

Stopping the Dropouts

By: Dr. Wesley Black

Many student ministers work hard to instill a committed, lifelong faith in their youth. But, then too often they are disappointed when those students graduate from high school and drop out of church participation. Why does this happen? What can we do about it? Parents of teenagers, along with collegiate and church ministry leaders are puzzled by this drop off in attendance when things looked so promising only a short time before.

Recent studies have shown that approximately two-thirds of those youth who were once active and faithful in church attendance drop out, at least for a period of time, after they graduate from high school. Finger-pointing and trial and error programming has not resulted in any noticeable change. What will it take to correct this glaring short-coming?

Over a century ago, there was a sincere hunger for spiritual renewal and vitality. In a tiny village in Wales, Pastor Joseph Jenkins had been concerned about a sense of weakness in his own preaching, and increasingly burdened by apathetic attitudes of the young people in his own church.

In a prayer meeting with his young people on Sunday February 14, 1904, Pastor Jenkins asked for testimonies of spiritual experiences. After a time of no responses, a young teenage girl named Florrie Evans, who had been saved just a few days earlier, stood and with a trembling voice said, "I love Jesus Christ - with all my heart." Person after person soon begin to stand and pour out their hearts to Jesus. The news of the service spread throughout the area as young people testified in other churches. With these simple words, the fires of revival ignited the great Welsh Revival of 1904-05 and soon spread to the four corners of the world.

What would it take to move our students to be so committed to Jesus Christ? Recently, I have been conducting some studies to get at the heart of this problem and discovered several areas of influence that make a difference in whether or not a student remains faithful in church attendance after he or she graduates. Here are some finding from those studies and suggestions for student ministers:

(1) Relationships – Student ministry must help adolescents in *basic personal skills* – how to meet and develop new friends, how to choose a church, how to make the transition to a new location, how to set priorities, and leading students to be *influencers, not just responders*.

(2) Discipleship – Youth ministry must *do a better job of discipleship* – teaching the basic, biblical concepts of Christianity, instilling a love and appreciation for intergenerational church relationships, building a personal commitment of faith in the lives of teenagers and helping adolescents *internalize their faith*.

(3) Meaningful Involvement - Student ministries need to spend some time in teaching youth how to *select and get personally involved in a church* that may be different from their home church. Provide opportunities for *youth to lead in ministry*.

(4) Family faith – several findings:

Moving teens toward adulthood – Parents must be equipped to *understand the transition* of their adolescent into young adulthood. Parents need help in *blessing their adolescent and freeing them* into the world of young adulthood.

Parenting style – Parents need help in *adjusting their parenting style* as their adolescent grows toward young adulthood. Parents need help in the *transition of their role from "parent" to "adult friend"* for their maturing adolescent.

Spiritual leaders in the home – This is a wake-up call for family ministry. The faithful attendance and perceived spiritual depth of parents is a major factor. We must give *practical, in-depth guidance to parents in how to be spiritual leaders* for their teens.

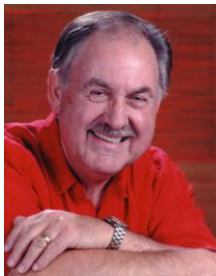
(5) Mentoring and intergeneration relationships – Churches and student ministries need to *develop a mentoring program* that matches spiritually strong adults (in addition to parents) with adolescents. An effective peer ministry program could also be helpful. These significant adults and peers can help in the transition to young adulthood.

(6) Scope of student ministry – There appears to be a gap between high school graduation and young adulthood and no one is attending to the gap. Someone needs to be the lead voice in mobilizing the resources of churches and families for the purpose of nurturing adolescents as they step over the gap into young adulthood.

I have developed a scale for measuring the potential for whether or not a student will drop out following high school. This can be useful to student ministers to know if they are on track in guiding their students toward a faith that will last beyond high school. The Lasting Faith Scale is available free of charge online at www.lastingfaithscale.com.

When we read about God’s moving in great awakenings and revivals around the world, we notice one startling, common point – most awakenings and revivals were started by youth. But the role that culture portrays of youth today is very different. The image that today’s culture paints for youth is one of self-satisfaction, unbridled thrill-seeking, and delay of any responsibility. It’s a time to “sow the wild oats” while you are young. In my study of why teens drop out after high school, more than a few said something like, “Well, they’re supposed to drop out! Don’t worry, they’ll grow up and come back to church when they get a little older.” The sad fact is that many are not coming back to church and many lives are being wasted by this ungodly attitude.

Could it be that God is holding back revival until we do a better job of preparing students for their role of leadership? Could revival be stifled because of our failure to equip and motivate families to lead their young to step up and declare their love for Jesus Christ? Could God be waiting until this generation of students remains faithful in their love of Jesus Christ “with all my heart?”



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