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Keeping Faith in the Transition to Young Adulthood
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At a recent event in New York City with about 100 pastors, our conversation about spiritual growth and church health quickly turned to the question of youth. The pastors believed that youth are leaving the church in droves and were struggling to find answers to what to do about it.

This conversation was more typical than remarkable. The question of youth “walking away” comes up in nearly every conversation with church leaders. This is not surprising given the sensational popular news pieces in the past few years reporting studies with just that conclusion. In 2002, the Southern Baptist Convention claimed that 88% of youth walk away from the church and never return. An article titled “Young Adults Aren’t Sticking with Church” appeared in the *USA Today* on August 6, 2007. Reporting on a Lifeway Research survey, the article states that “Seven in 10 Protestants ages 18 to 30 – both evangelical and mainline – who went to church regularly in high school said they quit attending by age 23”.

Some react to these headlines with disbelief, pointing out that nearly every generation expresses concern about the next abandoning the faith. There is some truth to these arguments. Historical data reveal that early adulthood is traditionally a time when active church involvement wanes. Even back in 1797, William Wilberforce wrote about his concerns for the next generation. [Read more](#)



So what is the truth about youth and faith? How concerned should parents, church leaders, and pastors be about the next generation? More importantly, what can they do to help youth thrive spiritually even as they transition to young adulthood?

Most Youth Will Spend Their Young Adult Years Outside of the Church

Unfortunately, the two studies that made the biggest headlines (the Southern Baptist Convention & Lifeway) are not publicly available. This makes it impossible to assess the research methods and thus, the conclusions.

However, there is sufficient data from other sources to conclude that most youth, even those spiritually active in their high school years, will spend their young adult years outside of the church: The best estimates are in the 60 to 70% range. Key findings from various studies include:

- Millennials are less likely to be affiliated with any particular faith compared to older adults now. They also have less faith involvement relative to earlier generations when they were at a comparable point in their life cycle (Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life). [Read more](#)

- ❑ Millennials attend religious services less often & fewer say that religion is very important in their lives. Church attendance is at lower rates than Baby Boomers when they were younger (Putting Life Together: Findings from Australian Youth Spirituality Research). [Read more](#)
- ❑ Three out of five twentysomethings were involved in a church in high school, but are not spiritually active in adulthood (The Barna Group). [Read more](#)
- ❑ Professing their allegiance to Christ and involvement with a youth group also doesn't prevent youth from walking away from the faith when they reach young adulthood. For example, seven out of ten Protestants between the ages of 18 and 30 who attended church in high school say they quit attending by age 23 (Grossman, 2009).
- ❑ Two out of five (39.7%) young adults say that they do not attend at all and an additional one-fifth attend only on special occasions. One-third attends church at least once a month. This rate is much lower than that observed among teens, more than half of whom go to church at least once a month (Center for Bible Engagement, 2009). [Read more](#)
- ❑ Half of college students say they attended church frequently in high school, but only 29% were attending frequently in their junior year of college. Those who maintained their spiritual involvement reported less psychological distress (Higher Education Research Institute, University of California at Los Angeles, 2004). [Read more](#)

Why Does Active Faith Decline in Young Adulthood?

Understanding why youth struggle with their faith in young adulthood is the first critical step to reversing the trend. Research by Youth for Christ of Great Britain indicates that distractions of life are the main culprit. That is, family pressure, peer pressure, and an unbelieving girlfriend or boyfriend are the most common reasons youth give for leaving the church. Surprisingly, few (15%) leave because they are “bored”.

Many Christian teens are also not prepared to continue living out their faith as adults. In essence, they do not see active faith as vital to their well-being. They may be surrounded as well by adults whose personal faith is more anemic than thriving. Adults who may attend church regularly, but do not really relate to God at all between Sundays.

For some, doubts about the Christian faith reinforce what is essentially a drifting away from church or may even fuel a conscious decision to walk away (Ham & Beemer, 2009). Through church and Sunday school, youth may know the facts of basic Bible stories, but miss the purpose of engaging the Bible in the context of a relationship with Jesus Christ. Lacking a firm foundation in what they believe and why they believe it, these youth are unprepared for the assaults on that faith from the world.

These conscious decisions to walk away, however, seem to be more the exception rather than the rule. In essence then, most youth essentially drift away from the church even though they intend to stay involved in their faith ([Read more](#)). The research of today suggests that the process William Wilberforce described more than 200 years ago is still at work:

Think about what happens to many young people who are raised with all the benefits of prosperous parents who are cultural Christians themselves. As children, they are taken to church, where they hear the parts of the Christian message that their particular church embraces. Although it is rare in our times, maybe they even receive some measure of religious instruction at home. Eventually, they leave home, and launch out into the world. Some go to work; some go to college. They face temptations that they have not faced before and give in to them. Their lives might get out of control with the use of alcohol, and they might give in to sexual indulgence. At the least, they never read the Bible or make any attempt to develop a spiritual life. Most don't even attempt to take what knowledge is at their disposal and form their own beliefs and convictions. They don't learn to think.

-William Wilberforce, *Real Christianity*

How Do We Help Youth Spiritually Thrive in Young Adulthood?

Churches can help youth spiritually thrive in young adulthood by giving them the tools and encouragement they need to make their faith their own. Parents, church leaders, and pastors should emphasize a daily relationship with Jesus Christ, not simply following the "rules." Surround youth with strong adult mentors and role models, ones who communicate with their Lord daily through prayer and through reflecting on His Word.

As part of their transition to adulthood, help youth understand and prepare for the challenges they will face. Prevent as much as possible barriers to thriving spiritually by helping youth connect with a local body of believers, wherever college or career may take them.

Most importantly, the faith community should also work together to ensure that all members – young and old – know in both their heads and their hearts what they believe and why they believe it. In this way, youth can enter adulthood living out 1 Peter 3:15 (ESV):

"but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect."

Additional Resources:

Center for Bible Engagement. (2009). On the verge of walking away? American teens, communication with God, & temptations. Lincoln, NE: Back to the Bible. Available online: http://www.centerforbibleengagement.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=33&Itemid=

Cole, A. & Ovwigho, P.C. (April 2009). Bible engagement & social behavior: How familiarity & frequency of contact with the Bible affects one's behavior. Invited presentation at Tel Aviv University.

Kinnamen, D. (2006). The mosaic generation: The mystifying new world of youth culture. *Enrichment Journal*. Available online:
http://enrichmentjournal.ag.org/200604/200604_028_MosaicGen.cfm

Melleby, D. (2008). Why students abandon their faith: Lessons from William Wilberforce. Available online: <http://www.cpyu.org/Page.aspx?id=361896>

Riley, J. (2009, March 10). Survey: Less than 1 percent of young adults hold biblical worldview. *The Christian Post*. Available online:
<http://www.christianpost.com/article/20090310/survey-less-than-1-percent-of-young-adults-hold-biblical-worldview/index.html>

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