Christian Youth & their Faith—2012 and Beyond

John Roberto, LifelongFaith Associates

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The Key Question

How do we grow disciples of Jesus Christ in a 21st century world?

Vital Faith in Youth

1. Seeking Spiritual Growth
2. Possessing a Vital Faith
3. Practicing Faith in Community
4. Making the Christian Faith a Way of Life
5. Living a Life of Service
6. Possessing a Positive Spirit
7. Exercising Moral Responsibility
What Do We Know?

The View from Research Studies

Research (NSYR Research)
Factors that Promote Faith Growth

- The combination of the following factors makes an enormous difference in religious outcomes during emerging adulthood:
  1. the teenager's parental religion
  2. importance of faith
  3. lack of religious doubts
  4. prayer
  5. Scripture reading and
  6. personal religious experiences
  7. having support nonparent adults in the church

- These most influential factors make differences of sizeable magnitude in substantive outcomes.

Factors that Promote Faith Growth

In these seven factors alone, we have identified some powerful teenage factors associated with and, we think, causing differences in emerging adult religious commitment and practice.

- 85% chance of being Highly Religious as an emerging adult if you were in the top 25% on the scales of:
  1. parental religion
  2. prayer
  3. importance of faith
  4. Scripture reading
Factors that Promote Faith Growth

- 75% chance of being a Highly Religious emerging adult if you were in the top 25% on scales of:
  5. having support nonparent adults in the church,
  6. having personal religious experiences
  7. lack of religious doubts

Factors that Promote Faith Growth

- Approximately 70% of youth who at some time or other before mid-emerging adulthood commit to live their lives for God, the vast majority appear to do so early in life, apparently before the age of 14.
- Most make their first commitments to God as children or during the preteen or very early teen years.
- Many religious trajectories followed in the course of life’s development seemed to be formed early on in life.
Churches want faith formation that helps people. . .

- grow in their relationship with God throughout their lives
- live as disciples of Jesus Christ at home, in the workplace, in the community and the world
- develop an understanding of the Bible and their faith tradition
- deepen their spiritual life and practices
- engage in service and mission
- relate the Christian faith to life today
- participate in the life and ministries of the faith community
Exemplary YM Research

It is the culture of the whole church that is most influential in nurturing youth of vital Christian faith.
• Spiritual Influence
• Models Faith
• Interpersonal & Leadership Competence
• Support Teams & Leaders

• Focus on Jesus
• Environment
• Relationships
• Multiple Approaches
• Well Organized

• Discipleship
• Scripture
• Prayer & Worship
• Mission
• Intergenerational
• Community Life

• Parental Faith
• Family Faith Practices
• Family Harmony
• Family Relationships

• Congregational Leadership

• Family & Household Faith

• Congregational Faith & Qualities

• Age-Group Ministry

• Congregational Culture: 44 Assets

• Focus on Jesus
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• Congregational Faith & Qualities

• Youth Ministry Qualities
Congregational Faith

1. Congregation’s Biblical Emphasis
2. Congregation Teaches Core Christian Concepts
3. Congregation’s Moral Guidance
4. Worship Services’ Positive Characteristics
5. Congregation Promotes Service
6. Congregation’s Mission Effectiveness

Congregational Qualities

1. Warm, Challenge Congregational Climate
2. Welcoming Atmosphere
3. Satisfied with the Congregation
4. Importance of this Church to Me
5. Congregation’s Moral Guidance
6. Congregation’s Social Interaction
7. Congregation’s Openness to Change
8. Members Experience Love and Support
The congregation’s basic ministries are thoroughly intergenerational.

- Young people are welcomed and expected to participate.
- Young people lead in church-wide ministries:
  - Worship
  - Education
  - Fellowship
  - Service and Outreach
  - Decision-making
Sticky Faith Research

Intergenerational Connections

While most U.S. churches focus on building strong youth groups, teenagers also need to build relationships with adults of all ages.

- Participation in all-church worship during high school was more consistently linked with developing a mature faith in both high school and college than any other participation variable.
- Churches and families wanting to instill deep faith in youth should help them build a web of relationships with committed and caring adults.
Intergenerational Connections

While small groups, mentoring, justice works, and a host of other youth ministry activities are important, the reality is that the challenges of kids, ministry programs, and spiritual development are far too complicated to be met with a single solution. The closest our research has come to that definitive silver bullet is this sticky finding: high school and college students who experience more intergenerational worship tend to have higher faith maturity. We found this to be true in our studies of both high school seniors AND college freshmen.

Intergenerational Connections

- **Intergenerational Insight #1**: 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.

- **Intergenerational Insight #2**: The more students serve and build relationships with younger children, the more likely it is that their faith will stick.
Intergenerational Insights

- **Intergenerational Insight #3:** High school seniors don’t feel supported by adults in their congregations.

- **Intergenerational Insight #4:** By far, the number-one way that churches made the teens in our survey feel welcomed and valued was when adults in the congregation showed interest in them.

  Becoming a 5:1 Church
  worship, teaching, mentoring, rituals, etc.

Intergenerational Connection

Intergenerational connection and involvement during high school promotes mature faith in both high school and college – a “sticky faith.”

- Welcoming and valuing young people’s participation in the life of the church
- Worshipping with all of the generations
- Serving and building relationships with younger children
- Having significant relationships with adults in the church and having the community show interest in them
Intergenerational Connection

Churches and families wanting to instill deep faith in youth should help them build a web of relationships with committed and caring adults.

**Becoming a 5:1 Church**

5 Adults to 1 Young Person in Worship, Teaching, Mentoring, Rituals, and all of Community Life
Family Assets

- **Family Assets** name 21 specific, dynamic qualities that strengthen families.
- **Family Assets** identify positive dimensions of day-to-day family life that allow families and their members to flourish.
- **Family Assets** focus on the family relationships, interactions, opportunities, values, skills, and self-perceptions that position family members to thrive.
Family Assets

Search Institute’s Family Assets Framework
Search Institute has identified the following key qualities that help all kinds of families be strong. When families have more of these research-based assets, the teens and adults in the family do better in life.

**NURTURING RELATIONSHIPS**
1. Positive communication
2. Affection
3. Emotional openness
4. Support for sparks

**ESTABLISHING ROUTINES**
5. Family meals
6. Shared activities
7. Meaningful traditions
8. Dependability

**MAINTAINING EXPECTATIONS**
9. Openness about tough topics
10. Fair rules
11. Defined boundaries
12. Clear expectations
13. Contributions to family

**ADAPTING TO CHALLENGES**
14. Management of daily commitments
15. Adaptability
16. Problem solving
17. Democratic decision making

**CONNECTING TO COMMUNITY**
18. Neighborhood cohesion
19. Relationships with others
20. Enriching activities
21. Supportive resources
Family Assets

Families with more assets are more likely to:

- Have children who are actively engaged in school and who earn higher grades
- Act in socially responsible ways like spending time together serving their communities.
- Teach youth to make good decisions.
- Foster positive identity and values.
- Nurture spiritual development.
- Build social-emotional skills.
- Encourage healthy life habits.

Managing Commitments

Parenting adults and youth struggle to navigate competing activities and expectations at home, school, and work. (Only about 40% met the criterion.)
NSYR Research

Family Faith

- **Parental Influence**: The single most important social influence on the religious and spiritual lives of children and adolescents (and emerging adults) is their parents.

- **Embedded Family Religious Practices**: Effective religious socialization comes about through specific religious activities that are firmly intertwined with the daily habits of family life.
Family Faith

**Embedded Family Religious Practices**
- Eating Together – especially the power of Sunday meals and holidays
- Praying – bedtime rituals and prayer, grace before meals
- Having family conversations
- Displaying sacred objects and religious images, especially the Bible
- Celebrating holidays
- Providing moral instruction
- Engaging in family devotions and reading the Bible
Family Faith

“Emerging adults who grew up with seriously religious parents are through socialization more likely (1) to have internalized their parents religious worldview, (2) to possess the practical religious know-how needed to live more highly religious lives, and (3) to embody the identity orientations and behavioral tendencies toward continuing to practice what they have been taught religiously.”

(Christian Smith & Patricia Snell)

Family Faith

“At the heart of this social causal mechanism stands the elementary process of teaching—both formal and informal, verbal and nonverbal, oral and behavioral, intentional and unconscious, through both instruction and role modeling. We believe that one of the main ways by which empirically observed strong parental religion produced strong emerging adult religion in offspring is through the teaching involved in socialization.”

(Souls in Transition: The Religious & Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults by Christian Smith with Patricia Snell)
Family Faith

- *Parents possess and practice a vital and informed faith* – understanding the Christian faith, participating in worship, praying, and engaging in service and mission.

- *Family members’ expressions of respect and love create an atmosphere promoting faith.*

- *Parents engage youth and the whole family in conversations, prayer, Bible reading, and service that nurture faith and life.*

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**Family Faith**

**Faith of the Parents...**

1. My faith helps me know right from wrong
2. I have a sense of sharing in a great purpose
3. I have had feelings of being in the presence of God
4. I have a sense of being saved in Christ
5. I am spiritually moved by the beauty of God’s creation
6. God helps me decide what is right or wrong behavior
7. I have found a way of life that gives me direction.
Family Faith

Faith of the Parents...
8. Religious faith is important in my life.
9. My life is committed to Jesus Christ.
10. My life is filled with meaning and purpose.
11. I have a real sense that God is guiding me.

Each of the 11 items rate 7.30 or better on a 9.0 scale.

Family Faith

Teens: How have your parents influenced your faith life?
1. Values are focused on serving others and God.
2. Positive influence on my religious faith
3. Talk with me about my relationship with Jesus Christ
4. Attending Sunday worship
5. Talked with my parent about religious faith
6. Reading the Bible
Family Faith

- One in four teens said their family sat down together and talked about God, the Bible, and other religious things on a weekly or daily basis.
- 40% of teens said they did this once or twice a month.

Six Family Faith Factors:
- Praying
- Caring Conversation
- Reading the Bible
- Celebrating Rituals
- Serving Others
- Learning & Applying Faith to Daily Life
The Parents’ Ten Competencies

(Robert Epstein)

Here are 10 competencies that predict good parenting outcomes, listed roughly in order from most to least important. The skills—all derived from published studies—were ranked based on how well they predict a strong parent-child bond and children’s happiness, health and success.

1. **Love and affection.** You support and accept the child, are physically affectionate, and spend quality one-on-one time together.

2. **Stress management.** You take steps to reduce stress for yourself and your child, practice relaxation techniques and promote positive interpretations of events.

3. **Relationship skills.** You maintain a healthy relationship with your spouse, significant other or co-parent and model effective relationship skills with other people.

4. **Autonomy and independence.** You treat your child with respect and encourage him or her to become self-sufficient and self-reliant.
The Parents’ Ten Competencies
(Robert Epstein)

5. **Education and learning.** You promote and model learning and provide educational opportunities for your child.

6. **Life skills.** You provide for your child, have a steady income and plan for the future.

7. **Behavior management.** You make extensive use of positive reinforcement and punish only when other methods of managing behavior have failed.

8. **Health.** You model a healthy lifestyle and good habits, such as regular exercise and proper nutrition, for your child.

9. **Religion.** You support spiritual or religious development and participate in spiritual or religious activities.

10. **Safety.** You take precautions to protect your child and maintain awareness of the child’s activities and friends.
Exemplary YM Research

Youth Ministry Qualities

What impact did involvement in youth ministry have on young people?

1. Deepen my relationship with Jesus
2. Understand my Christian faith better
3. Apply my faith to daily life
4. Make serious life choices (future, relationships, values)
5. Share my faith

These congregations are serious about making disciples of Jesus Christ.
Youth Ministry Qualities

 Congregations have developed age-level ministries.

- Marked by trusted relationships
- Custom-designed ministry practices and activities
- Caring atmosphere of high expectation
- Multiple nurturing relationships and activities intentionally planned to create:
  - atmosphere of respect
  - growth
  - belonging
- Generates an “alternative youth subculture
Sticky Faith Research

Sticky Faith

Churches and families overestimate youth group graduates’ readiness for the struggles ahead with dire consequences for the faith.

- Only one in seven high school seniors report feeling prepared to face the challenges of college life with few ready for the intensity of the college experience: loneliness, the search for new friends, being completely on their own for the first time, and the sudden availability of partying.

- One pervasive struggle for college students is finding a new church, as evident by the 40 percent of freshman who report difficulty doing so. Young people retrospectively report that the first two weeks of their college freshman year set the trajectory for their remaining years in school.
While teaching young people the “dos” & “don’ts” of Christian living is important, an overemphasis on behaviors can sabotage faith long-term.

- When asked what it means to be Christian, one-third of subjects as college juniors (all of whom were youth group graduates) failed to mention “Jesus” or “Christ” but rather emphasized behaviors.
- Students tend to view the gospel as a “do” and “don’t” list of behaviors instead of a faith that also transforms interior lives and beliefs. One of the dangers of reducing Christianity to this sort of external behavior is that when students fail to live up to the activities they think define Christianity, their feelings of guilt can make them quickly abandon their faith altogether.
Emerging adults have embedded their lives in spiritual communities in which their desire and need for both expressive/experiential activities, whether through art, music, or service-oriented activities, and for a close-knit, physical community and communion with others are met. They are seeking to develop a balance for individualism and rational asceticism through religious experience and spiritual meaning in an embodied faith.
Young Adults

The dominant characteristic was a desire for a theologically grounded belief that makes sense cognitively, combined with nonrational expressive tendencies—they want a faith that makes cognitive sense to them and that is also an expressive, embodied spiritual experience. Young adult Christians are searching for a more holistic faith than what a purely cognitive and rational approach can offer. They are seeking both a deep spiritual experience and a community experience, each of which provides them with meaning in their lives, and each of which is meaningless without the other.

Congregations That Get It: 6 Themes

(Belzer, et al)

1. Young adults want to feel that there presence is valued.
2. Young adults want a sense of ownership in their congregations.
3. Young adults’ interests in religion are multifaceted.
4. Young adults thrive when they are “met where they are.”
5. Young adults welcome opportunities to feel emotionally affected.
6. Young adults respond to a theoretical and practice balance between the particular and universal.
Young Adults

Characteristics of Churches Reaching Young Adults
(Lost & Found, Stetzer, Stanley, & Hayes)

1. Creating deeper community
2. Making a difference through service
3. Experiencing worship
4. Conversing the content with religious depth
5. Leveraging technology
6. Building cross-generational relationships
7. Moving toward authenticity
8. Leading by transparency
9. Leading by team

Spiritual & Religious Diversity
## NSYR Research

### Youth & Young Adult Religiosity

#### Youth (teens)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abiders</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adapters</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assenters</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoiders</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Atheists</td>
<td>5%</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

#### Emerging Adults (20s)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Committed Traditionalists</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selected Adherents</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spiritually Open</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religiously Indifferent</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religiously Disconnected</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Irreligious</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Youth & Young Adult Religiosity

1. **Abiders**: highest levels of religiosity and practice: believe in God, pray regularly, engage in personal religious practice, attend services, serve others, think about the meaning of life; most likely to say their religion is the only true faith

2. **Adapters**: high levels of personal religiosity + accepting of other people’s faiths + attend religious services more sporadically

3. **Assenters**: believe in God and feel somewhat close to God, but they are minimally engaged with their faith and practice only occasionally. Religion is tangential to other aspects of their lives.

4. **Avoiders**: believe in God but have low levels of religious practice; God is distant, impersonal; and often don’t name a religious affiliation.

5. **Atheists**: don’t believe in God and don’t attend services.

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Youth & Young Adult Religiosity

1. **Committed Traditionalists**: strong religious faith; articulate beliefs; active practice; commitment to faith is a significant part of their identities and moral reasoning, at least somewhat regularly involved in some religious group

2. **Selected Adherents**: believe and perform certain aspects of their religious traditions but neglect and ignore others; more discriminating about what they are willing to adopt of their religious tradition’s beliefs and practices

3. **Spiritually Open**: not very committed to a religious faith but are nonetheless receptive to and at least mildly interested in some spiritual or religious matters.
Youth & Young Adult Religiosity

4. **Religiously Indifferent:** neither care to practice religion nor oppose it; simply not invested in religion either way; too distracted with and invested in other things in life and unconcerned with matters of faith to pay any real attention to religion.

5. **ReligiouslyDisconnected:** have little to no exposure or connection to religious people, ideas, or organizations; neither interested in nor opposed to religion; faith simply has not been a part of their lives in any significant way.

6. **Irreligious:** hold skeptical attitudes about and make critical arguments against religion generally, rejecting the idea of personal faith.

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Religious & Spiritual Diversity

- **Not Religiously Affiliated**
- **Spiritual but Not Religious**
- **Minimal Engagement with Faith and Community**
- **Vibrant Faith & Active Engagement**
From Research to Practice

1. Focus on the first third of life & start early!
2. Take an ecological view of faith formation.
3. Pay attention to the culture of the whole congregation
4. Recognize the power of the congregation’s theological commitments.
5. Make discipleship the heart of congregational life & ministries.
6. Nurture the power of faith-filled, multi-generational Christian relationships; create intentional intergenerational connections, relationships, and faith experiences between all ages and generations.

7. Equip parents for family socialization & faith practice at home.

8. Deepen the faith and spiritual life of parents.

9. Address the increasing religious and spiritual diversity of young people & their families.

10. Stay connected with young people into the college years/emerging adulthood.
21\textsuperscript{st} Century Youth Ministry

It’s time to build a 21\textsuperscript{st} Century Youth Ministry for all young people. . .

- **Strategic**: utilizing research-informed youth ministry practices
- **Differentiated**: providing faith formation targeted to the religious & spiritual profiles of all young people
- **Connected & Networked**: utilizing digital and online (websites) resources, and social media to reach, engage, and involve young people

Youth Network

- **Intergenerational Experiences**
  - Worship Learning Service Community Life
- **Leadership**
- **Outreach & “Getting Started” in Faith Experiences**
- **Service Projects Mission Trips**
- **Prayer & Spiritual Formation**
- **Parent-Teen & Family**
- **Bible Study & Religious Learning**
- **Adolescent Life Issues**
- **Peer Relationships**
Faith Formation Formats

- **Face-to-Face & Virtual**
  - On Your Own
  - Mentored

- **Church Community**
- **Small Group**
- **Large Group**
- **Community & World**
- **@Home**

Faith Formation Methods

- **On your own**: online courses, reading, audio programs and podcasts, video programs and podcasts, apps, online faith formation websites
- **Mentors, spiritual guides, and apprenticeships**
- **Large group**: workshops, speaker series, multi-session programs, single session program, roundtable discussions, intergenerational programs, film festivals, conferences, field trips
- **Small group**: book clubs, online courses, discipleship or faith sharing groups, Bible study groups, theology study groups, Sunday lectionary-based or sermon-based faith sharing groups, practice-focused groups (prayer, service/faith in action), support groups
- **Retreats, camps, and extended programs**
- **Study-action**: study program with action projects, service projects and mission trips with reflection and learning
- **Online tools and social media**: blogs, wikis, video conferencing (Skype, Google+), webinars, websites