Engaging young adults (especially those less connected with parish life) can be a daunting task, made even more challenging by the distance we experience during this pandemic.

Two key challenges in this work are: (1) we cannot look at this demographic as a block (as we often do in marketing) and (2) we cannot reduce this work to one person or ministry.

In fact, the notion of “young adults” is a construct we use to categorize common trends like age, experience, and human development of those roughly 18 to 39. I learned this the hard way: whenever I looked at this demographic as a “them” to be recruited to come to church on Sunday, I failed. Even the term “young adult” is not something many in this age bracket identify with.

I needed to stop asking “How can I get young adults to come to church?” and start asking “How can I better accompany (fill in the young adult’s name)?” Each person, every young adult, has unique needs. To look upon them as a block is an injustice to their journey.

What works is individualized accompaniment. Pope Francis says, “La juventud (young adulthood) is not something to be analyzed in the abstract. Indeed, ‘la juventud’ (young adulthood) does not exist: there exist only los jóvenes (the young adult), each with the reality of his or her own life.” (Christus Vivit, 71) Yes, it may take longer and will involve patience on our part, but the result could be a stronger bond – between you and that person, and between them and the faith community.

Moving from group outreach to individualized accompaniment isn’t easy. To aid in that process, one idea is narrowing the focus of our pastoral ministry: for instance, with singles in their mid to
late 20s, or with engaged or recently married couples, or with those 18-25 who are not in college, or with young professionals who commute into work. There are many possibilities.

You may have also noticed I have not used the phrase “young adult ministry,” until now. That is intentional. Instead, I use “ministry with young adults,” broadening the meaning of the outreach and expanding who takes part in this ministerial work.

Ministry with young adults [or more appropriately, “ministry with (fill in the young adult’s name)”] can be done by anyone in the community, not just someone on staff or the volunteer coordinating events for young adults. This can include parents of young adults, ushers, choir directors, co-workers, mentors, fellow young adults, and anyone who encounters a person in their 20s or 30s: like the Instacart delivery person or tech support, at the doctor’s office or the grocery store, and wherever we may encounter them (and thus, the face of Christ) in our daily lives. Therefore, we can all engage in ministry with a young adult: encountering, accompanying, and inviting each person into our lives and the Catholic faith communities that surround and support us.

We know our own realities and the strengths we have in engaging others. Because of that, how we engage a young adult, one by one, will be unique for each of us. For many, this is unchartered territory; yet your own contribution to these seemingly small encounters is so important to the Church’s mission.

So, how will you approach the next young adult whom God places in your path? Whatever you do, may Christ be with you and that person in your journey ahead.