

Young Life's Role in the New Evangelization

Jesus Christ is at the center of everything we do in Young Life. In the Catholic Church as well, nothing is more urgent than passionately proclaiming Jesus with the energy and expressions that correspond to our time. This is what is meant by the "new evangelization."

Pope John Paul II, who originally coined the phrase, said:

"The moment has come to commit all of the Church's energies to a new evangelization. No believer in Christ, no institution of the Church can avoid this supreme duty: to proclaim Christ to all peoples."



Young Life has Protestant roots but is an ecumenical ministry that participates in the new evangelization by proclaiming Christ to more than 2 million adolescents every year. The message of Christ is nothing new; it is the methods of proclaiming Christ that change to respond to a rapidly changing world. That's why for more than 80 years, Young Life leaders have been going where kids are, building relationships on their turf, and "earning the right to be heard." In that time, we've learned that nothing is more effective in the new evangelization than the incarnational principles modeled by the Savior himself – presence, proclamation, and accompaniment on the road to discipleship.



Jim Rayburn, the founder of Young Life, proposed that the church can't wait for young people to come to it. Rather, we need a body of Christians who boldly and consistently go to young people. Seventy-two years later, this same vision was echoed by Pope Francis who described the church as "a field hospital after battle." This compelling image captures the nature of Young Life – a responsive, mobile movement of Christian first responders who are committed to "healing the wounds" of so many kids who are not making it into our church communities.

A field hospital is not the same as a hospital just as Young Life isn't a church, but the two are intimately connected. A field hospital is sent forth from a hospital, reaching the infirm where they are and applying life-saving support. "The thing the church needs most today is the ability to heal the wounds," Francis said. Once stable, the wounded can then be carried back to a hospital where they can receive the comprehensive care of the entire medical community. This is a great vision of Young Life's relationship to the wider Christian church.





A field hospital can't lug around all the equipment from the hospital. It can only bring the essential instruments to heal the wounds. At the center of Young Life's "field hospital kit" is the kerygma, a winsome proclamation of the gospel that stands as the fundamental core of the Christian message. The kerygma is the simple beauty of Jesus Christ – his life, death and resurrection. This kerygma is the heart and soul of Young Life's proclamation and, thus, it corresponds very well to the Catholic Church's call of the new evangelization. The Catholic Church recognizes that there are millions of Catholic kids who have received the sacraments and know many doctrines and details about Christ but may never have taken the personal step to follow Him. Young Life's kerygmatic proclamation of the gospel responds to this need.

As an ecumenical ministry, Young Life is committed to honoring the broad spectrum of Christian faith traditions in which young people are raised – Catholic, evangelical Protestant, mainline Protestant, Orthodox, etc. Young Life has great respect for God's work in kids' hearts long before their involvement in our mission.

The challenges of today's world demand a heroic effort from all faithful followers of Christ. Though impaired by our divisions, we are still one body in Christ. We are all medics of the Great Physician, sent into the battlefield to heal wounds. Young Life's ecumenical character welcomes the gifts of all churches committed to the common task of evangelization.

"The moment has come," John Paul II said, "to commit all of the Church's energies to a new evangelization." Dynamic collaboration between Young Life and the Catholic Church not only represents a significant step toward fulfilling the Great Commission, but it also has the potential to showcase the depth, beauty and sophistication of the Catholic tradition to those outside its communion. While Young Life has the potential to help reanimate the core of the Christian faith for millions of Catholics around the world, non-Catholics within Young Life might also uncover the incredible depth of spiritual wisdom and blessing as they build relationships with their Catholic friends.

The time for partnership and sharing our gifts is now. A world of kids is waiting. What Rayburn said is as true today as it was when he said it in 1968:

"Our young people today are waiting, waiting for somebody to care about them like Christ did. I mean there are 6 or 8 million in our nation that nobody has ever talked to about Jesus Christ, that nobody has ever said a prayer for, that nobody has ever cared about. There are millions of them in our own nation, and they are waiting for somebody to care about them enough to take the time and trouble to pour out compassion on them, to prove their friendship, to bridge this tragic and terrible gap that exists in our culture between teenagers and adults – to emulate the example of Jesus Christ."

