked alongside two discouraged disciples and asked, “What are you discussing as you walk along?” (Luke 24:17). Only after they had told their story did he open the Scriptures and break the bread.

A listening session follows the same order. Before a parish plans programs for young adults, it asks young adults about their lives, their faith, and their experience of the Church, and it takes what they say seriously. The U.S. bishops’ national framework for ministry with youth and young adults, *Listen, Teach, Send* (2024), puts listening first for this reason. Pope Francis made the same point in *Christus Vivit*: ministry with young people should be synodal, a way of journeying together.

A LISTENING SESSION IS

IT IS

- A structured conversation where young adults speak and leaders listen
- A way to learn what is really happening in young adults’ lives
- The first step in a relationship that continues afterward
- A sign that the parish values young adults’ voices

IT ISN’T

- A presentation, a debate, or a chance to correct people
- A recruitment event for an existing program
- A survey you file away and never mention again
- A one-time event with no follow-up

AT A GLANCE

TIME

90 minutes

Plus 30 minutes before for setup and prayer, and 30 after for the team debrief.

SIZE

8 to 30 people

Small groups of 4 to 6, each with its own facilitator and notetaker.

WHO

Young adults

Ages 18 to 39, including people who rarely or never come to Mass.

ROLES FOR THE DAY

Host

Welcomes, keeps time, and closes. Ideally a young adult.

Prayer leader

Opens and closes in prayer, in the languages of the room.

Facilitators

One per group. Asks, invites quiet voices, never steers.

Notetakers

One per group. Records ideas, never names.

BEFORE THE SESSION

Six weeks of preparation

Most of the work of a good listening session happens before anyone walks in the door, especially the invitations.

6 Weeks out: form a small team

Gather four to six people, at least half of them young adults. Agree on your purpose in one sentence, set a date and place, and tell your pastor what you are planning and why. Decide who will receive the findings.

5 Weeks out: map who you want to hear

List the young adults your parish already knows, then the ones it doesn't: different cultural communities, young parents, students, workers, people who have stepped away. In multicultural settings, consider partnering with nearby parishes so the room reflects your area.

4 Weeks out: invite in person

A bulletin notice alone will not fill the room. Ask each team member to personally invite five people, and ask those people to bring a friend. Go where young adults already are. Make clear that no prior involvement is needed and that their honesty is welcome.

3 Weeks out: plan the details

Choose a welcoming space that isn't a classroom. Plan food, childcare, interpretation, and accessibility. If you meet online, test the platform and assign someone to manage breakout rooms.

2 Weeks out: choose questions and train facilitators

Pick three or four questions from the question bank in this guide. Hold a one-hour training where facilitators practice the ground rules and notetakers practice recording ideas without names.

1 Week of: confirm and pray

Send a personal reminder to everyone who said yes. Print name tags, question cards, and notetaking sheets. Gather the team to pray for the people who will come.

DURING THE SESSION

A 90-minute run of show

0:00	**Welcome**	Greet people at the door by name. Food is out. Everyone gets a name tag and sits with people they don't know well.
0:10	**Opening prayer**	Read Luke 24:13–17 slowly. Pause in silence, then pray the opening prayer on the next page.
0:15	**Why we're here**	The host explains in two minutes what the parish hopes to learn and what will happen with what people share. Be honest about what the parish can and can't promise.
0:20	**Ground rules**	Read the ground rules aloud and ask, "Can we agree to these?"
0:25	**Round one**	Small groups. An easy opening question, then one question about life and one about faith. Everyone has a chance to speak before anyone speaks twice.
0:50	**Silence**	Three minutes of quiet. Invite people to notice what they heard that surprised or moved them.
0:53	**Round two**	Same groups. One question about the Church and one about hopes. Notetakers read back what they heard and ask, "Did I get that right?"
1:15	**Sharing with everyone**	Each group shares one or two themes, not individual stories.
1:25	**Closing and next steps**	Thank people sincerely. Tell them when and how they'll hear back. Collect contact information for those who want it. Close with the prayer.

GROUND RULES TO READ ALOUD

1. Speak for yourself, from your own experience.
2. Listen to understand, not to respond.
3. Every experience is welcome, including hard ones.
4. You may pass on any question.
5. What's shared here stays here. Notes record ideas, not names.
6. Leaders are here to listen, not to explain or defend.

DURING THE SESSION

Facilitating well

Your job is not to have answers. It is to make it safe for people to tell the truth, and to make sure every voice is heard.

Set the space with intention

Begin by reminding the group that each person here is made in the image of God and that listening to them is holy work. A brief ritual, like a moment of silence or lighting a candle, helps people settle.

Ask, then wait

After you ask a question, count to ten silently before you say anything else. Silence is where reflection happens.

Go around before you go deep

Give everyone a turn on the first question. Afterward, invite those who haven't spoken: "We haven't heard from everyone yet. Anyone want to add something?"

Follow the energy

When someone says something important, ask a follow-up: "Can you say more about that?" or "What was that like for you?"

Resist fixing

If someone shares a hurt caused by the Church, don't explain or defend. Say, "Thank you for trusting us with that." Their experience is real.

Notice patterns

Listen for what comes up more than once and for what nobody mentions. Both tell you something.

A PROCESS WORTH BORROWING

Future of Faith's Sacred Listening process names three movements that fit a listening session well: **set intentions** to create a sacred space, **ask and record** in ways that fit how people share, and **explore and follow up** by finding patterns and continuing the relationships. Their free tools are at futureoffaith.org/sacredlisteningtools.

OPENING PRAYER

Lord Jesus, you walked beside your friends on the road to Emmaus and asked about their journey before you spoke. Walk with us now. Open our ears to hear one another, our hearts to receive what is shared, and our community to be changed by what we learn. Help us recognize you in each person here. Amen.

QUESTION BANK

Questions worth asking

Choose three or four. Fewer questions with more time for each leads to deeper conversation.

TO OPEN

1. What's one thing that has given you life this month?
2. What brought you here today?
3. Where do you feel most at home right now?

LIFE

1. What takes up most of your time and energy these days?
2. What are you carrying right now that others might not see?
3. Who are the people you trust most, and why?

FAITH

1. When have you felt close to God? When has God felt far away?
2. What questions about faith are you living with right now?
3. Who has helped you grow in faith, and what did they do?

CHURCH AND PARISH

1. When have you felt welcomed in a parish? When have you felt invisible?
2. What would make it easier for people your age to belong here?
3. What do you wish parish leaders understood about your life?

HOPES

1. If this parish could do one thing for young adults, what should it be?
2. What gifts do you have that you'd like to share?
3. What would you want to be part of a year from now?

FOR PEOPLE WHO HAVE STEPPED AWAY

1. What was your experience of Church growing up?
2. What, if anything, do you miss?
3. What would a community worth belonging to look like for you?

AFTER THE SESSION

Closing the loop

What happens after a listening session decides whether young adults trust you next time. Within 30 days, people should hear back.

1 Debrief that night

Before anyone leaves, the team spends 30 minutes naming what they heard, what surprised them, and what they want to remember. Collect all notes in one place.

2 Find the themes

Within a week, two or three people read every note and group similar ideas. Look for what came up in more than one group, strong feelings, concrete hopes, and anything unexpected. Keep a few direct phrases, without names.

3 Write a one-page summary

Three to five themes, a few quotes, and two or three possible responses. Share it with your pastor and parish leadership first.

4 Report back to participants

Send the summary to everyone who came, or invite them back for a short “here’s what we heard” gathering. Ask, “Did we get it right?”

5 Take one visible step

Choose one thing the parish will do in response and do it soon. Invite the people who named the need to help shape it.

PRINTABLE

Notetaking sheet

One sheet per small group, per round. Record ideas, not names. Read a short summary back to the group before you finish.

GROUP _____ QUESTION _____

IDEAS WE HEARD (NO NAMES)

PHRASES WORTH KEEPING, WORD FOR WORD

WHAT SURPRISED US

THEMES THAT CAME UP MORE THAN ONCE

Keep going

Listening is a beginning. These resources can help with the steps that follow.

FROM NIMYA

Parish Readiness Checklist

Use what you heard to assess where your parish is today and choose a next step.

FROM NIMYA

Small Group Starter Kit

Many listening sessions end with young adults asking for a place to keep talking. This kit helps you start one.

U.S. BISHOPS

Listen, Teach, Send

The national pastoral framework for ministries with youth and young adults, and its implementation guidebook, at usccb.org.

U.S. BISHOPS

Journeying Together Handbook

A step-by-step process for intercultural encounter and dialogue led by young adults, from the Committee on Cultural Diversity in the Church.

FUTURE OF FAITH

Sacred Listening Tools

Free listening tools, including Mapping Trusted Relationships and Text to Connect. Future of Faith is a free resource designed to support all those working in ministry. No strings attached.

SCRIPTURE AND CHURCH TEACHING

For prayer and study

Luke 24:13–35, the road to Emmaus. Pope Francis, *Christus Vivit* (2019), especially chapters 7 and 9 on ministry with young people and on listening and accompaniment.

Free for your ministry

NIMYA resources are free for everyone who ministers with young adults. Copy them, adapt them for your community, and share them widely. No strings attached.

The National Institute for Ministry with Young Adults forms and accompanies pastoral leaders who minister with young adults in their late teens, twenties, and thirties, through pastoral formation, leader accompaniment, research, and advocacy. Learn more at ministrywithyoungadults.org.