



**ONLINE MEETING  
OF THE PRESS OFFICERS AND SPOKESPERSONS  
OF THE EUROPEAN BISHOPS' CONFERENCES**

18 June 2021  
from 9:00 to 12:00 (CEST)

## **SPIRITUAL ACCOMPANIMENT ONLINE**

*Shona Cahill, Jesuit YAM (Young Adult Ministry) Team, London*

My name is Shona Cahill and I am one of three people working on the Jesuit Young Adult Ministry team in London. I have a background in education, international development and I am a trained and practicing spiritual director. I work a long side Jim Conway and Dushan Croos both of whom are Jesuits. We work out of a Jesuit Community House based in Clapham Common in London and also hold an office at the London Jesuit Centre where the Curia is located in Farm Street in Mayfair.

Jesuit Young adult ministries began about 3 years ago and was just beginning as an initiative when the pandemic hit.

Jesuit Young Adult Ministries was set up as a response to the Jesuit Universal Apostolic preferences decided after two years of discernment by the Society of Jesus and collaborators in mission. They were given to us by Father General in 2018 and came into effect in 2019. There are four main areas which the Jesuits will focus on as a result of this discernment. These are the showing the way to God through the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius and spiritual accompaniment, walking with those who are excluded from society, care for our common home and showing the way to God by walking with the youth and young people.

Youth and young adults will remain a priority of the Society of Jesus from 2019 to 2029 at least.

Jesuit Young Adult Ministries began small and has developed and grown quite a bit despite the pandemic.

It initiated with a Young Adult Mass that had been going on at the Jesuit church at Farm Street for about 15 years. This was handed on to the new Young Adult Ministry team in 2019 and so there was already an established group of young people who came to the Jesuit church weekly for mass. There was little else by way of contact outside of this.

This mass moved online when the pandemic hit and online events began to take over.

Before the pandemic began, YAM as we are known had a weekly young adult mass each week. We also organised in person retreats in daily life (which account for people working) so a young adult would keep working or studying and meet with their spiritual director each day for 30 minutes. We had one Christian Life Community or CLC. This comprises of a group who meet and pray with a set text and discern together using Ignatian spirituality what has been happening in their lives with God, meeting in person fortnightly. We also had a young adult community living in a Jesuit house in Brixton where five young adults lived and were accompanied by the team through an Ignatian

way of life program. There were also first Saturday gatherings largely based around ecological issues where young adults spent the whole day having input, socializing, eating, discussing and relaxing together. These took place on a monthly basis.

When the pandemic began, YAM like everyone else believed that the ministry would ground to a halt until the virus passed however as with everyone else, we quickly saw that this was not the case and moved online and began to use zoom to engage with young adults. Having a stable group of approximately 70 or 80 young adults attending the weekly mass allowed for an easily accessible group.

We were initially concerned about what praying would be like on a zoom setting and would it allow for the quiet and reflective atmosphere necessary and the connection that ordinarily happens between a group to take place. To our surprise we found it worked well once everybody got the hang of the mute button and the camera angles! We were also concerned about what spiritual direction would be like on screen as opposed to in person. There are nuances and body languages, emotional responses, a listening with the eyes as well as the ears that is essential in spiritual direction that we worried may be missed virtually but again, we have been very pleasantly surprised at how well it is able to work while online.

What started with one CLC group in person before the pandemic has led to the growth of five CLC groups for young adults online. We have managed to successfully set up these young adult prayer groups all of whom are accompanied by an adult trained in Ignatian Spirituality so either a Jesuit or a Ignatian lay person. They meet fortnightly online and the sharing of their faith journey and relationship with God, the level and depth of their relationship with each other is a true gift to watch unfold. As a result of lockdown, we have been able to engage with young adults outside London who have joined these CLC groups in other parts of the UK but also overseas in Ireland and even Poland. So moving online has helped us to reach further afield.

We had one community of young adults living in a Jesuit house in Brixton before the pandemic, but through our engagement online and because of a felt desire of the young adults and our increased access to young people, we have opened a second community house in Brixton for a second household of young adults. Again, this house is accompanied by the Young Adult Ministry team. While household mixing was disallowed, we met weekly online for prayer, reflection and faith sharing with both communities on zoom.

The First Saturday meetings which take place on the first Saturday of each month proved very popular before the pandemic. They allowed young adults to ask some of the more difficult questions about the ecological issues we face and plan a response together as a group while in a faith context. Once lockdown occurred, we were not allowed inhouse and so also moved to online but over a shorter period of time. So instead of the whole day, it was reduced to a three-hour meeting. Input from various academics or activists took place online with time for space, reflection and questions and break out rooms so the young adults could discuss and raise questions about what feels important to them. Since we can meet outdoors now, we had a recent First Saturdays outdoors

event in the park with a large attendance enjoying the beauty of the natural world and enjoying seeing each other in the flesh once more.

An online rosary group began online also during the pandemic and continues. It was a request made by the young adults themselves and is accompanied each week by one of the team by way of solidarity.

A lectio divina group is also run weekly again online and accessed mostly by young adults across London. It too has a team member in attendance to lead the time of prayer and coordinate the sharing and reflection of participants.

We have held retreats in daily life online during lent and Pentecost over the lockdown and again due to it being online, we have managed to attract much larger numbers of young adults who would struggle to travel to other parts of London for their daily meeting with their director in ordinary times and so offering retreats online has made it enormously possible to reach many more people. Often after a days work, we do not want a long journey to meet a director and so online is very attractive to young professionals. They have been a huge success. We have also discovered that Spiritual Direction online is not only possible but also very effective.

Courses on discernment and understanding Ignatian Spirituality which would have happened in person and at venues which are not so easily accessible have also developed and expanded to wider audiences than we would have ordinarily reached given the ease of access across zoom. Recent courses on navigating your life with God have reached across the UK and Ireland as far as Zimbabwe. Because people are online so much now, advertising events is much easier and levels of traffic on our webpages has grown substantially.

We have been able to develop and engage with very many more young adults who have attended our prayer groups or retreats and who have asked for ongoing direction, all of which has continued to happen and continued to grow throughout lockdown.

We have very much managed to expand our ministry despite the pandemic and the main thing that has been missed for us is that in-person socializing.

Looking ahead, we will need to discern about what is the best way forward in terms of continuing to offer what we are currently offering and we envisage a blended approach of meeting in-person and online alternatively while remaining online for groups that have people from outside London and overseas. Because of our visibility and presence online, we have also been able to connect with and collaborate with other groups who work largely with young adults and start to work a long side them, most recently we have done this with CAFOD at the G7 summit in Cornwall. Since restrictions have lifted on attending mass in person, our young adults have returned in increasing numbers to the sacraments and I believe this is because we kept our young adults engaged throughout the lockdown, accompanying them to remain in deeper connection with God. It has been so important for us as a team to be able to remain available and hold space for these young people through this time of fear and confusion, loss and hardship, questioning and doubt so as to allow it all to be held within a deeper knowing of God's continued presence in a world of pandemic and suffering. So while the pandemic initially seemed set to limit or curb our work, we have actually expanded and grown despite it.