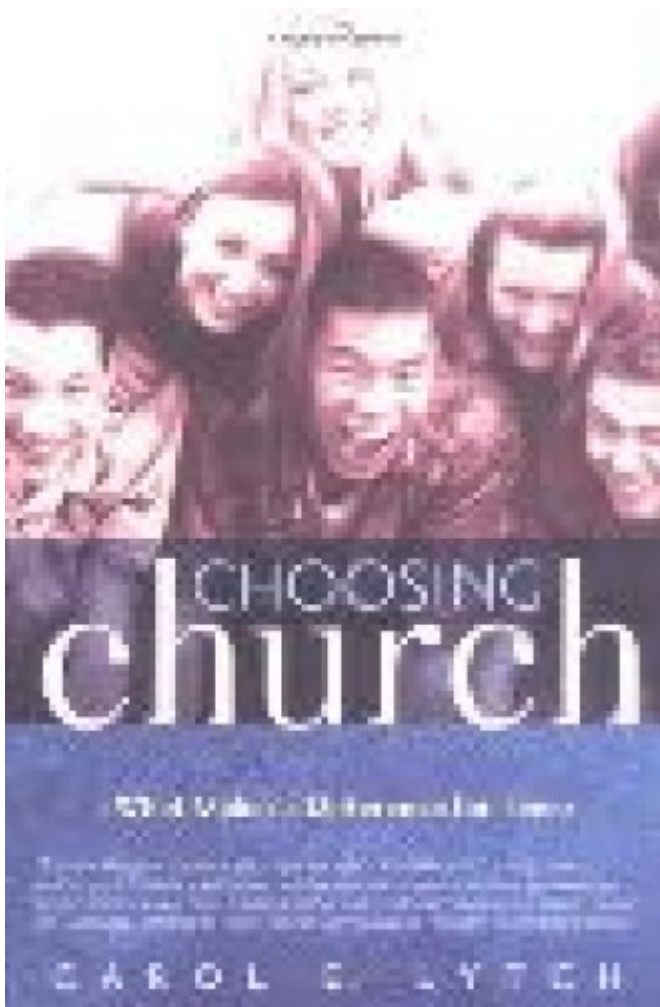


# Choosing Church: What Makes a Difference for Teens

reviewed by [Tony Jones](#) in the [June 1, 2004](#) issue

## In Review



## Choosing Church: What Makes a Difference for Teens

Carol E. Lytch

Westminster John Knox

Youth pastors hear an inordinate number of generalized and unsubstantiated statistics: X percent of adult Christians chose to follow Christ before the age of 18; X percent of youth workers leave the church after X months; X percent of students choose to follow Christ at a summer camp; X percent of youth leave the church after confirmation/graduation, never to return. Attend a youth ministers' conference, and you're likely to hear such statistics reiterated with authority.

Carol E. Lytch has not fallen prey to such facile observations. Instead, her excellent book thoroughly documents the state of "successful" youth ministry in suburban America. Lytch, the coordinator of the Lilly Endowment's Fund for Theological Education programs at the Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary, wrote her doctoral dissertation on what leads students to stick with their churches during the latter years of high school, a time of high attrition. Instead of resorting to generalizations based on nationwide surveys, she focuses on an extremely narrow group: high school seniors in three Louisville, Kentucky, churches: one mainline (United Methodist), one evangelical and one Roman Catholic. Lytch chose these churches because they didn't lose their upper high school students at nearly the rate of most churches. Indeed, the seniors in these congregations stayed committed right through graduation.

In order to discover what makes the churches tick, Lytch spent ten months interviewing youth, youth pastors, senior pastors and parents. She went on retreats, hung out at high schools and sang "Bananas Unite!" in at least one church parking lot.

What emerges is a sociologically thick description of youth ministries. While one might wonder whether three local churches can teach us very much, Lytch's research is so thorough and her interpretation so incisive that the characteristics and typologies she develops will be helpful to almost any pastor, youth ministry coordinator or seminary student. Indeed, this trend toward thorough empirical research by theologians trained in the social sciences is a hallmark in the burgeoning field of practical theology.

Lytch debunks the conventional wisdom about youth ministry. Search committees take note: a charismatic young youth pastor is not what compels teens to stick with a church. The churches she studied employed a middle-aged mom, a disarmingly humble young man—and a turnstile (that is, a new youth worker every two years).

Lytch finds that “it is the deeper, more universal things that congregations offer through a variety of means that attract teens: a sense of belonging, a sense of meaning, and opportunities to develop competence.”

She confirms what most congregational studies experts have shown: people will rise to the expectations set for them by the church. Although the three churches are quite different in theology, polity and tradition, each sets a high bar for its teens. The Catholic parish is known for its covenantal community, the evangelical church for its commitment to discipleship, and the mainline church for its classically trained youth choirs. Lytch teases out how each church fosters belonging, meaning and competence in dissimilar ways.

Successful youth ministry is not a question of having the right theology. It is, however, dependent upon having a theology and being unashamed of it: “In all three churches, the youth leaders were very clear about the theological grounding of their work with youth.” Each church also employs meaning-giving rites of passage for their teens during the important liminal stages of adolescence. Confirmation, mission trips, Youth Sunday and choir tours all play important roles in marking teens as progressing into adulthood in the congregation.

Parents, too, play an overwhelmingly important role in whether a teen stays committed to church. Lytch points out that the drop-out rate among upper teens often reflects parents who are negligibly connected to church. Such churches tend not to have high-enough expectations of their congregants.

Lytch is admirably evenhanded in her treatment of the churches, never casting aspersions on their theology or polity. I wish that she had given at least a hint about whether some normative theological issues are at play in holding onto these teens. And the book still reads too much like a dissertation. The transitions between the sociological analysis and the anecdotal stories about teens are too abrupt. Lytch’s field notes, presented as an offset text, could have been woven into a more compelling narrative. But this quibble aside, *Choosing Church* is an outstanding work of practical theology deserving of a wide readership.