

Irish Synodal Pathway – Working Group Submission Template

Working Group Priority Area: Youth

Date of Submission: 30th May 2026

1. Group Overview

Members:

Natalie Doherty

Jake Magill

Hannah Montgomery

Deirbhile Craven

Cyril Odia SBD

James McLoughlin

Helena O'Shea

Luke Casserly

Convener:

Michelle Ward

National Synodal Team Representative:

Bishop Brendan Leahy

2. Statement of Discernment and Vision

How we worked together:

Our group met by Zoom on eight occasions, each lasting approximately ninety minutes. We began every meeting with the *Adsumus, Sancte Spiritus* prayer and listened attentively to one another's perspectives. We ended each meeting with a prayer from different members. Between meetings, we encouraged prayerful reflection on various resources and materials. We used a shared Google document to exchange reflections and draft proposals, refining ideas collaboratively through comments and feedback. We also gathered youth statistics and consulted relevant organisations through an online survey of diocesan youth ministries,

congregations, movements, associations and other bodies to help inform our proposals, analysis and recommendations.

What we did:

We began by studying key national and universal synodal documents, for example, *Baptised and Sent* (2025) and the *Final Document for a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation and Mission* (2024). We also reviewed wider Church teaching, in particular *Christus Vivit* and contemporary research relating to youth ministry, evangelisation and discipleship. Throughout the process, our work was guided by prayerful reflection and discernment.

We reflected on summaries from three major gatherings of young people and youth ministers: *Dare to Hope* – Knock Shrine Feedback Summary (14 June 2025), *Summary of Young Pilgrims' Feedback – Jubilee Youth Pilgrimage to Rome 2025*, and *Into the Deep – Conversation in the Spirit* – Clongowes Wood College (June 2024), identifying common themes and concerns regarding youth outreach in Ireland.

We surveyed dioceses, congregations, movements and associations to map existing ministries and outreach initiatives for young people. We consulted with the IECs' Council of Evangelisation, Catechesis and Pastoral Renewal youth ministry committee.

We also reviewed recent statistical and sociological research, including the Irish Episcopal Conferences' research, *The Turning Tide?* (2026), Amárach Research commissioned by the Iona Institute, *What do Irish people think about the Catholic Church and religion?* (2025), *Spirituality in Northern Ireland* (2025), the Youth Assembly for Northern Ireland *Big Youth Survey* (2025), NYCI's *State of Our Young Nation* (2024), and the *European Social Survey* (2023–2024).

Draft proposals were prayerfully discerned and refined through consultation and collaborative feedback. Together, documentary study, research and lived pastoral experience shaped proposals grounded in practical realities and suitable for wider piloting.

What we heard:

According to the European Social Survey (2023–2024), 42% of Irish people aged 16–29 report not belonging to any religion. At the same time, Gen Z shows higher engagement with faith than millennials, particularly online, with 23% of 18–24-year-olds following religious or spiritual influencers. Research also highlights tensions around Church teaching, with many young people

expressing difficulty with teachings on sexuality, while Northern Irish Catholics aged 18–24 attend Mass more regularly than most other generations.

The central message emerging from our research and consultation is the urgent need for a coordinated, well-resourced, sustainable, and youth-centred ministry in the Catholic Church in Ireland, grounded in *Christus Vivit* and contemporary youth experience. Young people consistently expressed a desire for belonging, accompaniment, faith formation, friendship and meaning, yet many do not experience these within parish life. Youth ministry across Ireland often remains fragmented, under-resourced and heavily dependent on volunteers who lack sustained formation and support.

We heard a strong call for structures that intentionally include young voices and recognise young people as co-responsible participants in the Church's mission rather than passive recipients. There is a need for coordinated pathways that move from first encounter to mature discipleship, nurturing prayer, sacramental life, leadership and missionary outreach.

A recurring concern was the social and spiritual isolation experienced by many young people. Pilgrimages and gatherings remain important moments of encounter but require ongoing accompaniment and community-building to sustain discipleship.

We also identified a significant digital challenge and opportunity. Young people increasingly form identity and community online, creating a need for credible, creative and well-supported digital evangelisation rooted in safeguarding, authentic witness and coherent catechesis. Above all, young people consistently expressed a desire to belong, to be heard and to find a spiritual home within the Church.

Why these proposals:

Having shared our reflections on the documentation to date and listened to the issues that emerged across the various consultations, we discerned five major challenges to which we responded with the proposals outlined: the lack among young people of belonging and an experience of faith community, linked to struggles with Church credibility and relevance; insufficient evangelisation and faith formation; under-resourced and fragmented youth ministry; the need for greater digital engagement with young people; and the lack of meaningful youth leadership and inclusive structures that embody the message of Jesus.

Vision for the Church in Ireland:

The vision is of a missionary, synodal and relational Church that forms and empowers young people as co-responsible evangelisers. It is a vision of a Church with coordinated and sustainable structures that replace fragmented ministry, foster mature discipleship, and give young people meaningful leadership and peer ministry roles. It is of a Church that embraces digital culture through a credible online presence while safeguarding authentic community through pilgrimages, gatherings and ongoing accompaniment. Recognising the growing reality of youth isolation, it prioritises belonging, friendship and pastoral care attentive to mental health and wellbeing. Overall, it is a vision of a synodal Church that listens, accompanies and integrates pastoral care, catechesis and mission so that encounters with Christ lead to living faith and the daily witness of the Gospel in contemporary Ireland.

Word Count: __875__ / 800

3. Proposals for Consideration

Foundational Proposal (1)

Title: Appoint Youth Coordinators and Establish a Youth Advisory Committee

Description:

This proposal has two elements.

1. This proposal is for dioceses, congregations and movements in Ireland to appoint a suitably qualified Youth Coordinator. This role may be full-time or part-time, depending on resources; where positions already exist, access to updated, synodally informed professional development should be ensured. Smaller dioceses, congregations, and movements might consider collaborating to share personnel and resources, reflecting the synodal spirit encouraged by Pope Francis and the Irish Synodal Pathway.
2. In addition, each diocese, congregation, and movement is encouraged to establish a Youth Advisory Committee. This Committee should reflect a diverse cross-section of youth, young adults and those involved in youth ministry in order to contribute to the

strategic vision and planning and embody the shared discernment described in *Christus Vivit* (CV 206–208).

Rationale:

Christus Vivit reminds us that “young people are the now of God” (CV 178) and highlights the need for the Church to accompany young people with competence, joy, and pastoral closeness. However, many engaged in youth ministry report feeling the need for more opportunities for formation, resources, and support. Inconsistent and fragmented approaches across Ireland can result in duplication of effort, missed opportunities for evangelisation, and reduced impact (CV 212–213).

Establishing coordinated roles and participatory structures will strengthen the Church’s ability to respond to young people’s needs by ensuring that their voices are genuinely heard. By doing so, the Church more faithfully embraces the call to “make room for the creativity that only young people can bring” (CV 203).

Intended Impact:

- Strengthen the Church’s capacity to evangelise and accompany young people.
- Ensure youth ministry is strategic, sustainable, and mission-focused.
- Foster a culture of listening, participation, and shared responsibility (CV 206).
- Create pathways for young people to exercise leadership and co-responsibility in the Church (CV 170, 174).
- Enhance collaboration across dioceses, congregations, and movements.

Ultimately, it aims to cultivate vibrant faith communities where young people encounter Christ, grow in discipleship, and contribute actively to the Church’s mission.

Implementation Pathway:

Implementation should take place at diocesan, congregational, movement, regional, and national levels:

1. Appointment of Youth Coordinator

- Each diocese, congregation, and movement determines the appropriate level of appointment and required qualifications, or provides refresher training for those already in post.
- The role should include: formation of leaders at local level; fostering belonging; facilitating encounters with Christ and proclamation of the kerygma; accompaniment of young people; programme development; collaboration with the Sub-Committee for Evangelisation and Youth Ministry of the IEC Council for Evangelisation, Catechesis and Pastoral Renewal and enabling synodal listening through the Youth Advisory Committee (CV 244–247).

2. Formation of a Youth Advisory Committee

Responding to the call for young people to be “protagonists” (CV 174):

- Youth and Young Adult members may be identified through invitation or nomination from existing youth groups, ensuring diversity in age (approximately 16–35), background, and experience.
- Incorporate other stakeholders to ensure experience (e.g., Bishop, Provincial, Clergy, Religious, Youth Ministers, Chaplains/Lay Leaders).
- Establish clear terms of reference, including a defined term of service (e.g., three years).
- The Bishop, Provincial, or Movement Leader should commission the committee, with the Youth Coordinator acting as facilitator and decision-taker with decisions ratified by Bishop/Provincial/Movement Leader (CV 96, 203).
- Build on and connect with the committee for Evangelisation and Youth Ministry of the IEC council for Evangelisation, Catechesis and Pastoral Renewal (established January 2026).
- Each entity should adapt the model to its context in line with subsidiarity (CV 104) and include mechanisms for accountability to ensure responsiveness to evolving pastoral realities.

Proposal 2

Title: Build clear leadership pathways: training, bursaries, and meaningful youth representation

Description:

This proposal seeks to establish a national formation and training pathway for youth and young adult ministry within the Catholic Church in Ireland. The pathway is initially aimed at volunteers to build local capacity, and would equip both adult leaders and young people themselves to serve as missionary disciples, pastoral leaders, mentors, and facilitators of local youth ministry.

The pathway would provide tiered formation at parish/partnership, diocesan, and national levels, combining:

- Theology, prayer and spirituality rooted in *Christus Vivit*
- Practical ministry skills and safeguarding training
- Synodal leadership and accompaniment
- Peer ministry and evangelisation training

The pathway would encourage collaboration between clergy, religious, lay leaders, schools, chaplaincies, university ministries, and existing Catholic youth movements. It would also create opportunities for young adults to discern ministry vocations and leadership within the Church.

Rationale:

The Church in Ireland faces an urgent need to renew and strengthen youth and young adult ministry through intentional accompaniment, faith development, and missionary outreach. Many parishes wish to engage young people but lack trained leaders, sustainable structures, and confidence in youth ministry practice.

Christus Vivit repeatedly calls the Church to move from ministry *to* young people toward ministry *with* and *by* young people. Pope Francis writes: “*Young people themselves are agents of youth ministry*” (CV 203). The document also highlights the importance of accompaniment and leadership formation: “There is a need to train consecrated persons and laypeople... to accompany young people.” (CV 244)

This proposal responds directly to the wider call of the Church for:

- Synodal listening and co-responsibility

- Accompaniment of young people
- Formation of lay leaders
- Missionary discipleship
- Sustainable local ministry structures

It also responds to the pastoral reality in Ireland, where youth ministry often depends on a small number of volunteers without structured support or formation. Long-term renewal requires investment in local leadership, bursaries to support further training, shared responsibility, and clear pathways for training and development.

Intended Impact:

This initiative would:

- Create a national framework for youth ministry leadership and formation (initially for volunteers, with pathways open for professional qualifications)
- Support sustainable parish/partnership and diocesan youth ministry teams
- Equip young adults to become protagonists in the life of the Church
- Foster a culture of accompaniment, belonging, and missionary discipleship
- Encourage collaboration between generations in parish life
- Strengthen participation in liturgy, service, catechesis, pilgrimage, and evangelisation
- Provide consistent safeguarding and pastoral standards nationally
- Support vocational discernment and leadership development
- Build a national network of trained youth ministry leaders across Ireland

Pastorally, the initiative would help young people experience the Church as a place of welcome, listening, formation, and mission. Practically, it would provide parishes with accessible tools, training, mentorship, and support structures to sustain youth ministry locally.

Implementation Pathway:

At parish/partnership level, local youth ministry teams could include clergy, parents, teachers, volunteers, and young adults. These teams would support local gatherings, mentoring, peer leadership, and participation in diocesan and national events.

At diocesan level, regional training hubs could provide accredited formation, safeguarding training, retreats, mentorship/reflective practice, and networking opportunities. Collaboration with schools, university chaplaincies, retreat centres, and Catholic movements would strengthen local capacity.

At national level, the Irish Episcopal Conference through the committee for Evangelisation and Youth Ministry (of the IEC council for Evangelisation, Catechesis and Pastoral Renewal) could coordinate a shared framework, online resources, leadership gatherings, accreditation standards, and partnerships with international Catholic youth ministry organisations.

Together, these structures would create clear and sustainable pathways for leadership, formation, and meaningful youth participation within the Church in Ireland.

Some examples of training for Catholic Youth Ministry Leaders:

- Diploma in Youth Ministry and Spirituality (St Patrick's Pontifical University Maynooth)
- Diocesan Certificate in Youth Ministry Leadership (Archdiocese of Dublin)
- Knock Shrine Youth Ministry (Knock)

Proposal 3

Title: Establish Pathways of Intentional Discipleship for Youth and Young Adults

Description:

This proposal outlines a parish/pastoral unit-based approach to forming intentional disciples among youth and young adults. Its aim is to help create welcoming communities where younger generations can encounter Christ, grow in faith and participate actively in the life and mission of the Church.

Vision

The initiative proposes two interconnected pathways: one for youth and one for young adults, moving from evangelisation to discipleship, leadership and mission.

Youth Pathway (Ages 12–18)

The youth pathway begins with relational evangelisation initiatives that foster hospitality, conversation, prayer and Christian community. Games, icebreakers and music are important elements of these gatherings, helping young people build friendships, confidence and belonging within the Church.

For young people post-Confirmation (approximately 12-15 years), suggested resources could include:

- The GIFT Programme (Down & Connor)
- The Teen Hope Programme (Dublin)

For young people aged approximately 15–18, the Alpha Youth Series may provide an effective starting point for faith exploration and evangelisation. JP2 students may be especially suited to helping lead this stage of the pathway through peer ministry and leadership.

Following these initial experiences, participants are offered the opportunity to transition into deeper Catholic discipleship programmes focused on prayer, scripture, sacramental life and missionary identity. Retreats and pilgrimages should also form part of this stage, providing meaningful and experiential opportunities for young people to encounter Christ, deepen their faith and build Christian community.

Young Adult Pathway (Ages 18–35)

The young adult pathway may begin with already established and successful initiatives including Alpha, NUA: Fresh Perspectives, Sycamore and The Rescue Project. These sessions would be followed by Catholic Bible studies, faith-sharing groups, retreats, pilgrimages and discipleship resources that support ongoing formation, deeper encounter and mission.

Together, these pathways aim to foster a culture of evangelisation, accompaniment and missionary discipleship within parish life.

Rationale

Many young people and young adults lack meaningful opportunities for faith exploration, Christian friendship and accompaniment. This proposal seeks to provide intentional pathways from first encounter to mature discipleship and leadership.

The approach recognises young people not simply as recipients of ministry, but as co-responsible participants in the Church's mission, called to evangelise, accompany and serve others.

While the proposal primarily envisions these pathways being parish/pastoral unit-based, it also recognises that schools, chaplaincies, teachers and volunteers may choose to run these initiatives in other pastoral settings.

Intended Impact

The pathway aims to:

- Create consistent faith opportunities for youth and young adults
- Foster Christian belonging and supportive relationships
- Increase participation in parish life and mission
- Form intentional disciples rooted in prayer, sacraments and service
- Provide transformative experiences through retreats and pilgrimages
- Equip young leaders for peer evangelisation and mentoring
- Support long-term parish renewal and sustainable ministry

Implementation Pathway

1. Leadership & Preparation

Identify pilot parishes or pastoral units, recruit leaders, establish safeguarding structures and provide training in accompaniment, evangelisation and youth ministry.

2. Programme Launch & Community Building

Establish regular youth/young adult gatherings and welcoming spaces for discussion, icebreakers, prayer and community using age-appropriate evangelisation resources.

3. Formation & Discipleship

Support participants through ongoing Catholic formation, Bible studies, mentorship, retreats, pilgrimages and opportunities for deeper discipleship and encounter with Christ.

4. Leadership & Mission

Invite young people into leadership, peer ministry and missionary outreach within parish and community life.

Collaboration & Evaluation

The proposal encourages opportunities for youth ministers, volunteers, clergy and parish leaders to share best practice and learn from one another through retreats, gatherings or conferences. Regular evaluation and reflection should support effectiveness, growth and long-term sustainability.

Proposal 4

Title: Build Pathways of Belonging for Young people through pilgrimage and Gatherings.

Description:

Dioceses, individually or in partnership, are encouraged to prioritise annual pilgrimages and regular regional gatherings for youth (12–17) and young adults (18–35). These initiatives can be tailored to respond to local needs while encouraging the sharing of successful models and resources.

The aim is to create opportunities for young people to encounter Christ, experience the wider Church, and build authentic faith-based friendships. Pilgrimages and gatherings are intended not simply as isolated events, but as pathways into ongoing accompaniment, discipleship and active participation in parish and diocesan life.

Rationale:

Young people today continue to seek community, meaning and authentic connection. The Church has much to offer in responding by creating opportunities for young people to encounter Christ, build lasting friendships and experience belonging within the wider faith community.

Pilgrimages and youth gatherings have consistently proven to be powerful moments of encounter, spiritual renewal and personal growth. They provide opportunities for evangelisation as well as for young people to deepen their faith, engage more fully with the life of the Church and connect with other young Catholics.

By building on these experiences through ongoing accompaniment and formation, young people can be supported in moving from initial encounter towards lasting discipleship and deeper participation in parish and diocesan life.

Intended Impact:

This proposal aims to:

- Foster a stronger sense of belonging and Christian community among young people
- Create opportunities for encounter with Christ through pilgrimage, prayer and shared faith experiences
- Strengthen relationships between young people, parishes and dioceses
- Encourage participation in the sacramental and communal life of the Church
- Support sustainable youth and young adult communities at parish and diocesan level

Implementation Pathway:**1. Annual Diocesan Pilgrimages**

Dioceses, individually or collaboratively, are encouraged to organise annual pilgrimages for young people and young adults to places such as World Youth Day, Lourdes, Rome, Taizé, Glendalough, Croagh Patrick, Lough Derg, Knock Shrine and pilgrim walkways across Ireland.

These pilgrimages can vary according to local circumstances, with appropriate training and formation provided for leaders and volunteers.

2. Regional Gatherings and Ongoing Formation

Local, diocesan or regional regular youth gatherings can be developed to take place throughout the year, particularly around liturgical seasons such as Advent, Lent and Easter. These gatherings would help sustain and deepen the fruits of pilgrimage experiences by providing ongoing opportunities for prayer, formation, friendship and accompaniment. They can also serve as welcoming entry points for young people not yet connected to the life of the Church.

Gatherings may include youth-focused liturgies, Eucharistic Adoration, Reconciliation, catechesis, music ministry, guest speakers and social activities.

3. National Youth Pilgrimage to Knock

Building on initiatives such as “Dare to Hope,” consideration could be given to establishing an annual national youth and young adult pilgrimage to Knock Shrine.

Such a gathering could include faith formation, prayer, Eucharistic Adoration, celebration of the Sacraments and opportunities for fellowship, helping to foster a visible and vibrant culture of youth and young adult faith in Ireland.

4. Collaboration Across Youth Ministry

Greater active collaboration should be encouraged between dioceses, parishes and the many others also engaged in youth ministry, helping to extend invitations more widely and foster greater unity and shared mission.

Those charged with organising pilgrimages, gatherings and other initiatives are encouraged to reach out to movements, apostolates, religious orders, faith camps, retreat centres and school chaplains in the planning and promotion of these events. Sharing resources, experience, training and successful initiatives can help strengthen outreach and build stronger connections.

Many organisations and initiatives, including Youth 2000, Evangelium, Religious Orders, Net Ministries, Jesus Youth, the Neo-Catechumenal Way and the Legion of Mary, for example, already provide retreats, conferences, prayer experiences and formation opportunities that can complement local, diocesan and parish initiatives. These groups are likewise encouraged to support, promote and collaborate with diocesan initiatives as part of a shared commitment to the evangelisation, accompaniment and formation of young people across Ireland.

Proposal 5:

Title: Develop a National Digital Strategy for Youth-Focused Online Content

Description

This proposal is for the Irish Episcopal Conference to develop a National Digital Evangelisation Strategy with a youth focus to strengthen and coordinate the Church's presence in digital spaces. Drawing on national and international best practice, the strategy would provide a clear framework for evangelisation online and offer practical resources for dioceses, parishes, religious orders and Catholic organisations to engage effectively through digital platforms and form digital missionaries.

The strategy would recognise that young people increasingly encounter faith online before they encounter it in parish or school settings.

Rationale

As Pope Leo XIV has stated in his first encyclical, *Magnifica Humanitas*, "It is important to recall that communication 'is not only the transmission of information, but it is also the creation of a culture.'" (MH 135) Elsewhere, in his address to digital missionaries and Catholic influencers, he said: "*Today we find ourselves in a new culture, deeply characterized and formed by technology. It is up to us — it is up to each one of you — to ensure that this culture remains human.*" (Paragraph 2, Tuesday, 29 July 2025).

Young people's lives are deeply shaped by digital culture, yet the Church's online presence is often limited, inconsistent or inaccessible. This reduces opportunities for outreach, connection and evangelisation in the spaces where young people are most active.

Research from the Iona Institute (2025) suggests that Gen Z (under 25) are more likely than Millennials (25–34) to engage with faith and the Church across the island of Ireland. The same research found that Gen Z are more likely to engage with faith content online, while 23% of 18–24-year-olds follow religious or spiritual accounts on social media platforms such as “FaithTok”.

These trends present a significant opportunity for the Church to engage young people through authentic, high-quality digital content and online communities.

Intended Impact

- Increased digital reach and visibility for the Church
- Greater engagement with under-35 audiences
- Increased participation in online faith communities
- Improved digital literacy and capacity among Church leaders and ministries
- Shared resources and templates for youth ministry
- Stronger and more visible evangelisation among young people
- More consistent national messaging aligned with Church teaching

Implementation Pathway

A first step would be for the IEC to establish a working group to develop a five-year National Digital Evangelisation Strategy.

The working group would:

- Articulate a clear rationale for digital evangelisation
- Ensure safeguarding and ethical standards are followed
- Identify opportunities for collaboration with Catholic platforms, influencers, youth organisations and content creators
- Provide practical guidance and resources for dioceses, parishes and organisations

The strategy should include:

- Digital evangelisation, catechesis, faith education and online youth community spaces

- Engagement with contemporary cultural and social issues through faith-based dialogue
- Youth-focused digital content across platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, podcasts and livestreaming
- A national online resource hub with shared content and materials for dioceses, parishes, schools and ministries
- Training in digital communication and social media use for clergy, parish staff and youth ministry leaders
- National safeguarding and social media guidelines to support safe and effective online engagement

4. Presentation at the National Assembly

Reading of Statement of Discernment and Vision (800 words):

☐ Representative(s) confirmed

Michelle Ward

Presentation of Proposals:

☐ Representative(s) confirmed

Jake Magill

Natalie Doherty

Estimated Time Required:

[Insert duration]

5. Final Declaration

We affirm that this submission is the fruit of a synodal process of listening, prayer, discernment, and consultation, undertaken in accordance with the mandate entrusted to this Working Group.

Signed (on behalf of the Working Group):

Michelle Ward / Convener