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# Beyond Disaffiliation

A Process for Hope-Filled Action

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This book was developed, designed, and manufactured by the expert teams at Saint Mary's Press.

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**Springtide**  




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*touching hearts. enlivening minds.*

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# Welcome!

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Who knows the lay of the land better, the explorer who endeavors to make the map, or the townspeople who subsequently rely on it?

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**Saint Mary's Press, in partnership** with Springtide Research Institute for Religion and Young People, created *Beyond Disaffiliation: A Process for Hope-Filled Action*, a three-part design-thinking process to help activate your community—through listening, learning, reflection, and action—toward innovative and relationship-driven responses to the issue of disaffiliation.

Perhaps you've noticed the decline in church attendance in your own local community; maybe you have heard from a young person directly about the ways the Church has failed to live up to expectations or meet critical needs. Perhaps even upon reading this, you immediately wonder: What *are* young people's spiritual and religious needs? And where are they being met, if not in institutional religion?

We want to encourage you to continue asking thoughtful questions such as these, which can and will lead to fruitful responses: What is going on in the lives of young people that makes institutional affiliation less attractive than it was to previous generations? What is going on in society at large that contributes to this phenomenon? What can my church learn from innovative third spaces that are attracting young people? What does my community offer that can't be found elsewhere?

**Think of the maps** you currently rely on in your ministry and work: Do they reflect a terrain you no longer recognize when surveying the landscape? When was the last time you interrogated these maps and the assumptions behind them? It may be time to update or throw them out altogether. And the work of updating or creating new maps requires you to go out from the spaces you already know and explore the contours of the changed landscape for yourself.

To help guide you in exploring these new realities, the questions they drive, and the myriad ways your community might respond to them, *Beyond Disaffiliation* offers an innovative and action-oriented process that takes place over three sessions. Using a design-thinking approach, your team will emphasize

empathy, iteration, and action, first rooting yourselves in the stories of young people, reflecting on your own experience, and learning the basics about the reality of disaffiliation in general. You'll move from learning to engaging, meeting with young people in your community to hear their stories, then returning for the iterative work of deeper learning and initial ideation in light of new information. Finally, you'll spend time as a group narrowing in on the actions you want to take, whether new novel approaches to old ministries or new endeavors altogether. You'll build and test prototypes, which is critical to the design-thinking process, then gather a third time as a large group to clarify and refine the work you've outlined for yourselves.

**The possibility of throwing out** old maps can be intimidating. The work of building new maps can be overwhelming. *But doubling down on processes, systems, and solutions that are not connected to the needs, longings, and desires of young people will only lead to frustration and further disaffiliation.*

At Saint Mary's Press, we take as our starting point a profound trust that the Holy Spirit is at work in these new and changing realities, including—perhaps most important—in the lives of young people. We have the concluding words of Pope Francis in his recent exhortation on young people, *Christus Vivit*, to whom he addresses these final thoughts: “The Church needs your momentum, your intuitions, your faith. We need them! And when you arrive where we have not yet reached, have the patience to wait for us” (no. 299).

# Getting Started

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*Beyond Disaffiliation: A Process for Hope-Filled Action* presents a process to support teams working together to learn about young people who are disaffiliating from the Catholic Church and to respond to this dynamic with thoughtful, hopeful action. This section offers guidance to leaders preparing to implement this process with a team of people in parish, diocesan, high school, or university settings or in the context of other organizations that serve young people.

## Overview of the Process

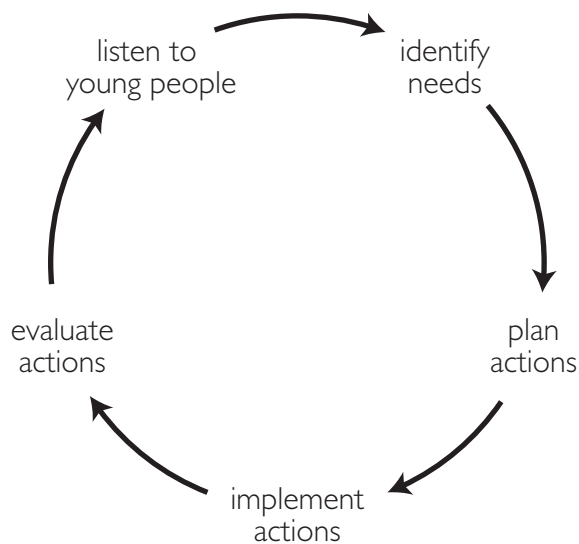
This guide introduces a multistep process for teams that is made up of three sessions as a large group, as well as activities and actions that take place before and after these in-person sessions.

### At a Glance

Preparation	Team members reflect on their assumptions about, knowledge of, and experience with disaffiliation.	Leader sends questions three to five days before session I
Session 1: Understanding Disaffiliation	Team members meet to learn about the dynamics of disaffiliation and to prepare for conversations with young people in the local community.	Length: four hours
Between-Session Activity: Listen to the Stories of Young People	Team members engage in conversations with young people who disaffiliated from the Catholic Church or whose affiliation is weakening.	Leader determines time frame depending on number of conversations
Session 2: Creating an Action Plan	Team members meet to share insights learned from conversations with young people, learn about larger societal forces contributing to disaffiliation, and engage in a process that culminates with an actionable plan to respond to the needs of disaffiliated or disaffiliating young people and a plan for testing the initiative.	Length: three hours

Between-Session Activity: Testing Your Prototype	The team experiments with some aspect of its actionable plan in order to assess feasibility and effectiveness.	Leader determines time frame depending on actions planned
Session 3: Integrating and Iterating	Team members meet to assess their plan based on experimentation. They confirm or adjust their full action plan and take necessary steps to fully implement the plan.	Length: three hours
Post-Process Activity: Implementation and Execution	The team implements its plan, but continues to meet periodically to plan, evaluate, and iterate as needed.	Leader determines time frame depending on plan(s)

As far as what is mapped out in this guide, the process is linear: there is a start and end to the work this guide sets forth. However, ideally your process will more accurately become a cyclical pattern, with the team repeating and deepening the basic tenets of this process: listening to the stories of young people, identifying needs, planning actions to take in response, implementing the actions, evaluating the effectiveness of actions taken, and listening again.



*Beyond Disaffiliation* outlines one path forward, though there are certainly many ways to approach the issue of disaffiliation. This outline is not meant to be in any way constraining, and to that end, all of the sessions are adaptable. The cyclical pattern that emerges should reflect your team’s particular needs, goals, and schedules.



# Introducing Your Team to the Dynamics of Disaffiliation

This guide's process introduces the dynamics of disaffiliation primarily through two related resources: the **video documentary** *Going, Going, Gone: The Dynamics of Disaffiliation in Young Catholics*, 2019 (26 mins.) and a published report on a study of disaffiliation conducted by Saint Mary's Press in collaboration with the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) with the same title: *Going, Going, Gone: The Dynamics of Disaffiliation of Young Catholics* (Saint Mary's Press, 2017). Information about accessing the video appears on the first page of this guide.

## The Video: Access to the Wisdom of Live Conference

The video documentary *Going, Going, Gone: The Dynamics of Disaffiliation of Young Catholics* presents footage from various national symposiums on the disaffiliation of young Catholics sponsored by Saint Mary's Press. It features expert voices in the fields of ministry, sociology, and religion, including Dr. Robert McCarty, Dr. Josh Packard, and Dr. Elizabeth Drescher. The documentary includes the voices and stories of young people detailing their own struggles, as well as reflections from innovative community leaders, both young and old, religious and not, who are paving the way for new models of community, belonging, and meaning-making.

### Featured Voices

Beatriz, Chris, Justin, Lauren, and Rachel: Young people who have graciously offered an in-depth sharing of their stories—stories that reflect the kinds of struggles young people have around staying affiliated or not.

Sr. Judy Carle, RSM, a Nuns & Nones sister collaborator and member of the community of Sisters of Mercy that hosted a pilot Nuns & Nones residency for millennials in Burlingame, CA.

Dr. Elizabeth Drescher, author of *Choosing Our Religion: The Spiritual Lives of American Nones* (Oxford University Press, 2016) and adjunct associate professor at Santa Clara University.

Adam Horowitz, member of the operational team of Nuns & Nones and participant in a pilot Nuns & Nones residency for millennials at Mercy Center in Burlingame, CA.



Milicent Johnson, a Nuns & Nones key coconspirator and participant in a pilot Nuns & Nones residency for millennials at Mercy Center in Burlingame, CA.

Sr. Gloria Marie Jones, OP, a Nuns & Nones sister collaborator.

Dr. Robert McCarty, principal coauthor of *Going, Going, Gone: The Dynamics of Disaffiliation in Young Catholics* (Saint Mary's Press, 2017).

Dr. Josh Packard, associate professor of sociology, University of Northern Colorado, executive director of Springtide Research Institute for Religion and Young People, and author, with Ashleigh Hope, of *Church Refugees: Sociologists Reveal Why People Are Done with Church but Not Their Faith* (Group Publishing, 2015).

Christiana Rice, author, with Michael Frost, of *To Alter Your World: Partnering with God to Rebirth Our Communities* (IVP Books, 2017) and coach and trainer of missional leaders.

John Vitek, facilitator of panel, President and CEO of Springtide Research Institute for Religion and Young People, and principal co-author of *Going, Going, Gone: The Dynamics of Disaffiliation in Young Catholics*.

## The Study: Committed to Listening to Young People

Saint Mary's Press, in collaboration with CARA, set out to answer the question, *Why are young Catholics leaving the Church?* The research involved listening deeply to the life stories of young people ages fifteen to twenty-five, many of whom had never shared their story before. The study was groundbreaking in many ways. It was among the first of its kind to focus on the stories of young people in narrative form, rather than allowing numerical statistical data to lead the conversation about the nature of their disaffiliation from institutional religion. Many new and important insights were gained through these qualitative interviews, including the thoughtful and even discerned nature of disaffiliation for many, the median age of thirteen years for deciding to be “done,” and the way many stories involved a slow chipping away of belonging, rather than a sudden break with a faith community.

Saint Mary's Press has continued listening to the stories of young people, and, through the process presented in this guide, invites you to join us in this ministry of listening—a listening that we hope will lead you and your team to insights about ways to respond to the needs you hear embedded in those stories.

The published report is excellent background reading for leaders, but please note that information from the study essential to the process will be reproduced in this guide, typically in background reading sections for leaders or in handouts for participants.

## Establishing a Team

The process outlined in *Beyond Disaffiliation* works with teams of various sizes, though we recommend aiming for five to twenty-five members. Many steps in the process involve team members working in pairs, trios, or small groups, so the process can work well with larger numbers. If your group is so large that when divided in small groups you have more than five groups, then we recommend recruiting small-group leaders in advance and providing them with an overview of the process. Additionally, if you are working with a sizeable group, consider substituting large-group conversation—which may get unwieldy or be unproductive—with the option of having several small groups discuss ideas with each other, and walk around to help facilitate or guide the leaders in those groups.

When assembling your team, we encourage you to make open-mindedness, hope, resourcefulness, and creative thinking nonnegotiable attributes for anyone joining you. In addition, try to recruit as diverse a group as possible, whether in age, degree of affiliation, cultural background, ministry emphasis, professional career, socioeconomic status, or other ways. As long as all members of this team are committed to the flourishing of young people, this diversity will allow the most innovative work to be done in your community.

## Scheduling Options and Time Line

Because the process this guide supports depends on work that the team members carry out between sessions, the length of the process will depend on the schedule you set for your team and the scope of the work the team aims to accomplish between sessions.

The interval between sessions 1 and 2 should allow ample time for participants to have conversations with young people without feeling rushed in either the scheduling of or the actual conversation. If each of the participants will be part of two conversations (as we recommend working in pairs), consider scheduling session 2 about two to three weeks after session 1.

Between sessions 2 and 3, small groups will test initial ideas for responding to the needs of those disaffiliated or disaffiliating by creating a prototype or experimenting with some portion of a larger plan. Consider scheduling session 3 two to three weeks after session 2, but be prepared to adapt in light of the scope of the action plans the teams decide to undertake.

## Flexibility and Number of Sessions

This guide provides detailed information for three sessions. Each session is three or four hours long. Though designed so that each session takes place during one gathering, sessions 1 and 2 can be broken down into multiple gatherings if needed. Session 3 can only be shortened by skipping the break/meal period, and is best undertaken in a single gathering. If breaking a session

into smaller parts is best for your group, we recommend treating the sessions derived from session 1 as a unit and holding them in close proximity, for example, over one week or weekend; we recommend the same approach if subdividing session 2.

If you consider dividing a session, note the breaks indicated in the session schedules. These occur at times when unstructured conversation might be helpful to the process, but these would be logical places to divide a session as well.

## A Note on Space

This process outlines three in-person sessions that will require the use of a space suitable for small- and large-group conversation. A classroom, conference room, or other room with space for several tables and chairs is ideal. While other spaces may work, we do not recommend anything smaller, nor bigger (for instance, an auditorium or gymnasium). When preparing the space, we recommend several tables with three to five chairs at each, depending on the size of your group gathering, as well as a clear “front of the room” from which you can give directions to the team. In session 1, a computer and a projector are required for viewing the *Going, Going, Gone* video, and internet use is recommended in session 3. Note that internet access is required for viewing the video if you don’t download it in advance. If possible, plan accordingly when determining your gathering place.

## Prayers, Glossary, and Further Exploration

This guide provides three appendices with additional information:

**Sample Prayers.** The directions for the sessions suggest incorporating opening and closing prayers. The appendix “Sample Prayers and Suggested Readings” provides a few resources that may help you plan.

**Glossary.** This appendix provides key terms and definitions for easy reference.

**For Further Exploration.** This appendix provides numerous resources to help you and your team with exploration beyond the sessions in this guide, in five categories:

- books and articles
- video presentations
- initiatives, organizations, and third spaces
- research organizations
- pastoral planning resources

## How to Use This Guide

This guide was designed to help prepare and empower you to lead a group through a creative, hope-filled, and innovative process of learning, reflecting, ideating, and implementing. Whether you have facilitated this kind of activity with a group before, we have provided the tools and information you need to be successful. To that end, we have a few tips for how to get the most out of this guide. First, we recommend reading through the sessions entirely at least once before using them with a gathered group. Notice the leader's notes, and using a highlighter or pen, make personal notes in the margins about anything you want to emphasize, add, change, or omit according to your comfort and your group's needs. Also read the background readings, handouts, and appendices to get a sense of the whole endeavor, and consider printing the handouts for yourself to reference during the sessions if that would be helpful. Second, we welcome and encourage you to think about how to delegate roles and responsibilities. Is there a natural fit for someone to be a co-facilitator with you? You could switch off leading different sessions, or even different parts of the same sessions. Would you like to assign team members to prepare opening or closing prayers (whether using the ones we provide or not), or invite them to contribute to the meal-time in session 3? Finally, think about the tone you want to set even with small decisions: Will you use breaks to provide food and drinks, or try to keep them limited to bathroom breaks? Do you want to play music during certain activities, or while people start arriving to each session? These are all decisions you can and should feel free to decide, whether or not *Beyond Disaffiliation* has explicit instruction around such topics. The guide is here to serve, not constrain, you and your team.

## A Belief Underlying the Process

This guide is inspired by the conviction that the Holy Spirit is at work in the Church, in this process as enacted, and in the lives of young people today. You will notice that we do not discuss disaffiliation as a problem to be solved, but a reality to be explored and responded to with hope and creativity. Our commitment is to young people, and thus this process has at its heart getting to know their needs, longings, and desires so that we may better serve them.

## Session I

# Understanding Disaffiliation

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## Session Overview

In this session, you and your team will begin a process of discovery with the aim of listening, learning, reflecting, and ultimately acting. You'll take time as a group to articulate any preconceived assumptions or ideas you may bring to the conversation about young people leaving the Church. The session equips you as leader with resources to help the group broaden and deepen its understanding of disaffiliation. The session also guides you through the process of preparing the participants for conversations that will help the group develop initiatives in your own community that are cultivated in hope and rooted in trust.

## Objectives

Enable the team members to do the following:

- reflect on one's own affiliation with the Catholic Church
- understand the nuances and details of disaffiliation, through the *Going, Going, Gone* project of Saint Mary's Press and the combination of data and narrative
- learn from those disaffiliating in order to develop a hope-centered response
- prepare for conversations with loosely affiliated or disaffiliated young people

### Session length

**4 hours**

## At a Glance

Welcome, Introductions, and Process Overview	30 minutes
Understanding Disaffiliation	75 minutes
Break	10 minutes
Exploring the <i>Going, Going, Gone</i> Project	75 minutes
Break	20 minutes
Preparing for Conversations with People Who are Disaffiliated	30 minutes