

Sticky faith: What keeps kids connected to church?

by [Jen Bradbury](#) in the [May 29, 2013](#) issue



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When I first started in youth ministry, I did everything I could think of to attract and engage high school youth. I held monthly social events and service projects. My Sunday school classes and weekly youth group meetings included crazy games, youth-only worship with contemporary Christian music, and discussions of relevant topics.

I chose topics based on what I thought youth cared about, so we talked a lot about friendships, sex and alcohol. While I tied these topics to scripture, I rarely focused on Jesus. I assumed that the youth, who had grown up in the church, already knew the Jesus story well and were likely to be bored by it. Rather than help students cultivate a lifelong relationship with Christ, I focused on getting them to live a Christian lifestyle. I had zero tolerance for inappropriate behavior.

Only a handful of the youth I worked with in that year are attending church today. My extensive efforts at reaching them seem to have made little difference.

Research suggests that my approach to ministry was not unusual—nor was the outcome. According to research by the Fuller Youth Institute, 40 to 50 percent of kids who are part of a youth group in high school fail to stick with their faith in college. To find out why, researchers at FYI conducted a six-year, comprehensive and longitudinal study from 2004 to 2010 called the College Transition Project. The study's findings are found in *Sticky Faith: Practical Ideas to Nurture Long-Term Faith in Teenagers*, a 2011 book by Kara E. Powell, Brad M. Griffin and Cheryl A. Crawford.

The term *sticky faith* is defined by researchers at FYI as faith that is “part of a student’s inner thoughts and emotions and is also externalized in choices and actions that reflect this faith commitment.” It is a faith that “celebrates God’s specific care for each person . . . in the global and local community of the church” and that “shows marks of spiritual maturity but is also in the process of growth.” It is this kind of sticky faith that we want to develop in students, for it is this kind of faith that becomes a way of life, capable of influencing people’s everyday decisions as well as their interactions with the world around them.

One of the key findings from FYI’s College Transition Project is that when it comes to fostering sticky faith, nothing is more important than “students’ view of the gospel.” Ministries that foster sticky faith, the report says, are centered on Christ.

I suspect that most of us youth workers assume we are better at creating Christ-centered ministries than we actually are. Consider this finding: when students involved in the College Transition Project were asked what it means to be a Christian, 35 percent “gave an answer that didn’t mention Jesus at all.”

One possible explanation for this omission, according to the CTP, is that many youth groups offer teens a “Red Bull experience of the gospel”—it was “potent enough to help them make the right decision at a party in high school” but not “powerful enough to foster long-term faith.”

To move students beyond a Red Bull experience we must relentlessly remind them that the Christian faith is one centered on the person of Jesus. Developing and maintaining a relationship with God requires engagement with scripture and the stories of Christ found there.

As my own early efforts demonstrate, youth ministers have often tried to attract teens by doing anything other than using scripture to connect them with Christ. In order to be politically or culturally acceptable, we’ve often stripped Christianity of

Jesus or transformed him into a character he is not. We've made Jesus wimpy rather than revolutionary; tolerant rather than loving; good rather than God. In lieu of discipling teens, we've attempted to entertain them; we've tried to make our ministries cool enough to compete with other community activities.

What every teen knows, however, is that the church is not cool. The good news is that the church does not have to be cool to be relevant. What the church has is Jesus, and he is enough. He is what differentiates the church from every other organization. He's why the church matters. If the church matters because Jesus matters, then what youth ministries need more of are not entertaining activities but conversations about Jesus.

One opportune time for having these conversations is on mission trips. On such trips, students are often out of their comfort zone, especially attuned to God's presence and particularly open to new ideas. When paired with scripture, such an environment often enables teens to see and relate to Jesus in new ways. For example, reading the Beatitudes in economically depressed areas means something different to teens than when they are read in the comfort of the suburbs. Similarly, when teens find themselves on their hands and knees, mopping up sewage from a church basement in order to ready the space to host a soup kitchen the day after reading about how Jesus washed his disciples' feet, they begin to understand what both humility and servant leadership are.

For youth ministries to become truly Christ-centered, though, conversations about the Jesus of scripture cannot be limited to mission trips. Instead, cracking open a Bible and wrestling with its content must become part of a youth ministry's DNA.

I saw the impact of this when I was teaching the story of the widow's mite during one of my ministry's weekly gatherings. Students reacted with shock at the thought of Jesus watching people putting money into the temple treasury. His scrutiny of people's behavior seemed judgmental to these teens—it directly conflicted with their image of Jesus as a nice man. But after being surprised by Jesus in this story, these teens could no longer ignore him as easily. They were driven deeper into scripture to wrestle with a person who had suddenly become real to them.

In scripture, teens discover that Jesus' message is neither fire and brimstone nor the string of never-ending niceties that they expect. By examining Jesus' relationship with his disciples, they realize he wants more than their happiness and demands

more than their half-hearted allegiance. He wants their very lives, something that appeals greatly to a generation looking for a leader worth following and a cause worth committing their lives to.

Teens also encounter in scripture a Christianity that cannot be reduced to mere morality. This directly contradicts what many teens believe Christianity is: following a list of dos and don'ts. Christian philosopher Dallas Willard, author of *The Divine Conspiracy* and other books, calls this the "gospel of sin management." According to this gospel, "the Christian message is thought to be essentially concerned with only how to deal with sin: with wrongdoing or wrong-being and its effects. Life, our actual existence, is not included in what is presented at the heart of the Christian message."

Besides making the focal point of faith sin rather than Christ, the gospel of sin management makes it difficult for teens to recover when they make a mistake or fail. Instilling sticky faith means creating ministries that are expressions of grace.

Many church kids can recite Ephesians 2:8 or tell you they are saved "by grace, through faith," but few can define grace, let alone recall specific examples of it in their lives. Terms like *grace*, *righteousness* and *justification* are often used without explanation.

To help youth understand and recognize grace we must explain it—and the best way to explain it is to show tangible expressions of it. Grace needs to be our default position, the way in which we reflexively respond to students. Teens experience grace when we encourage them to try new things rather than force them to compete against one another for positions of honor. They experience grace when we help them learn from their mistakes.

I saw the power of grace during one mission trip when there was a series of air mattress malfunctions. Since these malfunctions happened on multiple nights to different people, I concluded that vandalism was at fault. Eventually I located the culprit and the pin used to poke holes in the air mattresses.

With the offending pin in hand, I confronted the girl. When I asked, "Why did you do it?" tears gushed from this normally stoic girl's face. The rules suggested punishment, but grace compelled me to do otherwise. I hugged her, told her how important she was to our group, forgave her and gave her another chance. I believe that moment was, for her, a powerful encounter with the God of second chances.

When churches are suffused with grace they also welcome teens into the larger church community, treating them as vital parts of the body of Christ. The College Transition Project concluded that the best way for churches to do this is for adults to show an interest in teens—which usually requires an intentional effort to connect people across generations.

One way to do this is to change the usual ratio of leaders to students. Rather than aiming to have one adult leader for every five students, it's better to aim for connecting every teen with five adults who are willing to invest in the teen in some way, even if rather small. According to LifeWay Research, "teens who had five or more adults from the church invest in them during the ages of 15 to 18 were less likely to leave the church after high school."

Certainly, one way of connecting teens with adults is to utilize adults in our youth ministries as leaders. Such adult leadership teams are at their best when they, too, are intergenerational. This means that when we recruit adults to serve in our ministries, we need to look not just for the stereotypical youth worker—the outgoing, funny young adult in his or her twenties or thirties. Instead, we must also look for parents, empty nesters and senior citizens who are willing to spend time with teens, asking them questions and then listening to their responses and encouraging them.

The truth is, however, that successfully changing the adult to student leader ratio in our youth ministries also requires us to enlist parishioners from all walks of life to invest in youth outside our youth ministries. Simply put, adults can invest in teens by learning their names, greeting them each week, asking them a question about their week and following up on the conversation in the next week.

Beyond this, prayer buddies can also be a powerful form of intergenerational connection. In this model, adults commit to praying for a particular student—for a specific time period or event. Prayer buddies then write one another a note, introducing themselves to one another and encouraging each other. Whenever possible, give prayer buddies an opportunity to meet and connect with one another in person, through worship, meals or celebrations.

At one of my ministry's worship services following the 30 Hour Famine, I watched as one of our youth rushed down the aisle and embraced her prayer buddy, excited to participate in this event with her, especially since her own parents were unable to join her. On this particular weekend, this adult prayer buddy not only covered this

teen in prayer but became her surrogate parent. Such is the power of church and intergenerational community.

Another way of connecting teens with adults is through an interview or oral history project: teens develop a set of questions to pose to older people in the congregation and then conduct formal interviews. This type of interaction allows teens to see adults and seniors as wise and valuable saints in the community of faith. At the same time, it allows adults and seniors to see teens as people worthy of entrusting the future of congregations to.

Some teens in my church interviewed a 90-year-old man who shared stories of his family and marriage, which he described as “a 60-year romance.” The teens were riveted to this man’s every word. As we left his home, one student whose parents were in the midst of a difficult divorce commented, “I guess marriages really can last.” She left that session filled with hope. She learned more from listening to this man talk about the role of faith in his marriage than she could have from any lesson I would have taught on the subject.

Besides stressing the importance of intergenerational community, the College Transition Project contends that involving teens in worship is crucial for learning to contribute to the body of Christ. In fact, the CTP report states that “involvement in all-church worship during high school is more consistently linked with mature faith in both high school and college than any other form of church participation.”

This insight from the CTP suggests it’s time to reevaluate the wisdom of holding separate worship services for youth. While age-specific worship services may give teens some leadership opportunities that they might not otherwise have, these come at the expense of the community and of their own deeper involvement in church life. If teens become used to worshipping only with people their own age, they will find it hard upon graduating from high school to transition into intergenerational worship services. This leaves young adults feeling homeless.

Remedying this situation requires not scheduling youth group or Sunday school simultaneously with worship so that teens are free to attend intergenerational worship. Beyond that, however, it also requires us to help students understand and learn to value worship, an effort that extends beyond worship into youth ministry’s discussions. There, it’s important for us to talk openly and honestly with teens about what it means to be part of a church community, about what worship is and about

how our congregations uniquely go about worshipping. To do this, we've taken time in my ministry to explore the word and the sacraments, to wrestle with the words of the creeds and even to craft our own creed, to explore the meaning of the lyrics of the songs we sing and to explore what scripture says about prayer. We do all of this in order to help students better understand worship so that they can more fully participate in it and, in the process, encounter God.

Intergenerational worship demands not just that we invite youth to attend but that we give them opportunities to use their gifts in worship as ushers, acolytes, lectors, musicians and assisting ministers, not only on token occasions like "Youth Sunday" but throughout the year. Sticky faith forms when adults and teens lead worship together.

I've seen the impact of this practice on one high school senior. She is a gifted musician and has served as an assisting minister since her sophomore year. Once a month, she uses her vocal skills to lead the congregation in worship. She sings parts of the liturgy and helps serve communion. Though she's a leader in the youth ministry who's faithfully attended youth group and participated in youth retreats and trips, when asked what's helped her faith grow most, this young woman consistently points to her experience as an assisting minister. That experience has made her acutely aware of the words of the liturgy and of God's presence in her life and in the community of faith.

As with any research study, the College Transition Project has limitations. It's sample size is relatively small. Moreover, in an age in which adolescence is lengthening and many of the milestones formerly associated with adulthood (including marriage, having children and becoming financially independent) occur later in life, following youth group graduates through their third year of college may not be long enough to determine whether or not their faith has stuck. Students who leave church in their early twenties may return in their late twenties.

Nevertheless, churches should be concerned when young people abandon church even for a short time. When this occurs, "they are easily pushed by the shifting winds of their college culture." Setting faith aside "affects the quality of their integrated thinking" and their ability to make "true-to-self decisions about their worldviews, romantic partners, career directions, or graduate school."

Young people are a vital part of the body of Christ. Without them, the church suffers. The passion, conviction and creativity they bring enliven our worship and enable us to more effectively minister to the world around us.

To help teens form a lasting and consequential faith, I will continue pursuing the type of ministry the College Transition Project points us toward: one centered on Christ, infused with grace and built on intergenerational relationships and intergenerational worship. My hope is that in doing so, I will be able years from now to survey graduates of my youth ministry and find them still active in a church, committed to their faith and striving to live out their faith in daily life. The future of our congregations and the world depends on it.