

Listening to the Voices of Young People

Results from Raise Your Voice 2017 in the Archdiocese of Adelaide

Peter Bierer, Coordinator of the Catholic Office for Youth and Young Adults, Archdiocese of Adelaide.

peter.bierer@cesa.catholic.edu.au | (08) 8301 6866 | www.cathoyouthadelaide.org.au



Executive Summary

The purpose of this report was to analyse the results of the Raise Your Voice 2017 listening forums in the Archdiocese of Adelaide. Over 180 young people across the archdiocese participated in the listening forums, their responses were collected and analysed by Peter Bierer in the Catholic Office for Youth and Young Adults. The results of the Raise Your Voice 2017 indicate that young people in the archdiocese want opportunities to engage in the life and mission of the Church in their parishes, schools and communities particularly through social justice, faith formation, and leadership in the community. The report concludes that parishes, schools, and communities can engage with young people by providing them with a vision (the Reign of God), a mission (to serve and transform the world) and a way of life (Christian discipleship). The report offers several practical recommendation as to how this may be accomplished.

Introduction

Raise Your Voice 2017 was a series of listening forums developed, in part, to assist parishes, schools, communities, and archdiocesan leadership to listen to and develop appropriate responses for the young people of the Archdiocese of Adelaide. This report provides insight into the lives of young people and is a starting point for conversations with young people in the local parish, school, and community.

1. Raise Your Voice 2017

Raise Your Voice 2017 was designed as a way for the Archdiocese of Adelaide to gain feedback from young people regarding the questions asked in the Preparatory Document for the 2018 Synod of Bishops as well as to inform the ongoing work and development of the Catholic Office for Youth and Young Adults.

- 11 Raise Your Voice 2017 events were held across the Archdiocese of Adelaide in July and August 2017
- 180 Participants
- Participants ranged from 12 years old to 32 years old.
- Most participants were lifelong Catholics, moderately to highly engaged in faith
- Nearly equal number of male and female participants.
- At parish-hosted events, the average participant was a lifelong Catholic, aged 18 to 24, single, studying at University or in the early stages of a career.
- The 180 participants generated over 2,400 individual responses at the forums.

1.2 Raise Your Voice Event Information

1.2a Raise Your Voice Goals

- 1) To gather young people from each of the deaneries in the Archdiocese of Adelaide to give voice to their hopes, joys, and concerns about the Catholic Church in Adelaide and the World.
- 2) To gather a diverse cross-section of young people who are representative of the region.
- 3) To generate an accurate picture of young people and their relationship with the Catholic Church in the Archdiocese of Adelaide

The Questions

The Catholic Office for Youth and Young Adults developed ten questions for the Raise Your Voice Events. The questions were designed to answer three essential areas of interest for our research:

Present Situation	The Future	The Church
What is the current situation of young people in the Archdiocese of Adelaide?	How do young people think about the future?	What is the relationship of young people to the Catholic Church?

Out of these primary themes, ten discussion questions were developed:

Present Situation	The Future	The Church
1) What are the significant challenges facing you as a young person in South Australia?	2) How do you make important decisions for your life?	6) What do young people want from the Church?
7) What issues matter most to young people?	3) What worries do you have about the future?	4) What role should the Church play in the lives of young people?
5) Where do you find community, a sense of belonging?	10) What gives you hope?	8) What is the Church doing right? What is it getting wrong?
		10) What do you want the Church to know about young people?

**Questions were numbered a) to randomize the questions for table discussion and b) to give priority to what were determined to be more important questions for the pre-Synod report. If a group was too small to address all ten questions, they might only respond to the first three or four questions. Some smaller groups chose three questions that were most meaningful to them.*

1.2b Invitations

Invitations and advertisements were directed at any 16-29 year olds (as identified in the *Preparatory Document for the 2018 Synod of Bishops*¹), plus adults (over 29 years old) to act as observers from parishes, schools, and other Catholic communities. Invitations to young people were sent through parishes according to deanery, to school APRIMS and youth ministers. The events were advertised through COYYA, CESA, and Archdiocesan communications (eNewsletters, social media, The Southern Cross Newspaper).

1.2c Event Locations and Dates

Eleven listening forums were held across the Archdiocese. With the exception of one event, Raise Your Voice 2017 was hosted by parishes in each of the seven deaneries of the Archdiocese of Adelaide. The forums were held in July and August 2017.

1.2d Event Agenda

6:30 – 7:00 PM	Gather
7:00 PM	Welcome and Introductions
7:20 PM	Prayer / Music
7:30 PM	Introduction of Purpose of Pre-Synod Conversations
7:40 PM	World Café Conversations (3 rounds)
8:40 PM	Table Reporting
8:55 PM	Closing Prayer and Dismissal

1.3 World Café Conversation Method

World Café² is a conversation methodology that facilitates large group dialogue. World Café uses a unique set of design principles to create an environment ripe for good discussion. Hosts are encouraged to set up a large room with round, café-style tables, with no more than five chairs at each table. The host welcomes the group and introduces the World Café process, etiquette for sharing, and conversation topics. Next, table groups engage in several rounds of conversation, each lasting about twenty minutes. After each round, all but one or two table group members moves to a new table. The remaining person becomes the “table host.”

This method was effective at Raise Your Voice 2017 in assisting young people with the task of reflecting upon and answering the key questions. At the end of the final round and large group reporting, each participant received nine sticker dots and instructions to place a dot next to the insights and responses they thought were most important. When tabulating the number of responses, each sticker was counted as an additional response. For example, if someone wrote, “Climate change,” that was considered one response. Six stickers placed next to “Climate change,” counted as seven responses for climate change.

1.4 Participant Snapshot

Approximately 180 young people from across the Archdiocese participated in Raise Your Voice 2017. While the invitation was for all young people ages 16 to 29 regardless of faith background or engagement level with the Catholic Church, the actual participants ranged from 12 years old to 32 years old. Almost all of the participants were lifelong Catholics, moderately to highly engaged in faith, there was a nearly equal number of male and female participants. At parish-hosted events, the average participant was a lifelong Catholic, aged 18 to 24, single, studying at University or in the early stages of a career.

¹Preparatory Document for the 15th General Assembly of Bishops in Rome.

http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/documents/rc_synod_doc_20170113_documento-preparatorio-xv_en.html

²The World Café. <http://www.theworldcafe.com>

1.5 Evaluation of the Raise Your Voice Events

Those who attended Raise Youth Voice gave positive feedback of the experience. Young people were grateful for the opportunity to share their thoughts, opinions, and experiences of being a young person in South Australia. A sense of community and new friendships developed at each event. Conversations were rich and rewarding and the quality of participation was exceptional. It is the hope of COYYA to offer Raise Your Voice as an annual event for young people.

One critique of the Raise Your Voice 2017 events is the lack of “disengaged” Catholic and non-Catholic participants. The highest number of non-Catholics and disengaged Catholics was at the Student Leaders’ Consultation with the Archbishop. Due to the rushed planning of this event, there was not enough time or energy to pursue “outside” voices. In the future, I aim to have a greater diversity of young people in listening forums like Raise Your Voice.

2. Significant Themes from the Responses

Analysis of the responses revealed twelve common themes shared by the 180 participants of the forums.

2.1 Social Justice Issues (732 responses)

Many young people connect to their faith through social justice, service, and charity. Eight primary social justice issues were identified in the responses.

Acceptance and inclusivity (183 responses)

Young people want the Church to be welcoming, inclusive, and accepting of those on the edges of their communities and the whole of society.

Environment/ climate change (85 responses)

Young people are deeply concerned about the state of the environment, global warming and climate change.

Employment (85 responses)

Young people are worried about finding jobs in South Australia, especially in their chosen field of study and personal passion.

Inequality (81 responses)

Young people are concerned about the lack of equality in Australian society and globally, especially for women, racial minorities, indigenous peoples, religious minorities, the poor, and those who identify as LGBTQ+.

LGBTQ+ Issues (72 responses)

Young people have a strong interest in LGBTQ+ issues ranging from being a more inclusive Church to the rejection of same sex marriage. This is a very important topic for young people.

Peace and conflict (63 responses)

Young people are concerned about global conflicts and the impact of these events on Australian society and these issues contribute to growing anxiety in young people.

Mental health (61 responses)

Young people are asking the Church to recognise the reality of mental health issues, and to respond with guidance and support

Miscellaneous social justice issues (155 responses)

Young people are tuned-in to a wide variety of issues facing local and global society, and they have a desire to work for justice.

2.2 Desire to connect to the church (261 responses)

Young people want to engage in the life and mission of the Church. Young people are looking for communities that will welcome them, recognise them for their gifts and contributions, and empower them to be leaders in the community.

2.3 Adaptability of the Church to contemporary issues (172 responses)

Young people want to see the Church update and adapt to contemporary society. Young people want the Church to use technology and social media, employing youth ministers, update teaching and liturgy (especially music and preaching).

2.4 Desire for faith formation (144 responses)

Young people want faith formation that is inclusive of the experiences and beliefs of each young person.

2.5 Pressures from society, peers, school, and family (115 responses)

Young people face significant pressures from school/university, family members, friends, and society. Social media and popular media often exasperate the peer and cultural pressures.

2.6 Being Catholic in society and schools (103 responses)

Some young people find it difficult to be open about their faith with friends, family, and sometimes in the Catholic school setting. There is a perception of anti-Catholic bias in Australian culture and in the media.

2.7 Finding Purpose / Vocation (98 responses)

Young people are seeking purpose for their lives and desire guidance for the discernment of vocation.

2.8 Education (87 responses)

Many young people place a high value on education. They are concerned about succeeding in school and finding opportunities for further education, particularly at university.

2.9 Desire to be Listened to by the Church (86 responses)

Young people want their concerns and ideas to be heard and taken seriously.

2.10 Dialogue with Church Teaching (80 responses)

Young people want to be involved in formational, pastoral dialogue that honour the experiences, beliefs and opinions held by young people.

2.11 Guidance and Support from the Church (65 responses)

Young people want pastoral guidance and support from the Church.

2.12 Social Media and Technology (62 responses)

Social media and technology is a tool for engaging young people and an area of concern regarding peer pressure, mental health issues, and bullying.

2.13 Young People in Country Areas

The experience of young people who live in country areas is somewhat different to that of young people who live closer to the city.

Isolation and loneliness

Opportunities to participate in sports, education, and other areas often require significant travel. Young people in country areas feel “disconnected” from the Archdiocese, especially when events and activities are held in the metropolitan area.

Social Life

The strengths of a tight community and friendship groups can be beneficial but they can also result in cliques, gossip, and potential isolation from the community.

Services and Resources

Some young people are worried about losing public services and resources such as the hospitals and fire stations. Others worry about the impact of global events on local farming and trade.

3. Observations

The majority of young people who participated in the forums are moderately to highly engaged in their personal, and in some cases, communal Catholic faith. It is important to keep in mind that the concerns, criticisms, and challenges raised in this report come from young people who are committed to their faith, and not necessarily those who have rejected or left the Church.

Most of the young people at Raise Your Voice value education (almost all young adults had some tertiary level education, high school students had plans to attend University). There was a diversity of gender, sexual identity, ethnicity, and theological development. All of this is to say, there was both a uniformity of the kind of young person who self-selected to participate, and a diversity of experience and theology.

Those who came to Raise Your Voice appeared to have two goals, 1) to be heard – they had something to say which they felt would be important for the Church to hear; 2) to find community – they wanted to meet other young Catholics from the Archdiocese of Adelaide.

3.1 To Be Heard

It is apparent from the responses that young people have not always had a positive experience of being listened to by the Church and other authorities in society. Some young people have been talked down to, belittled or discouraged from sharing their ideas and opinions. Participation in Raise Your Voice 2017 allowed these young people to say things they have not yet been able to articulate. How will the Archdiocese, parishes, schools and communities continue to listen to the voices young people? How will we include young people in the important decisions we make as a faith community?

3.2 To Find Community

Young people are looking for belonging and opportunities to connect with Catholic peers. Many of the responses indicated a sense of loneliness in their faith, the difficulties of being openly Catholic at school, university, or with their friends and sometimes with their families. Young people are looking for faith communities that welcome and support youth through age-specific gatherings and events, as well as intergenerational community. Young people are asking for opportunities to participate in local, archdiocesan and national gatherings as a way of building community, faith, and a sense of belonging. How do our communities offer welcome and hospitality to young people? What resources and support can the Archdiocese provide to communities to assist them in this ministry?

3.3 The Challenge to Engage

Young people are challenging the Church to be a community of action for social justice and change in the world. These young people are passionate, energetic and carry the vision of the Reign of God. They have a deep desire to see the world transformed for peace, equality and justice and they understand the Church as an essential vehicle to drive that transformation. Young people have a clear understanding of the teachings of Jesus in the Gospels – love of God and neighbour, and to make the world a better place for the poor and marginalised. They understand the basic social teachings of the Church to promote the life and dignity of every human person, and they recognise that this includes the whole of life from conception to natural death. Young people want to see their communities, parishes and schools engage with the issues that matter to them. They want to see the Church step out in boldness and courage to transform the world for peace and justice.

Young people are also calling on their faith communities to be more reflective of young people. They want to see young people involved in leadership and worship. They want to see music, prayers, homilies and rituals be more relevant to their sensibilities and experiences. Young people want to be valued

members of the community, recognised for their gifts and contributions, and reflected in the life of the community.

3.4 The Desire to Learn and Dialogue

There is a strong desire from the participants for formation in their faith. Young people are experiencing a hunger for knowledge, spiritual connection, and faith practices.

However, many young people are less likely to take what the Church teaches at face value. Young people want to be able to ask questions, debate, and dialogue with official Church teaching, and they want their own opinions and experiences to be respected and valued. Many young people understand that a faith “in conversation” is a long-term process, but they do not want to be belittled or berated along their journey.

3.5 Responding to the Challenges

What can the Archdiocese of Adelaide do to provide parishes, schools, and communities with opportunities to engage with young people in conversation and dialogue regarding some of the most difficult and controversial topics? How can our communities and leaders enter into pastoral dialogue with young people in a way that honours their opinions and experiences?

These are serious challenges being issued by the young people of our local church. How will we as an archdiocese, in our parishes, schools and communities, properly and adequately respond to these challenges? Ignoring the challenges will leave our communities deprived of young people. There is a real risk of alienation by young people if they sense they are being left out. Therefore, we must develop new and radical ways of addressing the needs and concerns of young people.

4. Interpretation of the Responses and Recommendations

The Catholic Office for Youth and Young Adults engaged a process of reflecting on the various responses and offers and interpretation and recommendations in five areas.

A Vision, A Mission, and A Way of Life

Young people are looking for a vision, a mission, and a way of life that engages them personally and invites them into an accepting and loving community.

The Vision: The Reign of God – The Church

- Young people are inspired by the Old Testament prophetic message of the “peaceable kingdom”, the “Reign of God” proclaimed in the Gospels, the early Christian community in the book of Acts, and Paul’s vision of the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12).
- The Church must inspire young people with the Gospel, not only in word, but also in action.

The Mission: To serve and transform the world

- The mission of the Church, to spread the Good News of Jesus Christ, to serve and transform the world, is a mission young people can believe in.
- The Church must create more opportunities to engage young people in transformative action in the world.

A Way of Life: Discipleship to Jesus Christ

- Christian discipleship offers a way of life that provides a sense of meaning and belonging while engaging young people in the life and mission of the Church.
- It is the responsibility of the whole Christian community to form young people as disciples of Jesus.

Personal Engagement

- Young people want a personal connection with God, to learn more about their faith and to use their gifts and talents for the common good.

- Young people need opportunities to encounter Christ through dynamic experiences and relationships facilitated by schools, parishes, and communities.
- Sacraments, service with the poor, prayer and music are all ways to encounter Jesus. Each requires thoughtful preparation and planning as well as follow up opportunities to reflect and respond.

Community Engagement

- Young people desire to be a part of an authentic Christian community. They are looking for friendships, mentors, spiritual fathers and mothers, and a culture of community.
- They want to belong to a community that is authentic to the Gospel and is missional in its discipleship.
- They want to be a part of something that gives them meaning, honours their particular gifts, and encourages them to reach their potential.

5. The Way Forward

The responsibility to respond to these challenges is on the whole Church, all of us in parishes, schools, communities, and all levels of leaders and membership in the Archdiocese of Adelaide.

Investing in Young People

Proper investment into young people results in higher levels of engagement in the entire faith community. Young people infuse the community with energy and intensity that results in more service, passion, innovation, overall health, and even greater financial resources.

The Silver Bullet: Relationships

The silver-bullet for engaging young people in faith is relationships. Friendships, mentorship, positive acquaintances, family, teacher-student, all relationships matter, and they are the most effective way to share faith with young people.

Recommendations

- Develop opportunities for ongoing listening and dialogue with young people and the wider community.
- Help young people enter into the life of the community. Create space for young people to build relationship with peers and older and younger generations.
- Think beyond the weekend. Many young people said that weekends are difficult for them, especially for students and young people who can only work on weekends. When planning events for young people, consider weekdays and evenings.
- Invite young people into leadership roles. The faith community should be a place where young people can try out being a leader in small ways as well as to be a place for mature leadership to the whole community.
- Engagement with Social Justice. Service and justice actions with young people need thoughtful preparation in order for the work to be meaningful and be helpful. Groups such as Caritas, the St. Vincent de Paul Society, and Young Christian Workers/Students have strategies for planning service and justice with young people.
- Provide opportunities for holistic and comprehensive faith formation
- Offer pastoral guidance and support. Make social services, counsellors, and spiritual directors available to young people.
- Provide opportunities for training and formation for leaders of pastoral ministry with young people.