A Practical Guide for Ministering To
and Partnering With Catholics
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At school events, clubs, Campaigners and camps we have most likely
encountered a large number of kids who were raised in the Catholic tradition. Yet
many Young Life staff and volunteers who were raised Protestant find it challenging
to navigate the theological and cultural differences presented by a Catholic
worldview. We have a kingdom-sized mission in Young Life - to reach every kid
(Protestants, Catholics and the unchurched) and give them a chance to respond
more deeply to the gospel. The Catholic Church is committed to the same vision and
offers an expansive and yet largely untapped institutional network of kids, parents,
potential leaders, committee members and donors that could help us achieve our
common goal. Offered here is a brief list of DOs and DON'Ts that may help you to
avoid the pitfalls, minimize confusion and enjoy the manifold blessings of ministering
to and with Catholics.

**DO** invite Catholic kids into a deeper relationship with Christ.
**DON'T** neglect the role that Christ has already played in the lives of Catholics
through baptism, religious formation, confirmation, family, retreats, regularly
receiving the body and blood of Christ, etc.

The classic misstep here is to assume that a Catholic isn’t in relationship with
Christ because he/she doesn’t use relational language to talk about their religious
experience. Catholic tradition speaks clearly and openly about entering into a
relationship with God. Young Life is particularly adept at proclaiming to adolescents
God’s invitation to meaningful and dynamic relationship. While it is entirely possible
that Catholic kids don’t talk about relationship with God simply because they are
currently disengaged from their faith, let us not make this assumption too quickly.
Inquire about their thoughts, feelings and experiences of God. There may be more
relationship there than meets the eye. Our job is not to discredit and discard kids’
religious upbringing but to acknowledge and build upon it.

**DO** encourage Catholic kids to pursue and embrace a faith of their own.
**DON'T** ever intentionally dissuade kids away from the denominational tradition they
were raised in.

Young Life is interdenominational. This means that we respect a broad
diversity of Christian faith traditions – Catholic, Protestant, Evangelical, mainline, etc.
One of our greatest strengths as a mission is our willingness to look beyond our
differences and minister hand in hand to lost and hurting kids. We are truly one body
in Christ. The single biggest obstacle preventing Catholic parents and priests from
trusting Young Life is the fear that Young Life staff and leaders pull Catholic kids away from the Catholic Church. Worse yet, stories are told about Young Life staff intentionally targeting Catholic kids, attacking their faith and pressuring them to leave the Catholic Church in order to be “saved” or to “become a Christian.” This is an egregious mistake that confuses kids and drives a wedge between Young Life and the largest body of Christians on earth. If we wish to partner with Catholics to “reach the unreached” we must prove our worthiness by honoring their religious heritage and encouraging Catholic kids to be the best Catholics they can be.

**DO** encourage Catholic kids to critically examine their faith.

**DON’T** use small groups or Campaigner bible studies to specifically contradict what you feel are errors in Catholic teaching.

Many Protestants may feel the need to “correct” what they consider erroneous beliefs or practices within Catholic tradition. Young Life staff might view Campaigners as the perfect place to talk openly with their Catholic friends about all that is wrong with “praying to Mary,” the misguided “traditions of men” or “earning your salvation.” First, it is essential that Young Life staff who are working with Catholic kids acquire at least a baseline understanding of what the Catholic Church actually teaches. Resources like Alan Schreck’s *Catholic and Christian: An Explanation of Commonly Misunderstood Catholic Beliefs* or Thomas Groome’s *What Makes Us Catholic* might prove very helpful. Most Protestants would be pleasantly surprised to learn that the Catholic Church does NOT advocate praying to Mary, it does not teach Tradition over Scripture nor earning one’s way into heaven. Young Life staff may be shocked to learn that Catholics and Protestants have even come to an official consensus on the doctrine of justification, the theological dividing point of the Reformation.

Campaigners or other small group bible study settings are indeed perfect places to closely examine the Christian faith and how it applies to kids’ lives. We want kids to know their faith, to own it and to act on it as vibrant members of the body of Christ in the world. We encourage kids to ask tough questions and together we seek answers in the Bible as a normative witness for Christian living. When facilitating such a discussion it is important to remember our role as Young Life leaders. Our role is NOT to steer kids toward our own denominational interpretations (however passionate we may be about them). Rather, we should know our audience well enough to “meet them where they’re at” and call them to something deeper.

Take the following example: If we have kids in our bible study that were raised Presbyterian, Methodist and atheist, then it is our duty and privilege to call the Presbyterian and Methodist to embrace Christ in their respective churches while inviting the atheist into a life-giving relationship with Jesus (offering church suggestions later). If we are ministering to Catholics, it is especially important to direct kids toward a deeper understanding and practice of their Catholic faith. We
must be committed to honoring the Catholic faith in which their parents have chosen to raise them.

**DO** encourage Catholic kids to stand up at the say-so if they have meaningful experiences at camp.

**DON’T** celebrate the experience with Catholic parents and priests by saying their kids “became Christians” at Young Life.

The say-so is one of the most beautiful experiences of Young Life camping. To watch kids stand before their peers and proclaim their faith in Jesus Christ is something we all celebrate. Yet it can be a confusing time for Catholic kids. They may be sitting there wondering, “Now I do feel more alive in my faith than I ever have. I kinda feel like standing up, but does that mean that I wasn’t a Christian before?” Our answer to that question is vitally important. Catholic kids have been baptized. Most have been confirmed. Many were raised by committed Catholic parents who shared Christ with them throughout their lives. Some may have gone to Catholic schools, made retreats, been to confession and participated in countless liturgies.

To say that they have “become Christians” because they stood up at the say-so is to deny the presence of God operating in their homes and churches for years before they even heard of Young Life. We can easily use other language which honors both their earlier religious formation and the spiritual growth experienced at camp. We might say that a Catholic kid “deepened his faith” at camp or “grew in her relationship with Christ.” These subtle language adjustments can not only engender the trust of Catholic parents and priests but also encourage their active partnership in the ongoing discipleship of adolescents whom we all love so dearly.

**DO** actively seek relationships with Catholic adults (parents, priests, teachers, etc).

**DON’T** wait for them to come to you.

For those YL staff with little exposure to the Catholic Church, the most helpful practical step is to build a relationship with a local priest or Catholic parent who can provide guidance for you in handling the many specific questions that will arise in working with Catholic young people. This relationship does not require a lot of time but it will require that you take some initiative. Most Catholics unfamiliar with Young Life may fear that we’re the kind of bait-n-switch, fear-mongering, fundamentalist operation they’ve seen on TV. Inform them that Young Life is ecumenical, that we respect the many Christian faith traditions our kids have been raised in, and that our aim is NOT to pull kids away from their Catholic faith but to help them “grow where they have been planted.”

When you go into meetings with Catholics, be prepared. Reading the USCCB document on evangelization *Go and Make Disciples*, the Evangelicals and Catholics Together statement *Christian Mission in the Third Millennium* or the *Joint Declaration*
on the Doctrine of Justification could really help. Ask questions of Catholic adults and exhibit humility in your responses. We suggest questions such as: As a Catholic parent or priest, what are your perceptions of YL in our area? Do you have any concerns about our work with local Catholic kids? Is there anything that I could be particularly sensitive about when ministering to Catholic kids? What are your biggest struggles in passing along the faith to young people? Do you have any suggestions to offer as to how YL can support Catholic kids, parents and clergy in building kids’ faith? The upshot of real relationships with local Catholics is immense. The stereotypes that divide will diminish, trust will grow and true partnership in the gospel can flourish.

| **DO** invite Catholic parents and priests to Young Life events. |
| **DON’T** be afraid to show them the very best of Young Life! |

Young Life is a fun, exciting and life-giving ministry. Don’t hide it under a bushel basket! Catholics will appreciate the humor, the creativity and the relevant ways Young Life presents the gospel to kids. They will be floored by the lengths to which you’ll go so that kids might know the love of Christ. We’ve learned a lot about ministering to the unique demographic of postmodern adolescents. That’s our niche. Young Life leaders are good at what they do - penetrating the world of kids and making Jesus come alive. Be sure to invite Catholic parents, teachers, priests, youth workers and community leaders to your clubs, events, banquets and adult guest camps. Be courteous and respectful. Ask about how Young Life’s ministry complements the good work Catholics have been doing. Answer their questions with care and sensitivity. Inquire about how Young Life might better serve Catholic kids in your school or town. Do what you do best – BUILD RELATIONSHIPS! Then watch the Holy Spirit unify us as one body and mobilize us for the kingdom-building work to which we’ve all been called.