



The question of how the U.S. Church can better reach young adults who are not actively engaged in their faith was at the heart of a three-day conference in Washington, D.C. last week.

Michael Gormley, podcast host and coordinator of evangelization at a parish outside Houston, said that he believes many in the Church are still operating under a mindset of “If we just teach them in the right way, use the right programs, hold the right events, they’ll come pouring back in.”

“And I think it completely misses the point that we’re not even on their radar,” Gormley said. “The biggest problem is we need to go where people are, and not expect them to come to us.”

The National Young Adult Ministry Summit was organized by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops’ Secretariat of Laity, Marriage, Family Life and Youth. Some 130 attendees from 60 dioceses, hailing from as far as Fairbanks, Alaska, gathered at the National Shrine of St. John Paul II May 15-17.

Themes of the summit were tied to the preparatory and pre-synod document for the 2018 Synod on Young People, the Faith, and Vocational Discernment, which will be held this fall in Rome.

Throughout the summit, participants attended various breakout and small-group sessions that were tailored to different segments of the young adult population. People were split up based on if they worked on the diocesan or parish level, in order to better connect with people from similar positions.

While the attendees came from diverse backgrounds and locations, many were struck by how similar their struggles have been in engaging young adult Catholics. Common issues facing young adults in Catholic parishes included a longing for “authentic friendships,” as well as struggles with reaching people from the peripheries of society.

“Even though you’re talking to and meeting people from all across the U.S., from various job positions, with various responsibilities within their jobs, the same kind of things are coming up in young adult ministry,” said Ken White, director of youth and young adult ministry at Our Lady of Mount Carmel Catholic Church in Newport News, Virginia.

“Ultimately, the solution is building relationships with people.”

White said one of the biggest issues facing young adults in his parish was simply a lack of time to commit to parish activities, as people tend to be busy both with jobs, families, and other activities.

Young adults at Gormley’s large parish in The Woodlands, Texas, face similar challenges, but in different contexts. In the Houston area, Gormley explained, many young adults work jobs in the oil industry where, although they make quite a bit of money, they do not have time to form relationships or commit to many parish activities.

“Our big goal with them is trying to find time in their busy lives to do more than just a social,” he said. For Gormley’s parish, that came in the form of theology on tap, which he said has proved quite popular.

Additionally, Gormley’s parish has seen success in launching a small-group ministry, with different types of groups for singles, older adults, and people with children.

While there is a large segment of well-to-do young adults in Gormley’s parish, he said he also has to focus on providing support for the marginalized members of society--particularly the wives and girlfriends of the men he meets during his work in prison ministry.

“It’s so easy to ignore them, because they’re not [seen as] ‘good people,’” he explained.

One of the presentations at the summit highlighted the need to pay attention to the

sometimes-neglected categories of young adults in a parish, particularly single parents, those with addictions, divorcees, and people who have graduated from high school but may not attend college.

“Calling attention to what young adults are going through gets multiplied once you get to the peripheries of the Church--that’s an area that’s kind of scaring us,” said Gormley.