

# Samuel Group Helps Young Adults Get *Closer to Christ*

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**More clarity in life. An improved prayer life. A sense of community.** Those are some of the benefits that young adults are seeing by belonging to the Samuel Group, a recently formed community of young adults, from the ages of 20-30, in the Diocese of Joliet.

Led by Father Steven Borello, the diocesan director of vocations, the group has been meeting once a month since September 2019. The group — which includes several volunteers, both lay and consecrated religious, who are accompanying the young adults on their faith journeys — provides tools for how people can discern properly with peace, joy, and confidence. Along the way, the participants have experienced a journey of prayer, spiritual direction, self-knowledge, purification, and growth in interior freedom. Ultimately, the hope is that they discover what they are truly made for and how to embrace God's call in every stage of life.

It is common for young adults to have questions about career choices/changes or

about whether the person they were dating was the right one for them to end up marrying. Some young adults wonder if they are being called to the priesthood or consecrated religious life.

These questions mean a discernment process would be helpful. The Samuel Group helps to create a safe space for young adults to figure how some big questions in life can be answered through a relationship with Christ.

"My desire is to create a space to help young adults genuinely seek holiness," Father Borello said. "In response

to seeking holiness, we discover and find how the Lord is inviting us to live out the call to a relationship with Him."

The program requires that the young adults be open to God and His prompting, are committed to a regular spiritual life, and are available to meet monthly with a spiritual director.

**Michael Larson**, a 25-year-old participant, said one of the biggest lessons he's learned from being part of the group was the concept that, to grow in relationship with Christ, requires "faithful intentionality." He explained that he was doing the "bare minimum" of the requirements — for instance, one of the requirements is to pray each day for 20 minutes — for several months. He said some good came from just doing the bare minimum and attending all the meetings, but he found that he was limiting some of the "fruits" that could come out of it by not making more of an effort to "meet God in His will," he said.

A change in his attitude came by participating in Exodus 90, a 90-day spiritual exercise for men, at the beginning of this year, which "reinvigorated" his participation in the Samuel Group. Exodus 90 requires a lot of intentional effort, which he applied to it and which then carried over to his participation in the Samuel Group.

He is now praying for about an hour a day.

"Never in my life have I prayed for a full hour every single day," said Larson, a parishioner at St. Mary's Church in Mokena. "I want to do that for the rest of my life."

He found out that he spent a lot of time looking at YouTube videos, but, because the Samuel Group advocates cutting out distractions that might prevent you from praying, he has learned to cut down on the amount of



time spent watching videos, and, as a result, that opened up more time for him to pray, he said.

Another participant, **Veronica Kitzhaber**, 25, has appreciated the community aspects of belonging to the group. She recently moved to the diocese and didn't know anyone here. She had heard great things about the group, such as that it was "rock-solid" in terms of formation of Catholics, so she started attending, and now she feels part of a community.

"I'm here every month," said Kitzhaber, a parishioner at Ss. Peter and Paul Parish in Naperville. "And the same people are here every month. I'm sitting between the same two people every month. But then when I go to another young adult event, I see someone, and I say, 'Oh, you're in Samuel Group! I haven't talked to you because you're in a different small group, but I see you every month.' And, now, we have some things to talk about and a basis to start building a relationship. That's been very beneficial to me."

Another benefit of the group, she has found, is that she has grown, spiritually, especially in "a vulnerability with the Lord and with others." She admitted to being someone who tends to be private. But, by sharing in the small groups that are part of the Samuel Group, she has been practicing being vulnerable, and she finds that the Lord is "touching" her heart. The group members also meet with a spiritual director, and that person has been encouraging her to be more aware and attentive of that vulnerability and that transparency, she said.

She has also found that belonging to the group has helped her be more accountable in saying her daily prayers. "There's people checking in on me every month," she said. "It's helped me grow in my prayer life. Some of the most reverent times I've ever experienced in my life have come from that time praying together, both in the holy hour and at Mass [which occur during the monthly meeting]. The silence and the peace that you feel on that Sunday afternoon [during the Holy Hour and Mass], it carries me through."

What Kitzhaber has also found helpful is the group has given her "tools" in her "spiritual tool box," which, in turn, gives her "ammunition" for everyday life. The first four-to-five months, she said, were spent on



developing good prayer habits and focusing on her relationship to the Lord. "It wasn't just, am I supposed to be a religious or priest or get married?" she said.

She added that talking about vocations — a reference to the vocation to the priesthood/religious

life; vocation to being single; or vocation to being married — did not occur until February 2020.

"There's a lot of emphasis before that on hearing God in the day-to-day moments and hearing God in the little decisions," said Kitzhaber, who teaches third-grade Catholic students in Lemont. "Should I do this, or should I do that? Not that we are overanalyzing every moment and every decision, but there are so many decisions that we need to make, especially as young adults: should I date this person? Should I invest time in this group of friends or a different group of friends? What's the best way to spend my money? All these decisions, especially as young adults when you're on your own for the first time, the Lord wants to be part of all of them. I feel like the Samuel Group has given me the tools to let me be a part of that."

**Alexis Yakich**, another group member, said she felt the need to join because she was feeling "lost" after she moved back home in the diocese when

she got a full-time job. None of her friends from high school or college were around; she felt the need to seek community. She added that she also felt disconnected from God. Because her work was so demanding, she lost the good habits she used to have regarding prayer.

"I wanted some re-direction and to learn to be in a space where I could really look at my life and see where God was leading me," said Yakich, a parishioner at St. Ann in Channahon. "I was really confused. I had a lot of anxiety and didn't know what I should be doing."

The friendships she has formed with other members of the group have been more fruitful, she said, because they are having "deep" conversations and not just "surface-level" stuff. When she sees many of them outside of the group meetings, she said they are able "to talk about issues that matter and things going on in our lives and being raw and vulnerable with each other without having to worry about judgment."

What she has also received through her participation in the group is healing, she said. "There were a lot of wounds I had developed in the past two years," she said. "I wasn't addressing them. I was avoiding them. Between going to the Samuel Group and going to a spiritual director regularly, it allowed an environment for me to really be comfortable to look at those wounds, letting God reveal those wounds to me and facing them and allowing God to heal me — so I could allow myself to get closer to Him and closer to other people." †



► **Samuel Group will end this month to the current group of 36 young adults who have been regularly attending it since last year. The next group will start in September 2020 at the Blanchette Catholic Center, Crest Hill. The cost: \$45, with scholarships available. For more information and registration, visit [www.yamjoliet.org](http://www.yamjoliet.org) or contact Mayra Price, the coordinator of Young Adult and Campus Ministry, via email at [mprice@dioceseofjoliet.org](mailto:mprice@dioceseofjoliet.org) or by phone at 815-221-6235.**