

RETHINKING TEEN MINISTRY: A NEW STRATEGY FOR KEEPING TEENAGERS IN
CHURCH AND IN THE FAITH

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Abstract

Christian churches are struggling to keep teenagers in church and connected to Jesus Christ. In churches around the country, some seventy percent (70%) of young Christians will either be inactive church members or fall away from the faith entirely before graduating from high school or college. Churches have tried solving this problem by using teen groups, Bible studies and rallies for high schoolers, and social events at church. But these traditional methods of ministering to teens have not stopped the bleeding. In fact, these forms of teen ministry may actually be contributing to the problem.

A different model for teen ministry is needed. Rather than taking teens out of their homes to minister to them, why not make the home a place where faith is nurtured? Instead of relying on pastors and youth leaders to turn teenagers into mature Christian adults, why not equip and empower parents, whom God wants to be the primary educators of children, to fulfill that high calling at home? In other words, the way to keep teenagers in church is to change the paradigm for teen ministry from a model that is church-based and home-supported to a model that is home-based and church-supported.

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Introduction

There's a problem in Christian churches in America. It's hard to pinpoint exactly when this problem began, but over the last few generations the problem has gotten worse. If left unchecked, this problem will have an enormous impact on the growth of Christianity in the United States of America. Young people, particularly teenagers, are leaving churches in droves.

A casual visitor to any church probably wouldn't notice this problem. This visitor would likely see several teenagers in the worship service, either sitting with their families or with a group of friends. She would probably read an announcement in the bulletin about the upcoming activities for the congregation's teen group. A monthly teen Bible study would likely be on the calendar. As far as that visitor is concerned, there is an active teen group at this congregation and plenty of teenagers in church.

The typical member of the average Christian church might be unaware that teenagers are leaving the church. This member would know about the confirmation classes for middle school students. He would know that every spring a group of new confirmands would vow to remain faithful to Jesus Christ. Perhaps this member would have a teenager of his own who comes to church, say, twice a month. This member would look around the sanctuary and see a mixture of people - families with young children, elderly couples, empty nesters, and a handful of teenagers and young adults - and the crisis of teenagers leaving church would probably never enter his mind. All would seem well.

But an active teen group in a congregation doesn't tell the whole story. Classes of new confirmands don't prove the spiritual health of teenagers. Seeing teenagers in public worship and Bible studies doesn't mean that every young person is still in the faith. Religious activity among a percentage of teenagers does not mean that teenagers as a whole are faithful. The numbers tell the real story.

The Barna Group, a leading research group that focuses on the intersection of faith and culture, has conducted numerous studies and surveys on young adults leaving churches. The results of their work paint a bleak picture of teenagers' spirituality and faith. A 2006 study found that "most Americans have a period of time during their teen years when they are actively

engaged in a church youth group. However, Barna’s tracking of young people showed that most of them had disengaged from organized religion during their twenties.”¹

Most pastors are aware of this trend, which is commonly called “confirmation syndrome.” They know that a number of their confirmands will fall away from the faith within a decade of confirmation. In fact, some clergy estimate that three-quarters of graduating high schoolers leave the church.² That number, though shockingly high, is not far from the truth. The Barna Group’s research found that “about three out of ten young people who grow up with a Christian background stay faithful to church and to faith throughout their transitions from the teen years through their twenties.”³

Those numbers are incredibly worrisome. Seventy percent (70%) of young Christians will either be inactive church members or fall away from the faith entirely before graduating from high school or college. That percentage is far too high. Granted, even just one percent would be too high, but seventy percent is absurdly high. Clearly, teenagers leaving church is a staggering problem.

The Wisconsin Synod (WELS) is not immune to this problem. In fact, the percentage of inactive young people in WELS is similar to those percentages found in the Barna Group’s national study, with between sixty and seventy percent (60-70%) of WELS young people classified as inactive.⁴ The former head of the WELS Commission on Youth Discipleship found that only about thirty-five percent (35%) of confirmands, by the time they hit nineteen years of age, attend public worship as often as twice a month.⁵ Even more frightening is how quickly the “confirmation syndrome” sets in. Four out of ten members of this year’s confirmation class will

¹ Barna Group, “12 Most Significant Spiritual Findings of 2006,” *Barna Research*. Published December 20, 2006. <https://www.barna.org/barna-update/faith-spirituality/141-barna-lists-the-12-most-significant-religious-findings#.UoP8lihER8s>.

² Dan Kimball, *They Like Jesus But Not The Church: Insights from Emerging Generations*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 17.

³ Barna Group, “5 Myths About Young Adult Church Dropouts,” *Barna Research*. Published November 16, 2011. <https://www.barna.org/barna-update/millennials/534-five-myths-about-young-adult-church-dropouts#.UoP8OyhER8s>.

⁴ Joel C. Gerlach, “What Can Be Done to Make Our Children Active Church Members?”, 1. Place and date of presentation unknown. <http://wlsessays.net/files/GerlachChildren.pdf>.

⁵ Gerald F. Kastens, “Retaining Our Youth,” 1. Date of publication unknown. <https://connect.wels.net/AOM/ps/youth/teenministry/Documents/Retaining%20Our%20Youth.aspx>.

become inactive by the first Sunday after Memorial Day.⁶ It takes less than three months after confirmation for forty percent (40%) of WELS teenagers to become inactive members. These statistics are shocking. They clearly reveal a sizable problem in churches around the country and show that WELS is not exempt from this issue.

Many faith leaders, whether clergy or laity, have minimized this church dropout problem by assuming that young adults will come back to church when they get older, especially when they have children.⁷ The thought was that they “better get some Jesus for their kids.” However, this does not appear to be happening. In 2010, the Barna Group studied the question of whether or not having children led to increased church attendance and religious activity. This study found that fifty percent (50%) of parents reported that having children did not influence their connection to a church. Only one-sixth (17%) of parents said that having children helped them reconnect with a church after a long period of inactivity. While this is what many pastors and youth leaders are counting on, it’s not happening at the expected rates. On the positive side, one in five parents in this study (20%) reported that having children actually made them more active in church. The lesson to be learned here is that church leaders simply cannot expect all of their inactive teenagers, or even a majority of them, to return to church several years down the road. As the study shows, fewer than four in ten of these “leavers” come back to church at all, with just over half of them taking an active role in church.⁸ These numbers might give a small sense of relief to church leaders, but do little to minimize the enormity of the problem of teenagers leaving church.

Across the board, WELS churches are losing their teenagers. The problem is large, and it is not going to go away in the near future. That much is clear. But what is to be done? How can WELS churches stop the bleeding? Is there anything that churches and church leaders can do to reverse this trend? That’s what this thesis will examine. It will explore the reasons teenagers are leaving church, debunking popular myths along the way. It will dig down to the heart of the

⁶ Ibid., 1.

⁷ Barna Group, “5 Myths About Young Adult Church Dropouts.”

⁸ Barna Group, “Does Having Children Make Parents More Active Churchgoers?”, *Barna Research*. Published May 24, 2010. <https://www.barna.org/family-kids-articles/391-does-having-children-make-parents-more-active-churchgoers>.

problem to find a solution that works. The proposed solution of this thesis involves parents and pastors working together to make a teen ministry that has a lasting impact. Primarily, this thesis will show that the answer for keeping teenagers in church lies not in the church, but in the home. In other words, the way to keep teenagers in church is to change the paradigm for teen ministry from a model that is church-based and home-supported to a model that is home-based and church-supported.

Literature Review

There is no shortage of material on this timely topic of teenagers leaving the church. Most of the existing literature on this subject deals with the broader topic of teen spirituality and religiosity, with different articles, books, and papers handling the subject from various angles.

Some of the literature examines the reasons behind the mass exodus of teens from church. *UnChristian*, a book by a lead researcher at the Barna Group, looks specifically at young people from ages sixteen to twenty-nine and examines that which motivates teenagers and young adults to drift away from the church. Working on the basis of extensive and thorough surveys, author David Kinnaman shows the perspective of those who leave the church. The Barna Group has had a long-standing practice of doing similar studies, which can be accessed via their website. Among the more helpful studies were ones entitled “5 Myths About Young Adult Church Dropouts,” “Six Reasons Young Christians Are Leaving Church,” and “4 Tough Aspects of Spiritual Growth.”

Other resources address the spiritual attitudes and needs of today’s teenagers. *Disconnected*, by Chap and Dee Clark, offers insight and advice on guiding teenagers in their spiritual development from childhood through the mid-twenties. *Disconnected* approaches this subject from the unique perspective of parents who are also youth workers. *Raising Kids to Love Jesus* is another book that helps parents understand their children’s and teenagers’ spiritual needs. Authors H. Norman Wright and Gary J. Oliver also provide practical advice and tips for how parents can meet those spiritual needs of their children and help them remain strong in the faith. *Adolescent Spirituality* is an older book whose value is found in comparing the needs of today’s teenagers with the needs of teenagers a generation ago. While today’s teenagers live in a

world vastly different from how it was three decades ago, *Adolescent Spirituality* shows that there are some inherent spiritual and social needs that don't change, and that addressing those needs is a key component of an effective teen ministry.

A significant number of resources focus on the important role Christian parents play in developing their child's faith. *The Family*, by Jack and Judith Balswick, use information gleaned from recent studies to highlight the important role parents play in developing their children's faith and the necessity of "launching" them into a more mature faith. *Raising Kids to Love Jesus*, mentioned and cited previously, is another excellent resource in the study of the enormous impact parents have on their children. Wright and Oliver hit the proverbial nail on the head as they meticulously prove that parents play the most important role in helping their child grow in faith. *Family-Based Youth Ministry*, by Mark DeVries, is another fantastic resource for pastors and youth workers. It heavily emphasizes the importance of the Christian family, both the immediate family and the extended church family.

Highlighting the importance of Christian parents and families is not a new practice. *Luther's House of Learning* shows the importance that the sixteenth century reformers, including Martin Luther, placed on parents. *Luther on Education*, a reader and summary of Luther's writings on the topic of educating children, provides compelling insight from the great reformer. Author F.V.N. Painter's thoughtfully chosen excerpts from Luther's written works cover the main points Luther makes on the religious and secular training of children. Both of these books serve to drive home the point that Christian parents are an indispensable part of the Christian upbringing of a child, whether that child lived five centuries or five years ago.

Still other papers and books look to the practical aspect of keeping teenagers in church. "Keeping Kids in the Kingdom" focuses on the basic, yet often ignored, pastoral strategies for keeping young people connected to church. This essay by Mark G. Zarling reminds pastors that it's not their job to strengthen faith in teenagers. It's their job to give the Holy Spirit opportunities to work through the means of grace. "Helping Our Students Grow to Christian Maturity While They Are With Us and After They Leave," by Richard D. Balge, recognizes that there is no "quick fix" to the problem of teenagers leaving the church, but offers several practical ideas which can gradually help solve the problem. Just like Zarling, Balge also places a strong

reliance on the means of grace as the way to change hearts. “Expanding the Nurture of High School Age Youth,” by David Kuske, outlines a concrete plan and course of study to help teenagers continue to grow in faith, thus limiting the impact of “confirmation syndrome.”

Finally, two books stand out from the rest. These two books approach teen and youth ministry from a different perspective. *The Family Friendly Church*, by Ben Freudenburg, and *Family-Based Youth Ministry*, by Mark DeVries, both challenge the *status quo* in teen ministry. They recognize the deficiencies of a “traditional” teen ministry that is church-based and program-focused. Both authors are bold enough to offer a plan to change teen ministry for the better, and both have implemented their strategies in their own churches. Their ideas are thought-provoking and cutting edge, and every pastor and teen minister should read these books.

Part One: What Are Teenagers Leaving?

The numbers are shocking. Between sixty and seventy percent (60-70%) of teenagers and young adults are leaving church. But are these teenagers losing their faith, or are they simply not connected to a church? Have they fallen from the faith, or have they just disconnected from a particular church or congregation?

While some tend to describe the departure of teens from church in alarmist tones, claiming that confirmands and high schoolers are losing their faith, the research indicates that teenagers tend to leave church behind, but not their faith. But it’s not a matter of black and white. Teenagers do not fall neatly into one of two camps: those who lose their faith or those who are active church members. The reality is more nuanced. In general, there are three distinct patterns of these church dropouts. The Barna Group has labeled these patterns as prodigals, nomads, and exiles.⁹

Prodigals are those young people who were Christian at some point but have lost their faith. Thankfully, this is the smallest percentage of church dropouts. Only one in nine young people fall into this category. Nomads are those young Christians who have left the institutional

⁹ Barna Group, “5 Myths About Young Adult Church Dropouts.”

church but are still believers.¹⁰ While they still call themselves Christians, they are far less active in church. In fact, many of them have become “lost” to church participation. Roughly forty percent (40%) of those who leave church fall into this category. Exiles are the final category of leavers. People in this group feel lost and stranded in the murky ground between what they call a “church culture” and a society which they want to impact. They want to follow Jesus while connecting with the world around them, but they have drifted away from church as they struggle to find their desired middle ground. Approximately twenty percent (20%) of young people who left the church find themselves in this category.¹¹ The results of this research are clear. Young people are leaving the church, but they tend to remain believers, at least for a while.

This conclusion applies to the WELS, too. As part of a 2005 study entitled, “Why Young People Leave WELS,” an independent researcher found that “the overwhelming share of leavers are not becoming atheists; nine in ten claim to be Christian.”¹² Taking these leavers at their confession, we assume that they still remain part of the Holy Christian Church. Interestingly, this same study found that almost half of the leavers did not leave WELS. They simply switched to another WELS congregation. Twenty-five percent (25%) no longer have a place of worship, and one in ten have switched to a non-WELS Lutheran church or another denomination. Those young people who leave WELS tend to fall into the same category as those who leave other Christian churches: they leave the church, but not their faith.

This careful research by the Barna Group and the WELS¹³ helps spiritual leaders breathe a little easier. While no church leader is happy to see someone leaving church, it’s a small

¹⁰ To put it in theological terms, we might say that nomads have left the church (lower case “c”) but are still in the Church (upper case “C”). They might not be a member of a visible church, but remain a part of the invisible Church, the Holy Christian Church, of which every true believer is a part. They might not be on the membership list of a particular congregation, but their names are still written in the book of life (Revelation 20:12,15).

¹¹ Barna Group, “5 Myths About Young Adult Church Dropouts.”

¹² Bret Goodman, “Why Young People Leave WELS: A Summary of Findings from the WELS Commission on Youth Discipleship National Survey of Pastors and Young Adults,” 5. Published in 2005. [https://connect.wels.net/AOM/ps/youth/researchresources/Documents/Why%20Young%20People%20Leave%20WELS%20\(Summary\).pdf](https://connect.wels.net/AOM/ps/youth/researchresources/Documents/Why%20Young%20People%20Leave%20WELS%20(Summary).pdf)

¹³ As noted previously, full studies and much more research on this topic can be found at the Barna Group’s website, <https://www.barna.org/>. The full summary of the study entitled “Why Young People Leave WELS: Summary” can be found online at [https://connect.wels.net/AOM/ps/youth/researchresources/Documents/Why%20Young%20People%20Leave%20WELS%20\(Summary\).pdf](https://connect.wels.net/AOM/ps/youth/researchresources/Documents/Why%20Young%20People%20Leave%20WELS%20(Summary).pdf).

comfort to know that a leaver is, in all likelihood, saying “No” to a church but not saying “No” to Jesus. So why all the fuss about young people leaving church? If young people are still believing, why does it matter if they leave church? Is the membership list of a visible church more important than the list found in the book of life? Can’t a person grow in faith without the church?

That is a reason that leavers often give for disconnecting from a church. “Only one out of every five self-identified Christians (21%) believes that spiritual maturity requires a vital connection to a community of faith.”¹⁴ Even fewer people believe that spiritual maturity is meant to be developed within the context of a local church or community.¹⁵ There is an attitude prevalent among leavers that says, “I can do this myself. I don’t need anyone else to help me be strong in my faith, and I sure don’t need a church in order to be a mature Christian.”

The problem with such an attitude is that it doesn’t line up with the scriptural encouragements to learn and grow with other believers. The letter to the Hebrews says, “Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another - and all the more as we see the Day approaching” (Hebrews 10:25)¹⁶. The “I don’t need a church” attitude is the exact opposite of the biblical attitude, which David characterizes when he writes, “I rejoiced with those who said to me, ‘Let us go to the house of the LORD’” (Psalm 122:1).

Another issue that surfaces when young people leave the church is the weakening of faith. While faith and spirituality remain hot and timely issues, American Christians tend to be, in contrast, spiritually lukewarm. Among the vast majority of Americans, especially among leavers, “very limited effort is devoted to spiritual growth.”¹⁷ Without the accountability system that a church family provides, the Old Adam will get the best of leavers. Satan will provide activities and issues that seem more important than growing in faith, and without anyone to

¹⁴ Barna Group, “4 Tough Aspects of Spiritual Growth,” *Barna Research*. Published September 13, 2011. <https://www.barna.org/barna-update/faith-spirituality/524-self-described-christians-dominate-america-but-wrestle-with-four-aspects-of-spiritual-depth#.UoP7pChER8s>.

¹⁵ Barna Group, “12 Most Significant Spiritual Findings of 2006.”

¹⁶ All Scripture, unless otherwise noted, is taken from *New International Version*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984).

¹⁷ Barna Group, “12 Most Significant Spiritual Findings of 2006.”

encourage them or hold them accountable, leavers will easily fall into those dangerous snares. Without Christian friends encouraging them to attend church, and without a pastor or church elder using church discipline to bring them back to the fold, the faith of leavers is extremely likely to stagnate or shrink. The church provides the necessary hammering of the Old Adam and the encouragement to the New Man that every believer needs.

These are great reasons to bring leavers back to church. But the most important reason is this: believers must be connected to the means of grace, and church attendance guarantees a regular exposure to those means. God has revealed that he creates and strengthens faith only through the means of grace, that is, the gospel in Word and sacrament.¹⁸ Paul writes, “Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the Word of Christ” (Romans 10:17). The Word of God in all its forms is the one thing needful for believers to stay in the faith. Churches provide opportunities to hear the Word of God and receive the Lord’s Supper on a regular basis.

The danger with those who leave the church is that they aren’t always regularly in contact with the means of grace. Granted, some leavers faithfully and regularly read their Bibles and thus grow in faith, but those people are few and far between. Consider these statements from the Barna Group’s research:

- “Less than one out of every five self-identified Christians (18%) claims to be totally committed to investing in their own spiritual development.”¹⁹
- “Four out of ten self-identified Christian adults (39%) have participated in a combination of three “normal” religious activities in the past week (i.e., attending church services, praying, reading the Bible).”²⁰ (If you take church attendance out of that equation, the percentage of those connected to the means of grace plummets).

¹⁸ Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Senior Dogmatics Notes, Mequon, WI: Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, 37. While God certainly could create faith apart from the means of grace, the Bible only reveals that God works through the means of grace.

Luther’s words are very appropriate here: “ Outwardly God deals with us through the oral word of the gospel and through material signs, that is, baptism and the sacrament of the altar. Inwardly he deals with us through the Holy Spirit, faith, and other gifts. But whatever their measure or order, the outward factors should and must precede. The inward experience follows and is effected by the outward. God has determined to give the inward to no one except through the outward. For he wants to give no one the Spirit or faith outside of the outward Word and sign instituted by him, as he says in Luke 16:29, ‘Let them hear Moses and the prophets.’” (LW 40, p 146, quoted in WLS Senior Dogmatics Notes, 40).

¹⁹ Barna Group, “4 Tough Aspects of Spiritual Growth.”

²⁰ Ibid.

- “Although large majorities of the public claim to be ‘deeply spiritual’ and say that their religious faith is ‘very important’ in their life, only 15% of those who regularly attend a Christian church ranked their relationship with God as the top priority in their life.”²¹ (That percentage is not likely to go up if one were to survey non-church goers).
- “People do not have an accurate view of themselves when it comes to spirituality. American Christians are not as devoted to their faith as they like to believe. They have positive feelings about the importance of faith, but their faith is rarely the focal point of their life or a critical factor in their decision-making. The fact that few people take the time to evaluate their spiritual journey, or to develop benchmarks or indicators of their spiritual health, facilitates a distorted view of the prominence and purity of faith in their life.”²²

The takeaway from these statements is that the vast majority of people do not give their relationship with God the time and attention it deserves. The unfortunate conclusion is that leavers, if they are anything like the people surveyed by the Barna Group, are unlikely to maintain consistent contact with the means of grace.

WELS’s own independent study found that to be true, as well. When the research team asked people how they had stayed connected to the Lord after leaving WELS, the dominant response was “personal prayer.”²³ The majority of WELS leavers still know their Savior, and for this we give thanks. But there is a problem with this approach. Prayer is not a means of grace. Prayer is an expression on our part of a desire for grace from God, but only the means of grace are the instruments which God uses to convey and confer his grace on us.²⁴

Most of the WELS leavers still attend church, and about two-thirds of them attend once a month or more. But they tend to receive the Lord’s Supper infrequently. Less than one-third receive the sacrament on a monthly basis. Personal Bible reading happens with about thirty percent (30%) of leavers.²⁵ The upshot of these statistics is that the leavers’ exposure to the Word tends to be low. When the means of grace are not used regularly, faith will stagnate or slowly die off.

²¹ Barna Group, “12 Most Significant Spiritual Findings of 2006.”

²² Ibid.

²³ Goodman, “Why Young People Leave WELS: A Summary,” 5.

²⁴ Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Senior Dogmatics Notes, 53.

²⁵ Goodman, “Why Young People Leave WELS: A Summary,” 4-5.

That is why pastors and church leaders are so concerned with bringing these young people back to church. It's not about numbers. It's not about filling the pews on Sunday morning. It's about strengthening faith through the means of grace. It's about doing whatever they can to put these teenagers in contact with the one thing that can strengthen and keep them in the one true faith - the gospel in Word and sacrament.

In summary, teenagers don't seem to be leaving the faith; they are simply leaving the church. However, leaving the church makes growth in faith more difficult, so we strive to bring these young people back to church to keep them in contact with the means of grace. In order to bring them back, we must first examine why they are leaving the church in the first place.

Part Two: Why Teenagers Are Leaving Church

There is a dreary refrain of reasons why young people are leaving the church. It goes something like this: "There is the breakdown of families, the confused values of parents, the false goal...the intellectual questioning and doubt...youthful rebellion...freedom from parental control...small faith, ill-formed faith, immature faith..."²⁶ Some may add to this list with other reasons. "Kids lose their faith when they go off to public colleges and universities." "They leave because they don't know what God's Word says." "Rebelling against authority is a normal part of growing up." But are these actually the reasons that young people and teenagers are leaving the church? Which of them are true? Which of them are myths?

Myths About Teenagers Leaving the Church

The Barna Group's research proves particularly helpful here. A study entitled "Five Myths about Young Adult Church Dropouts" debunks as myths several of the "traditional" reasons for youth leaving the church. The first myth is that dropping out of church is just a natural part of the maturation process for young adults. If this myth were true, then every young person would leave the church during their adolescent years. While a large share of youth do leave church, many do not. In addition, leaving the church is a fairly recent phenomenon. The

²⁶ Richard D. Balge, "Helping Our Students Grow to Christian Maturity While They Are With Us and After They Leave," 1. Presented to the Wisconsin State High School Teachers' Conference, October 23, 1980. <http://wlsessays.net/files/BalgeStudents.pdf>

“Boomer” generation was the first generation to leave church in such great numbers.²⁷ Granted, there have always been people abandoning the church, but significant numbers of leavers began with the Boomers. During the first half of the 1900s, before the Boomers came around, young adults were not less church-ed than the older adults.²⁸ So leaving church is not simply a part of growing up. There is more to it than the maturation process.

Perhaps the culprit is the public universities. Many have complained about the number of Christian young men and women who are sacrificed on the altar of the public academy. The argument is that if you put a young, still-maturing Christian in a godless environment where professors teach contrary to the Scriptures and the Bible and faith are attacked repeatedly, then 1 Corinthians 15:33 kicks in, and “bad company corrupts good character.” The reality of this argument cannot be ignored. College does play a role in the faith journeys of young Christians, and many colleges are antagonistic to faith at worst or neutral about it at best. But to blame college for today’s young church dropouts is too simplistic. The Barna Group’s research shows that most church leavers are emotionally and spiritually disconnected, though not necessarily physically disconnected, from their church before their sixteenth birthday.²⁹ If the bulk of dropouts have already left the church by their junior year of high school, college can hardly shoulder the full blame for those who leave the church.³⁰

If the public universities are not to blame for the high rate of church dropouts, then perhaps the problem must be more general. Some seize upon the growing rate of biblical illiteracy as the main cause of church dropouts. Young people don’t know what God says in his Word, so how can they stand firm in a faith when they lack the foundational knowledge?

²⁷ The “Boomers” are people born between 1946 and 1964. They were typically children of “the greatest generation,” those who fought in the second World War.

²⁸ Barna Group, “5 Myths About Young Adult Church Dropouts.”

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Interestingly, the lead researcher for this study noted that the problem of church dropouts happening during college “arises from the inadequacy of preparing young Christians for life beyond youth group. ... Only a small minority of young Christians has been taught to think about matters of faith, calling, and culture. Fewer than one out of five have any idea how the Bible ought to inform their scholastic and professional interests. And most lack adult mentors or meaningful friendships with older Christians who can guide them through the inevitable questions that arise during the course of their studies. In other words, the university setting does not *cause* the disconnect; it exposes the shallow-faith problem of many young disciples.” These two important points - the shallow faith syndrome and the lack of Christian mentors - will be addressed later in this paper.

Without a firm foundation, faith quickly shrinks or dies. The results of the Barna Group's research on this question is surprising. One would expect the younger generation of believers to know less than their older counterparts, yet Barna found very few knowledge gaps and differences in beliefs between these generations. What they found instead is that "the broader culture seems to be losing its collective understanding of Christian teachings. In other words, Christianity is no longer 'autopilot' for the nation's youngest citizens."³¹ As a result, people are becoming increasingly indifferent or downright hostile to Christian beliefs. The problem, therefore, isn't biblical illiteracy. The problem is what biblical illiteracy causes - a growing animosity towards Christianity.³² So while some church leaders blame biblical illiteracy for the growing number of teenage dropouts, the lack of biblical knowledge is not the reason young people are leaving church.

True Reasons Teenagers Leave Church

So if these proposed reasons for the mass exodus of mid to late adolescents are false, what are the true, core reasons? After an extensive perusal of the literature, surveys, and studies, several reasons young people left the church surfaced repeatedly. One reason, perhaps *the* reason behind church dropouts, did not appear in the literature, but it must be mentioned. This reason is so obvious to any knowledgeable Christian that it is easy to overlook. Young people leave the church because of the Christian's three biggest enemies: the devil, the world, and the sinful flesh.

The devil is hard at work among believers, as he should be. He already holds unbelievers in his grasp, so why spend his efforts on them? He is looking to increase the number of people who will spend eternity with him in hell, so he is going to attack believers. He sows doubt and cynicism among the immature believers. He builds up walls of pride and self-reliance. He erects haughty minds and proud hearts that think they do not need God. The devil is a powerful being, and is surely at work among those who leave.

³¹ Barna Group, "5 Myths About Young Adult Church Dropouts."

³² Biblical illiteracy remains a serious concern for spiritual leaders. The problem of how a person can stand firm in the faith without a base of knowledge is a problem well worth considering, but is beyond the scope of this paper.

On top of Satan's guiles and tricks is the pressure from a sinful world. The "hollow and deceptive philosophies" that the apostle Paul talked about, which "depend on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ" (Colossians 2:8), have permeated every aspect of our society. Over the airwaves, on television, in print media, and in conversations around the world one can see the force an un-Christian world exerts. Like a crushing weight, the pressures of this world move inexorably forward, pushing relentlessly against even the strongest Christians. The world pressures believers to ignore the truth of God's Word, to rationalize away sin, and to forsake the faith. The temptation to be like Demas, who loved the world and deserted the apostle Paul as he languished in prison (2 Timothy 4:10), can be overwhelming. Wrecked as it is by sin, is it any wonder that this world plays a sizable role in the church dropout phenomenon?

Finally, each Christian must constantly wage war against his own sinful flesh. As the apostle Paul wrote, "The sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so" (Romans 8:7). Such a heart drives after sin. It sets itself against God and actively runs away from him. It seeks out sin and cares nothing for the teachings of the Bible. When the walk of faith becomes difficult, the sinful flesh uses that as an excuse to leave God behind for a way that seems easier and pleasures that seem greater. Above all, the powerful sinful flesh easily distorts the Word of God. Rather than feeling the cut and sting of the law, the sinful heart becomes self-righteous and complacent. Instead of rejoicing in the healing the gospel brings, the sinful nature becomes bored with it.³³ Such attitudes are the result of the sinful flesh working overtime, and these thoughts and attitudes play a large role in the church dropout phenomenon.

To ignore the power of the devil, the world, and the sinful flesh is foolishness. This essay proceeds on the assumption that these three enemies play the most significant role in causing young people to leave the church. But their role is not directly seen, for they work in various forms. These "masks" of the devil, world, and flesh are what researchers, pastors, and teen ministers see as the tangible reasons behind the exodus of today's youth from church. It's these various forms to which we now turn our attention.

³³ Balge, "Helping Our Students Grow to Christian Maturity," 2.

The first mask of the devil, world, and flesh is a postmodern attitude, which believes there is no such thing as absolute truth. The only truth is what each person thinks is truth. Scripture, which is absolute truth, is summarily rejected by a postmodern culture. Claims that Christianity thinks it has the only truth are growing, and those claims turn people off to Christianity.³⁴ They do not want others to view them as intolerant or close-minded, so they resort to a smorgasbord approach to religion. They take pieces from one religion and parts of another. A person's spiritual life then becomes an eclectic mix of various beliefs and faith systems. As teenagers develop critical thinking skills, this approach to religion is greatly appealing to them. As they leave the coattails of their parents' faith and think through religious matters on their own, they latch onto what makes sense to them. They leave behind many of the incomprehensible truths of Christianity. That puts them on a slippery slope. Once you dismiss one truth of Scripture, what is keeping you from dismissing more?

A related reason for youth leaving the church is the superficial Christianity they experience. Pastor Paul Kelm summed it up well when he wrote, "[Young people] sense a shallow spirituality in the church: Bible study that is only proof-texting; evangelism that is only high-sounding words; underdeveloped Christian fellowship that lacks commitment."³⁵ In the eyes of many leavers, the church lacks depth and relevancy. Sadly, according to one-fifth of a group surveyed by the Barna Group, God seems to be missing from the church experience.³⁶

They're on to something, aren't they? The church is about transforming lives by the power of the gospel, then encouraging and empowering people to live out that transformation. But is that how the church operates? Are God and faith the center of people's lives, or are they the center of their lives for one hour on Sunday morning? Is the church focused on enriching and strengthening the faith of its people, or is it satisfied with filling a minimalist role in shaping faith? Are people passionate about sharing the gospel and winning souls for Jesus, or are they

³⁴ Richard L. Gurgel, "Meeting the Needs of the 21st Century Family: Raising Spiritually Mature Adults in a Postmodern World," 5. Presented to the Cyprus Pastors' Conference in Gainesville, FL, September 21, 1999. <http://wlsessays.net/files/GurgelPostmodernism.pdf>.

³⁵ "Confront," by Paul Kelm, quoted in Balge, "Helping Our Students Grow to Christian Maturity," 2.

³⁶ Barna Group, "Six Reasons Why Young Christians are Leaving Church," *Barna Research*. Published September 28, 2011. <https://www.barna.org/barna-update/teens-nextgen/528-six-reasons-young-christians-leave-church#.UoP-ayhER8v>.

focused on adding names to the membership roster? Young people notice these priorities in the church. When they feel like a nameless, faceless number instead of a valued member of the church family, they leave. When they see a church that does not practice what it preaches, they leave. When they compare the depths of Scripture's teachings with the shallow sermons and empty Bible classes they hear, they become frustrated and leave. When they do not hear what God says, they leave. When they hear preachers change the truths of Scripture in order to sound more "relevant" and "in step with the times," they recognize the shallow Christianity and leave. They want depth of teaching and faith. When they do not see that in a church, they leave.

The WELS is not immune to such tendencies. God be praised that the pastors and leaders in WELS congregations hold firmly to the truths of Scripture, just as their forebears did. But several of the questions in the previous paragraph are issues in many WELS churches. Is faith the central focus of the members' lives? Are we more concerned with numbers, or do we truly care about the people sitting in the pews? WELS churches, too, must be on the lookout for shallow Christianity and empty spirituality.

This concept of shallow Christianity has many offshoots. Some young leavers say that the posture of the church has become too defensive and impersonal.³⁷ Rather than seeking to understand those with different beliefs, the church seems quick to condemn them. Instead of meeting non-Christians where they are at spiritually, the church hastens to label them as "hell bound." Young people notice that the church is not "quick to listen" (James 1:19), but quick to condemn. In the eyes of young church dropouts, "Christians demonize everything outside of the church."³⁸

Closely related to the charges that the church is too defensive and impersonal are claims of hypocrisy and a judgmental mentality among Christians. Church leavers see this primarily in the arenas of science and sex.³⁹ Christianity is seen as antagonistic to science, denying the "truths" of science because they hold to beliefs that are incompatible with new scientific discoveries. When it comes to issues of sex and sexuality, Christians are often viewed as

³⁷ "Confront," by Paul Kelm, quoted in Balge, "Helping Our Students Grow to Christian Maturity," 1.

³⁸ Barna Group, "Six Reasons Why Young Christians are Leaving Church."

³⁹ Ibid.

hypocrites. They preach abstinence and purity, but do not live up to those standards in their own lives. When young people see a church filled with such contradictions, they don't recognize that believers are both saints and sinners who will make mistakes. They don't recognize that people go to church to hear law and gospel proclaimed because they need to hear that so desperately. They see a church filled with "hypocrites" who are "judgmental," and they leave.⁴⁰

Another offshoot of shallow Christianity is the perception of "boring worship." In general, young people are tired of the routine and repetition in public worship.⁴¹ Using the same worship forms week after week, month after month, quickly becomes old news for them. They want more interesting services, less repetition, more contemporary styles of worship, and better music. Interestingly, "[young people] are not looking for a worship upheaval; they simply want more variety and less monotony/routine. While tradition is very important to these young adults, they want it wrapped in some more uplifting and contemporary approaches."⁴² Too many pastors are trying hard not to be an entertainer on Sunday mornings, which is a fine goal. But in trying to avoid one extreme, they have swung to another. Now they are stuck in the same old worship forms, scared to try something new because they might be perceived as "the Sunday morning variety show" which has abandoned the traditional styles of worship. Young people want the happy medium. They want continuity in worship, but not mindless repetition. They want new songs and music, but also enjoy many traditional hymns. When they are in a church that does not meet their needs and desires in public worship, they leave.

One of the most commonly cited reasons for the high rate of church dropouts is the "breakdown of the family." That statement, while generic, captures part of the problem. The traditional family setup of father, mother, and children is not the norm it once was. There has been a rapid escalation in the divorce rate, single-parent families are more common, and an increasing number of parents are spending more time in the workplace than at home. Such households tend to be less stable and less consistent than the traditional family unit. In general,

⁴⁰ There are several other offshoots of the "shallow Christianity syndrome" which the scope of this paper prevents us from discussing. For an eye-opening study and thoughtful analysis of this topic, read David Kinnaman's book, *UnChristian*. That book's publishing information is found in the bibliography of this paper.

⁴¹ Both the online survey and the focus group of the study "Why Young People Leave the WELS" had a high number of responses indicating boredom with public worship.

⁴² Goodman, "Why Young People Leave WELS: A Summary," 7.

these kinds of homes are more difficult to raise children who love Jesus and will cling to him even through the turbulent adolescent years. In that sense, the breakdown of the family unit does contribute to the problem of young people leaving the church.⁴³

The bigger issue here is not the breakdown of the traditional family unit; it's the lack of spiritual influence that the family exerts, no matter how the family is put together. The family's influence on a child is the single biggest factor in their spiritual growth and development. A study by the Search Institute, entitled "Youth in Protestant Churches," stated that "a parent's positive influence on a child's faith development dwarfs all other influences."⁴⁴ A study of adults and youth in the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod (LCMS) noted the important role families play in shaping the physical, intellectual, emotional, social, and psychological development of children. The study went on to say, "But sometimes we forget that the family is just as important in the area of spiritual or faith development."⁴⁵ Families have a profound and far-reaching effect on the spiritual health of their children. When families do not have a positive influence, the children of those families tend to leave the church.

The research is clear and conclusive: far and away, parents are the biggest influence on their children's spiritual lives. After years of experience with youth ministry and a sabbatical to study the impact of Christian parents on their children, youth minister Ben Freudenburg formulated this thesis: "Parents are the primary Christian educators in the church, and the family is the God-ordained institution for building faith in young people and for passing faith on from one generation to the next."⁴⁶ This concept is the reverse of what typically happens in churches. Churches usually take the lead in Christian education and parents support that work. But that model for education ignores the fact that children learn from and model themselves after the people with whom they have the most contact - parents. Two experts in Christian parenting and

⁴³ H. Norman Wright and Gary J. Oliver, *Raising Kids to Love Jesus*, (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1999), 232-233.

⁴⁴ Ben Freudenburg with Rick Lawrence, *The Family Friendly Church* (Loveland, CO: Group Publishing, Inc., 1998), 1.

⁴⁵ Peter L. Benson, Ph.D., Eugene C. Roehlkepartain; and I. Shelby Andress, *Congregations at Crossroads: A National Study of Adults and Youth in the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod*, quoted in Ben Freudenburg, *The Family Friendly Church*, 17.

⁴⁶ Freudenburg, *The Family Friendly Church*, 10.

families, H. Norman Wright and Gary J. Oliver, state that “God designed the family as the crucible in which the reality of the person of the living God is to be both taught (through formal education) and caught (by the example of the parents’ lives).”⁴⁷ Parents have the primary responsibility when it comes to training their children in matters of faith and spirituality. The church is there to provide support and assist the parents however they can.

The problem is that many parents are not fulfilling that responsibility. The church can only do so much. It is difficult, in what amounts to very limited time each week, for churches to be successful in retaining young people when parents are not encouraging their children to stay active in church. It’s hard for the truths of Scripture to “stick” when parents are not reinforcing those truths at home. It’s nearly impossible to show that God and faith are the highest priorities in life when parents don’t make the Word of God an important part of daily living. Without the important work and influence of Christian parents, a child will be unprepared to come face to face with all the worldly reasons to leave church.

When parents don’t teach scriptural truths at home and don’t model what it means to be a child of God, the likelihood that their children will leave church increases dramatically. Of the young people who left WELS, sixty-three percent of them (63%) said that God’s Word was shared in their homes “occasionally” or “never.” Church attendance among this group and their parents was occasional, averaging just under two visits per month.⁴⁸ Their parents did not make the Word of God a priority, and their children “caught” that attitude towards spiritual matters. As these children became teenagers, that attitude turned into action as they left the church.

A study by the Search Institute found four particular family experiences most closely tied to greater faith maturity in adolescents and teenagers. These four experiences are:

- Talking with their mother about faith
- Talking with their father about faith
- Frequent family devotions and prayers

⁴⁷ Wright and Oliver, *Raising Kids to Love Jesus*, 26.

⁴⁸ Goodman, “Why Young People Leave WELS: A Summary,” 4.

- Family projects which put faith into action, i.e., helping others⁴⁹

The common thread connecting these experiences is that they all happen within the context of the Christian family. Notice that these experiences, which do not take large amounts of time or effort, are more valuable than mountain top experiences such as mission trips, youth retreats, teen rallies, and even outings with a teen group. It is not so much *what* is done that matters; what matters is *with whom* it is done. The Christian family plays a unique role in faith development, for it is the only lifelong nurturing structure with “staying power,” that is, the ability to make the truths of the Bible remain with kids long after they become teenagers.

But the problem is that these experiences are not happening, or at least are not happening as regularly as they should. If they were happening more frequently, the dropout problem would not be such a widespread issue. When families don’t talk about faith, when they don’t share devotional time together, when they don’t bare their souls before God and each other in prayer, the power of the family is neutralized. When parents let go of the reins, so to speak, their children are likely to leave the church later in life. In fact, Freudenburg says, “If parents aren’t integrated into kids’ faith development, it’s a miracle if their young people continue in the life of the church after confirmation.”⁵⁰

This is the biggest reason why teenagers are leaving the church. Christian families, and especially parents, are not fulfilling their God-ordained role of serving as the primary spiritual caregivers and teachers for their children. But we simply cannot lay the full blame on parents. God gives them the great responsibility of telling the next generation the praiseworthy deeds of the Lord (Psalm 78:4). But God never intended for parents to accomplish this vital task on their own. The church is there to assist families in raising children to know and love Jesus. The church is there to reinforce, enhance, and build upon the teaching parents are doing at home and in their daily living. But the church is not doing that, especially for teenagers.

⁴⁹ Peter L. Benson and Carolyn H. Elkin, “Effective Christian Education: A National Study of Protestant Congregations - a Summary Report on Faith, Loyalty, and Congregational Life,” quoted in Mark DeVries, *Family-Based Youth Ministry*, (Downer’s Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 84. This study was conducted in 1990. A 1995 study entitled *Congregations at Crossroads: A National Study of Adults and Youth in the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod* (cited above and quoted in *The Family Friendly Church*, by Ben Freudenburg), found these same four experiences to be the most essential to strong faith development in children and teenagers.

⁵⁰ Freudenburg, *The Family Friendly Church*, 20.

“Wait a minute!” some might cry. “The church *is* doing all those things. The church has public worship for the whole family, teen Bible classes, and a teen group with fun outings and service projects. In many churches there’s a Christian peer group for our teenagers. Larger churches even have a pastor whose focus is on youth and family ministry. With all of that activity specifically designed for teens, how can you say that the church isn’t doing its part to support parents as they raise Christian teenagers?”

But isn’t that precisely the point? With all of its church-sponsored and church-centered activities for teenagers, hasn’t the church been taking the focus off of strong Christian families and placing more importance on a “successful” teen ministry? Instead of focusing on parents as the primary Christian educators of their children, the church has become the primary educator. Instead of encouraging, supporting, and assisting parents, the church has taken over the parents’ role in shaping faith. Freudenburg says, “Over the years, this vision [of parents being the primary Christian educators in the church] has been lost in a program-centered church culture in which parents find themselves on the sidelines instead of in the game, shaping their children’s faith and lives.”⁵¹

The church’s takeover of Christian education has isolated teens from their parents. That statement might shock some, but it is not as shocking as it sounds. Our whole society has isolated teenagers from adults. In neighborhoods, in schools, and in their social activities, teenagers spend so little time with adults. The vast majority of their time is spent either alone or surrounded by their peers.⁵² As Chap Clark, a longtime youth minister, noted, “There has been a subtle yet steady erosion of our collective commitment to proactively assimilate our children into adult society. This has created an innate insecurity in the souls of our kids.”⁵³ Most significantly, teenagers are isolated from their parents. Just a few generations ago, parents and teens spent time together, usually out of necessity. That time together was the natural bridge from childhood to adulthood as teenagers learned and “caught” what it meant to be an adult. But

⁵¹ Freudenburg, *The Family Friendly Church*, 10.

⁵² This topic of the abandonment of our youth and teenagers is a weighty one worth a more comprehensive study. The reader is directed to chapter two of Mark DeVries’s book, *Family-Based Youth Ministry*, where he explores this topic in greater detail. See also footnote fifty-five (55) below.

⁵³ Chap Clark and Dee Clark, *Disconnected*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2007), 134.

now, “American parents spend less time with their children than do parents in any other country in the world.”⁵⁴ Despite the busy clip of life in today’s world, children and teenagers feel alone and isolated from their parents and families. In fact, this problem is so severe that Chap Clark has coined a new term for it: “systemic abandonment of our children.”⁵⁵

The church is in an ideal spot to help with this abandonment of children and teenagers. It can provide an environment where youth can interact with adults about the meaningful subjects of faith and Christ. Sadly, the traditional church organization has not helped with this. For many teenagers, the place where they are most segregated from the world of adults is their church.⁵⁶ Even though many churches have youth and/or teen ministries, those ministries only make tangential contact with adults and the mission of the church. But instead of seizing the opportunity to remedy this situation, the church has compounded the problem. Churches have tried to involve teenagers by giving them their own niche in the church - they have teen ministries, teen group, teen choirs, teen Bible classes, teen outings, teen rallies, teen retreats, teen fundraisers, and the like. But those very programs have isolated teens from the rest of the church, especially from mature Christian adults. The problem is isolation, and the church’s solution, though well-intentioned, has resulted in more isolation.

Sometimes this isolation is the result of the church’s programming, but sometimes the pendulum swings the other way. The study entitled “Why Young People Leave WELS” found that a sizable segment of teenagers and young adults were lost because they were made to feel as if they didn’t count. Pastors felt that this age group was not engaged or made to feel as if their opinions counted. The focus group from this study put a significant emphasis on putting young people into more significant roles in congregations. Members of this focus group felt that their

⁵⁴ Mark DeVries, *Family-Based Youth Ministry*, (Downer’s Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 40.

⁵⁵ Chap Clark uses this term in chapter six of his book, *Disconnected: Parenting Teens in a MySpace World*. He theorizes that adults as a whole have hurt their kids. We keep them busy with school, extracurriculars, and activities, but spend very little time with them as a result. Parents, according to Clark, have become little more than chauffeurs and short order cooks. Parents aren’t spending quality time with their children. In fact, they’re not spending *any* time with their children. Life has become all about schedules and To Do lists when it should be about relationships that help us grow closer together and grow into maturity. It’s not purposeful neglect, it’s “neglect by default.” As Clark said, “We’ve disassembled our communal story, ripped ourselves away from meaningful relationships. We’ve lost vision, passion, and dreams” (73). We’ve lost sight of the central focus of relationships, and children know it. They’ve been wounded as a result of this neglect, and by the time they hit high school, they know it. Deep down, children crave more time with adults and parents, but they’re not getting it.

⁵⁶ DeVries, *Family-Based Youth Ministry*, 41.

opinions didn't count, and that they should simply attend church and let the adults make the decisions. If young people were allowed to leave the kids' table and give input, they felt that their ideas were given superficial recognition but were not taken seriously.⁵⁷ There doesn't appear to be any malicious intent behind this phenomenon. Perhaps church leadership is hesitant to put young people without a lot of life experience on committees and boards. But the fact remains that young people want to be more involved in meaningful roles, and the church is not meeting that need.

If the church wants to solve this problem of isolation, it needs to change its approach to teens. This is not a problem that can be solved as a mechanic would solve it, by isolating the problem and fixing. Teens are a part of the body of Christ. We cannot remove them from the body of Christ and expect them to survive and thrive. We need to involve our teens, not isolate them. Until this change is made, teens will continue to leave the church as they recognize that they have been abandoned by it.

This isolation of teens from the rest of the church, and especially from the adults, is not intentional. Many churches are simply doing what worked a generation or two ago, when Christian homes were much stronger. But the statement has been made, and families have picked up on it: the church has given the impression that it can provide for all the spiritual needs of teenagers. Parents just need to drop them off, pick them up a few hours later, and the church will handle the rest. Unfortunately, the problem is that the influence of the pastor, the youth leader, and the Christian teen peer group is not nearly as powerful or long-lasting as the parents' influence. Consider these statements:

- "Parents are the undefeated primary influence on teenagers - for better or for worse."⁵⁸
- "Our isolated youth programs cannot compete with the formative power of the family...As a general rule, [when teenagers become adults] they return to the tracks that were laid by their parents."⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Goodman, "Why Young People Leave WELS: A Summary," 3,8.

⁵⁸ Freudenburg, *The Family Friendly Church*, 107.

⁵⁹ DeVries, *Family-Based Youth Ministry*, 65.

- “Youth ministries, in and of themselves, have limited power to produce lasting change in young people’s lives.”⁶⁰
- “Far and away, parents are seen as the most important influence affecting ... young adults’ religious attitude and practices.”⁶¹
- “There is overwhelming evidence that parents are, almost always, the single most significant determining factor in the development of their children.”⁶²
- “A strong, consistent, Christ-centered, love-based relationship with our kids is the environment in which truth is caught and taught, and will make the difference between those who follow Christ and those who don’t.”⁶³
- “Parents are the key faith developers for their children - they can have either a positive or a negative impact on their kids’s faith growth. But either way, they’ll have the biggest impact. You can have strong faith-shaping programs for kids at church, but if you’re not partnering with homes, you risk producing kids who have weak faith.”⁶⁴

The church can only do so much. If churches want to keep teenagers in the church, they must acknowledge and understand the limited influence they have. Trying to help young people mature into Christian adults who will remain in the faith is a noble goal. But trying to do so without the help of parents is like trying to drive a car without an engine. You simply won’t get far. Unless churches rethink their strategies for teen ministry, teens will continue to leave the church in droves.

So why are teens leaving church? The answer is long and complicated. But when you dig down to the root of the problem, you find the answer: Christian parents are not meeting the spiritual needs of teenagers in the home, and churches are unintentionally isolating teens from the great influences parents have. Those two factors play the largest role in the mass exodus of teens from church. To solve the problem of teens dropping out of church, we must fix those problems. We must strengthen the Christian home and redefine the role of the church in bringing up teenagers who remain in the faith. In other words, the way to keep teenagers in church is to

⁶⁰ Ibid., 78.

⁶¹ Goodman, “Why Young People Leave WELS: A Summary,” 7.

⁶² DeVries, *Family-Based Youth Ministry*, 80.

⁶³ Wright and Oliver, *Raising Kids to Love Jesus*, 38.

⁶⁴ Freudenburg, *The Family Friendly Church*, 77.

change the paradigm for teen ministry from a model that is church-based and home-supported to a model that is home-based and church-supported.

Part Three: Strengthening the Christian Home

This paradigm shift is based on the principle that strong homes make strong churches. It involves a shift in how we think about the church. The church is no longer the center of faith development. Instead, it empowers, enables, and assists parents to serve as the primary agents in developing their child's faith. This paradigm shift does not diminish the role of church; it simply changes the role of the church. The church is still a place to come and nurture your faith, but it will play a greater role in developing and strengthening the Christian home.

The Primary Role of Parents

God intended parents to have the primary role in shaping their children's faith. Back in Old Testament times this was God's will. In Deuteronomy God said to his people,

Only be careful, and watch yourselves closely so that you do not forget the things your eyes have seen or let them slip from your heart as long as you live. Teach them to your children and to their children after them. Remember the day you stood before the Lord your God at Horeb, when he said to me, "Assemble the people before me to hear my words so that they may learn to revere me as long as they live in the land and may teach them to their children (Deuteronomy 4:9-10).

A large part of the teaching Old Testament parents did was certainly related to the sacrificial system, since that was their form of public worship. Explaining the sacrifices, what they meant, and why they were performed was instrumental in teaching the truths of sin and grace. But the role of the "church," that is, the priests and sacrifices, was supplementary to the role of the parents.

The reason for the primary role of parents in Christian education was the continual influence parents had on their children. Learning from the church and priests was somewhat regular, but not nearly as frequent as was the learning from parents. Seeing the sacrifices and the bloodshed that sin caused would have had a significant impact on children, but that impact was nothing compared to seeing parents live their faith every day. Elsewhere in Deuteronomy God spoke:

These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the door frames of your houses and on your gates (Deuteronomy 6:6-9).

God is stressing that parents are to be the primary teachers of the faith. They are to make biblical truths such an important part of home life that children would naturally integrate them into daily living. The ongoing goal of the Christian home is to put children in situations where the Word of God is handled, learned, and applied. This was to be done through formal instruction and observation of daily living influenced by the Word.

God designed families to pass the faith down to succeeding generations. Parents were to teach their children and grandchildren, and the cycle would start again with each new generation. That cycle is very clear in Deuteronomy 4:9-10, quoted above, but it was not merely an Old Testament occurrence. New Testament believers continued to follow God's plan to teach their children and grandchildren the truths of Scripture. Timothy, the young charge of the apostle Paul, experienced that cycle in his own upbringing. "I have been reminded of your sincere faith, which first lived in your grandmother Lois and in your mother Eunice and, I am persuaded, now lives in you also" (2 Timothy 1:5). These Scripture passages show that passing on the message of the Savior through families has been God's plan from the start, and there is no evidence it is any different today.

Martin Luther and the reformers of the sixteenth century recognized the importance of parents teaching children about the Word of God. Luther wrote, "To raise one's offspring in the fear of God, to bring them up as Christian servants of their fellowman - this is the godliest of labors."⁶⁵ This emphasis on teaching the faith was based on Proverbs 22:6,⁶⁶ or as Luther paraphrased it, "If a person learns from youth up to recognize the benefits of God, and hence to love Him, ... he will not forget it afterwards when he is old."⁶⁷

⁶⁵ Gerald Strauss, *Luther's House of Learning: Indoctrination of the Young in the German Reformation*, (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 111.

⁶⁶ Proverbs 22:6 reads, "Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it." It's important to remember that this verse is not a promise from God. It is a proverb, a wise saying. It certainly carries significant weight since it is part of God's inspired Word, but it remains a proverb.

⁶⁷ F.V.N. Painter, *Luther on Education*, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1928), 119.

But the reformers did more than recognize the importance of the Christian training of children; they knew this training was a key to strengthening the church. Luther wrote, “Children should be brought up in the fear of God. If the kingdom of God is to come in power, we must begin with children and teach them from the cradle.”⁶⁸ In the minds of the reformers, parents were expected to do some formal instruction, but were not to stop there. “Formal catechizing did not exhaust the parent’s teaching responsibilities. By daily example and counsel the parents were to guide their children’s footsteps on their Christian journey.”⁶⁹ The reformers envisioned a family setting where Christian truth was both taught and caught. Both parts of this training were necessary for building a strong, lifelong faith. Strong believers made for strong homes, and strong homes led to strong churches. That was the reformers’ vision, and it was a key component in growing the Reformation.

The historical practice of strengthening the home in order to strengthen the church is a practice to which we must return if we want to keep our teenagers in church. Without strong families and homes, the church’s growth will stagnate. Christians’ children will grow up and leave the church, and the gospel’s progress will be hindered. Rather than focusing our time and effort on programming geared towards teenagers, we must focus on strengthening families in the Word of God and enabling them to train their children to fear and love God. The old saying of Benjamin Franklin that “An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure” fits beautifully here. We have tried treating the problem after symptoms appear, that is, after teens leave church. But we have not tried to nip the problem in the bud, taking preventative measures before the problem becomes apparent.

This change in focus will be a significant change for the church. Focusing on strengthening families and empowering parents does not downplay the vital role of the church; it simply changes the focus of the church’s role. The church will focus on equipping the universal priests that are the heads of households (i.e., parents) to better fulfill *their* role. Pastors and church leaders will play the important role of supporting, equipping, and empowering parents, and the focus will be on the Christian home as the primary source of Christian teaching and

⁶⁸ Painter, *Luther on Education*, 119.

⁶⁹ Strauss, *Luther’s House of Learning*, 124.

training. The church will make sure the truth being taught is orthodox while homes will be the primary disseminators of the truth.⁷⁰ Pastors will still preach, teach, evangelize, administer the sacraments, visit the sick, etc., but their focus in terms of youth ministry will turn to the family. Rather than focusing on developing programs and events for teenagers, pastors will turn the majority of their efforts to strengthening Christian parents and homes.⁷¹

Potential Roadblocks to the Paradigm Shift

There are several potential roadblocks that can prevent this paradigm shift in teen ministry. Can parents handle this responsibility? What about parents who are new converts? Are the families in our churches stable and strong enough to fulfill their role? Are youth leaders flexible enough to try new strategies in teen ministry? These are all legitimate concerns, and are worthy of attention.

The truth is that getting parents more involved in their children's faith is not the silver bullet for youth ministry. Pushing parents to teach more doctrine and model Christian living is not a quick fix. In fact, a large percentage of parents are not mature Christians themselves. Mark DeVries, in his book *Family-Based Youth Ministry*, notes that sixty-six percent (66%) of adult church members do not devote time to reading or studying the Bible, and seventy-two percent (72%) of adult church members are not involved in Christian education.⁷² The pastor of the average church is likely nodding his head in agreement with those statistics. One quick look at attendance records of adult Bible classes will report similar numbers. While the church attendance of adults might be higher than their Bible class attendance, a large share of adult members are not frequent and regular in their Sunday morning attendance. These numbers highlight an unfortunate truth: the majority of adults in church do not have a mature faith. The upshot of this is that pastors must focus on educating and training parents if this new vision of

⁷⁰ Strauss, *Luther's House of Learning*, 123-124.

⁷¹ This does not mean the end of "traditional" youth and teen ministry, which consisted of teen Bible studies, teen groups, teen outings, teen service projects, rallies, conferences, and the like. Those groups and events serve an important purpose, and we don't want to discount their value. Much more will be said about the role of "traditional" youth and teen ministries in the section of this paper entitled "The Role of the Traditional Teen Group," beginning on page thirty-four (34).

⁷² DeVries, *Family-Based Youth Ministry*, 91.

teen ministry will take off. Without mature Christian parents, our efforts will be about as useful as rearranging deck chairs on the Titanic.

Another problem with changing the direction of teen ministry is that many parents feel helpless. Some feel the press of busy schedules with more “urgent” demands that supersede faith formation. Some feel that their families are too isolated or unstructured to have formal catechetical instruction. Others feel out of their league when it comes to communicating with their teenagers, much less communicating about the gospel with them. These parents feel overwhelmed, helpless, or defeated, and many of them simply throw up their hands in despair.⁷³ Without the support of the church, these parents will not be able to fulfill their roles as faith shapers.

The helpless parent syndrome is not primarily caused by laziness or apathy on the part of parents. The overall decline of the family is in play, too. The editor of a collection of essays on the American family entitled *Rebuilding the Nest* noted two areas of general agreement by scholars. First, the family in America is “increasingly less able to carry out its basic functions. The family, in short, is becoming weaker as an institution in our society.” Second, “the quality of life for America’s children is declining...It is becoming harder each year to be a child in the United States.”⁷⁴ Families are in a crisis. Divorces and broken families are just as common as the traditional family unit of Mom, Dad, and the kids. Non-traditional families are becoming the norm. Parents are having affairs, are workaholics or alcoholics, or are just plain absent from their children’s lives. This decline of the family is very real, and it will be an issue with which pastors and youth ministers must contend.

These issues will be a part of changing our paradigm for teen ministry. They seem overwhelming. But there is good news in these significant barriers. Parents who have teenagers under their roof are always looking for help. These are some of the most stressful years of parenting, and mothers and fathers are hungry for support and assistance. That’s why Mark DeVries notes that “the climate is ripe for parents to become increasingly involved in programs

⁷³ DeVries, *Family-Based Youth Ministry*, 94.

⁷⁴ Quoted in *Family-Based Youth Ministry*, 95.

that can equip them in the spiritual formation of their children.”⁷⁵ That’s why the former head of the WELS’s Commission on Youth Discipleship, Gerald Kastens, wrote that he has “never seen parents more hungry for help than they are now.”⁷⁶

Parents are hungry for help, and they feel ill-prepared to teach their children. That’s why the first priority of this new strategy for teen ministry must be to equip parents to carry out their role as faith-shapers as best they can. What follows are several practical suggestions for doing just that.

Equipping Parents

First and foremost, the leaders of the church must model what a Christ-centered family looks like. Because many of today’s parents did not grow up in a strong Christian family, they have either no idea or incorrect ideas about what such a family looks like. Pastors are in an ideal position to show and tell others what a strong, Christ-centered family is. Their families are very visible in the church, and members take note of how the pastor interacts with his spouse and children. What they see on Sunday mornings at church, on Wednesday nights during Bible study, and at Friday afternoon soccer games will make an indelible impression on them.

Besides modeling a healthy family, pastors should also make a point of talking about what makes a Christ-centered family. Many parents would be shocked to hear that something as simple as a five minute family devotion after supper can make a world of difference in their children’s faith lives. Taking a few minutes to say bedtime prayers, reading the Bible where children can see you doing that, and making church a priority are steps that any parent can take, and the impact of such “little” actions will stick with children for years to come. Families don’t have to make earth-shattering changes in their daily schedules. Often it is the little things that make the biggest difference. Remember, dynamite comes in small packages, yet its effect is great and powerful.

Another practical step pastors can take to equip parents is to provide them with resources. The primary focus here should be on devotional resources, since family devotions are such an

⁷⁵ DeVries, *Family Based Youth Ministry*, 97.

⁷⁶ Kastens, “Retaining Our Youth,” 3.

easy way for parents to grow in faith while they create the habit of taking a few minutes each day to gather around the Word of God.⁷⁷ While many pastors know where to access such materials, many parents do not. Share with them what devotional resources you are using in your own home. Put together a list of daily devotionals, and stock the church's library with them. Subscribe to the *Meditations* devotional series from Northwestern Publishing House, the WELS's own publisher, then distribute copies to parents. Tell them about the daily devotions and prayers available online at www.wels.net. Pastors don't have to take the time to write out a year's worth of devotions. There is a wealth of confessional Lutheran material out there, and pastors must simply show their people how to access it.

On top of providing devotional materials, pastors can also supply educational resources. Sunday School materials will work well for younger kids, as will books with Bible stories for children. For confirmation students, give them assignments to do with their parents. Just as with the devotional resources, these assignments will teach children, help parents review, and give parents and children an opportunity to discuss matters of faith together.⁷⁸ Consider having parents attend confirmation class along with their children. This has been done with great success by a number of WELS congregations.⁷⁹ Supply parents with a catechism of their own, or have a "crash course" in catechism for parents whose children are in confirmation class.⁸⁰ For parents of teenagers, stock the church's library with a few books about the tough questions teens ask. Parents will feel more confident about their responses, and can invite their teenagers to ask the tough questions on their minds.

⁷⁷ Remember, Christian truth is both taught and caught. Daily devotions teach the truths of Scripture, and, when done faithfully, teach children that spending time with God's Word is a part of each day. We sleep, we eat, we read God's Word. It's just something that we naturally do as believers. Once started, this habit will hopefully carry over into children's lives as they grow older.

⁷⁸ The reader is directed to page nineteen (19), where four of the key experiences for growth in faith are listed. The top two experiences are talking about faith with Mom or Dad. Give parents a golden opportunity to have this experience on a regular basis.

⁷⁹ Beautiful Savior in Summerville, South Carolina is just one example of a church that does this. In the words of a former vicar there, "The parents love it." An additional benefit is that classroom management and discipline becomes much easier, since parents are right next to their children. On top of that, using breakout groups where parents talk with others' children allows for relationships between adults and youth to grow, which is a topic that is addressed later in this paper.

⁸⁰ This "crash course" could be a four week affair which quickly covers the basic tenets of the Christian faith. A class like this will give parents greater confidence as they help their children with catechism assignments.

Several of these ideas provide informal training for parents on how to teach the truths of Scripture to their children. Pastors should also offer several formal training opportunities, because no one is simply born with a strong set of skills for Christian family and child rearing. These skills must be learned.⁸¹ So provide opportunities to train “youth ministers” for each home. Here are some ideas:

- Hold seminars on the important role parents play in their children’s lives, especially in the spiritual arena.
- Offer regular seminars on how to handle milestones in children’s lives (baptism, first day at school, confirmation, etc.).
- Have classes on basic family and parenting skills. Topics could include listening and communication skills, understanding teenagers and their emotional and spiritual needs.
- Start up “growth groups,” which are small group, family-based Bible study opportunities. Parents take turns hosting and leading the group study and discussion. Leading these informal studies will give parents more confidence to talk about faith with their children.

The word “training” makes this process seem more formal than it actually needs to be. While pastors and churches should offer formal opportunities to equip parents with necessary knowledge and skills, much of this training can be as simple as giving parents chances to be with their kids apart from the distractions of TV, social media, and work.⁸²

On top of modeling healthy families, supplying resources, and training parents to be competent ministers and teachers in their own homes, pastors must also be active encouragers as parents embark on this new role. Without getting legalistic, pastors should act as accountability partners, checking with parents to make sure they are being faithful in their personal devotions, family devotions, discussions about faith, and daily modeling of Christian living. Involving elders and church leaders is a great way to enlarge this accountability group. Handwritten thank you notes for all the work parents are doing would reinforce the importance of their efforts. Include parents in prayers during public worship and in your own private prayers. Remind parents that they are doing a noble work for their children, and God will reward their efforts. The point is that getting a new system of teen ministry up and running is lots of work, but the job

⁸¹ Freudenburg, *The Family Friendly Church*, 42.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 80.

is far from complete. Pastors and spiritual leaders must continue to support and encourage parents with their time, prayers, resources, and general assistance.

Such encouragement should be expressed through various mediums. An email with a brief article about the importance of families and parents or an announcement during Bible class can help get the word out. Create a brief brochure about the impact family devotions have on children, and distribute it as people leave the sanctuary. Put an article in the church newsletter. Talk about this in Bible class, sermons, and whenever the opportunity arises. Do whatever possible to communicate the important role parents play in the spiritual development of their children.

Consider these words from the study “Why Young People Leave WELS: The 11 Recommendations”:

Not only does WELS need to emphasize the big picture importance parents will play in their children’s future WELS relationship, but, in addition, specifically point out that leading through example, in areas such as church attendance, sharing God’s Word (at home), enrolling children in Sunday school, Bible study and various youth activities generally appears to correlate with a stronger WELS commitment.⁸³

As pastors encourage parents to be more active in their children’s faith lives, they should *be specific* about what parents can do. Encourage parents to attend worship as a family, to attend Bible classes and teen groups, to talk about faith with their children, to have family devotions at home, and to look for ways to put faith into action. These activities in particular will have an enormously positive impact on their children for years to come.⁸⁴

The important thing to remember is that the church must be sensitive to the needs of its families. Ben Freudenburg relates a story in which he visited the Focus on the Family headquarters and saw literally hundreds of staff members on the phone, responding to people who called with needs or concerns. Their churches weren’t meeting their spiritual needs, so they were calling into Focus on the Family instead. The church needs to take a tack similar to what Dr. James Dobson, Focus on the Family’s founder, did. He saw that families were in trouble and children were suffering. So he focused on helping families and parents. The church needs to do the same. It must focus on helping families with both the means of grace and also with family

⁸³ Bret Goodman, “Why Young People Leave WELS: The 11 Recommendations,” 1.

⁸⁴ See page nineteen (19) for studies that show these activities have the greatest impact on children.

and parenting resources and aids. By doing so, it will be strengthening the families where Bible truths find meaning in daily living.⁸⁵

Part Four: The Role of the Church

Strengthening the Christian home does not diminish the role of the church in any way. Nor are youth leaders trying to work themselves out of a job by equipping parents to do more teaching at home. This new paradigm is simply a change in focus. Ben Freudenburg put it this way:

A home-centered, church-supported faith-development model ... dictates that the church do all it can to provide support and training for parents in the development of their kids' faith in their homes. The church exists to partner with homes to be the best they can be. The result: The church says, "Come to us to learn how to teach the faith in your home. We'll be a resource of ideas, training, and programs, and we'll provide you with everything you need to teach the faith at home. Strong homes make strong churches."⁸⁶

The focus is on equipping, training, and supporting parents to be more active in developing their children's faith. In other words, the church must delegate some of the responsibility for teaching the faith. We've examined how the church has taken the bulk of this responsibility. Now is the time for the church to give some of that responsibility back.

As stated before, this does not mean the church abrogates its responsibility. While the universal priests we call parents will handle more of the responsibility, the universal priests and public ministers in the church will partner with families to develop faith in young people. The church will supplement the faith teaching and modeling done by parents at home. By using both the means of grace and practical resources, the church will strengthen and empower parents to teach and model the faith as best they can.

The Role of the Traditional Teen Group

When it comes to keeping teenagers in the faith, the primary goal of the church is to provides resources for parents and create family-centered programs. The secondary goal is to provide teen-specific programming. The old paradigm for teen ministry skips this primary goal

⁸⁵ Gerlach, "What Can Be Done to Make Our Children Active Church Members?", 5.

⁸⁶ Freudenburg, *The Family Friendly Church*, 98.

and dives straight into this secondary goal. The new paradigm will devote more time and resources to the primary goal of strengthening families. This doesn't mean that programs designed solely for teens must end. Shifting to this new paradigm doesn't have to be so drastic. But the church must be deliberate about its programming geared towards teenagers.

Traditional teen groups are a key part of teen ministry. A well-run teen group has three pivotal functions: it provides a Christian peer group, offers recreational opportunities with other Christians, and furnishes teens with chances to put their faith into action. The Christian peer group is an especially important thing to have. For many teens, the teen group is the only Christian group they have, besides their families. This Christian peer group provides emotional support for those who feel it is "them against the world" as they go to school, participate in extracurriculars, and work a part-time job. On top of that, fun outings with the teen group shows teenagers that being a believer is not just the "boring" stuff like attending formal worship and Bible studies. Christians can go paint balling, rafting, biking, hiking, and do all sorts of activities together. That's part of the fun of having an extended Christian family. Finally, teen leaders provide opportunities for service projects. By doing yard work for elderly members, participating in church outreach activities such as canvassing, doing the community a service by picking up trash along a stretch of highway, and joining in many other such projects, teenagers learn that being a Christian isn't just about believing in Jesus; being a Christian also means putting your faith into action and letting your light shine.⁸⁷

A traditional teen group should serve in these three important ways. Since such programming for teens has significant benefits, we would be foolish to do away with it completely. But we must also avoid the other extreme of leaning too much on the teen group. We cannot let such groups devolve into social gatherings with no spiritual substance to them. We do not want merely to socialize them into faith. A faith fostered in such a way is not likely to last. The proper place of the traditional teen ministry (that is, a teen group, junior choir, teen Bible studies, and the like) falls between the two extremes of a) replacing the work of parents

⁸⁷ The book of James deals extensively with the idea that faith always produces works. In fact, James says that "faith without deeds is dead" (James 2:26). Jesus speaks about Christian letting their light shine before men in Matthew 5:16.

and homes, and b) ignoring the many benefits teen-specific programming offers. Each church must assess its own situation and make the necessary adjustments and changes.

First Things First

As churches reexamine their strategies for teen ministry and strive to put families at the center of their efforts, they must plan. A paradigm shift like this does not happen without prior planning. Plans must be put in place to strengthen and equip parents for their tasks, to support the development of stronger homes, and to rethink the current teen ministry. Above all, plans must be made to reach every teenager in the congregation. Too many teens are neglected or ignored in the church's efforts at teen ministry. Churches want to minister to those who are willing to participate, but efforts must be made to involve those teens who are on the fringes of the church community.⁸⁸

As churches are in the early stages of strengthening families, youth leaders must make an effort to expose teenagers to healthy Christian homes. Even if a teen does not live in a healthy home, seeing strong Christian families in action can make quite the difference. The goal is to give teenagers a target for which to strive when they are older - loving family relationships centered on the Word of God, based on unconditional love and forgiveness. Sadly, the majority of youth leaders consider this tactic either a minor part of their teen ministry strategy or don't use this tactic at all.⁸⁹ Considering that even brief exposure to healthy families is better than no exposure at all, youth leaders should reconsider using this as a primary strategy.

Meeting Teenagers' Spiritual Needs

As pastors work to keep teenagers in church, they must be familiar with the spiritual needs of teenagers. It's too simplistic to say that teens need to hear the law and gospel. While they certainly need to hear about sin and grace, their unique position in life means they need this

⁸⁸ Gerald Kastens emphasizes planning to reach all teens in his article, "Retaining Our Youth." Without this crucial first step, no other changes will happen.

⁸⁹ Barna Group, "Role of Healthy Families in Youth Ministry," *Barna Research*. Published May 3, 2012. <https://www.barna.org/barna-update/millennials/565-research-examines-the-role-of-healthy-families-in-youth-ministry#UwFcDyiOp8t>. This study found that seventy-eight percent (78%) of youth leaders fall into these two categories. Twenty-four percent (24%) use this tactic as a "minor" part of their strategy, while the remaining fifty-four percent (54%) don't use it.

message presented in different ways. In general, WELS pastors and church leaders can improve in this area. Many of the young adults who left WELS left because they were unhappy with the church leadership at their particular congregation. Interestingly, many of the leavers who reported this did not leave WELS; they simply switched to a different congregation because their spiritual needs were not being met.⁹⁰

There's a good reason that churches have trouble meeting teenagers' spiritual needs. Some of them are paradoxical. One of the primary needs teenagers have is the need for continuity. They need stability in their faith lives, continuity in tradition, and a dependable faith community in which to be nurtured. Yet they also need to "individualize" their faith, that is, make their faith their own and not merely parrot what Mom and Dad believe.⁹¹ Trying to meet both of these needs, which seem to work against each other, makes the church's task difficult. But unless churches are trying to meet both these needs, teenagers will continue to leave.

The teenage years are a turbulent time. While many teenagers do not go into full-scale rebellion against their parents or think the world is out to get them, every teenager goes through intense physical, mental, psychological, and emotional changes in a relatively short amount of time. As these changes are happening within and around them, there is a deep, sometimes unconscious longing for stability and continuity. Whether they know it or not, teenagers need a safety harness of sorts as they go through their "jumping off" years. As they mature in their faith and begin asking difficult questions about it, they need something steadfast to which they can cling. Teens are looking for a rock in the middle of life's storms. They're searching for something that doesn't change when everything else is shifting. They want stability in their church, not a church that changes with each passing whim and fancy.⁹²

Yet teenagers also yearn for individuation of their faith. They are forming their personal identity in all aspects of life, including their identity as a believer. So teenagers will question the necessity of public worship. They'll wonder why Bible studies are important. They'll question the teachings of the church and the faith of their parents. They might even exhibit a bit of

⁹⁰ Goodman, "Why Young People Leave WELS: The 11 Recommendations," 1.

⁹¹ DeVries, *Family-Based Youth Ministry*, 132.

⁹² Kimball, *They Like Jesus But Not the Church*, 216.

animosity towards church. This questioning and searching will feel uncomfortable for parents and pastors. But remember that resistance to the church isn't necessarily the first step towards atheism. More likely, it is a natural development in discipleship. Those who question and discover answers are more likely to "own" their faith than those who blindly follow their parents' faith. Those who wonder and doubt are actively thinking about their faith, not merely mindlessly repeating what they heard in Sunday school. While spiritual leaders may be unnerved by the individuation process, it is a necessary time for teenagers. Remember that the goal of individuating faith is spiritual interdependence, not dependence or independence.⁹³

The key to meeting both of these needs is balance. Parents and pastors must provide continuity and allow for individuation. This is easier said than done, but it must be done. Meeting these two needs is akin to hitting a moving target, so some readjustments and tweaking will be necessary.

To provide continuity, look to the Word of God and to families. The unchanging truth of God's Word is the rock that does not move nor change. The basic structure of the liturgy provides continuity in worship. A caring church family helps them feel welcome every time they come to church. A pastor who takes time to talk with them and see how they're doing makes them feel important. A role in the church, whether big or small, makes them feel needed. A family who is devoted to the Word of God and to each other provides an anchor in the storms of adolescence. Such things give teenagers the continuity they desire.

To allow for individuation, patience is the number one ingredient. The individuation process takes time; there's no other way around it. Let them ask their questions, and answer them without sounding overly defensive. You don't have to apologize for the truths of Scripture; unleash them and let the gospel go to work. Give teens opportunities to dialogue about the tougher aspects of walking with Jesus. Keep in mind that sometimes teens aren't looking for answers; they simply want to be heard. But balance that patience with discernment. Be on the lookout for this individuation process turning into a judgmental, "us versus them" mentality that turns every issue into a witch hunt.⁹⁴ Do your best to make sure the individuation process is a

⁹³ Jack O. Balswick and Judith K. Balswick, *The Family*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 150.

⁹⁴ DeVries, *Family-Based Youth Ministry*, 138.

healthy process that leads to teenagers developing their faith, not fleeing from it.⁹⁵ That can be a fine line to toe, but experience will be a good teacher.

Adult Relationships and Mentors

At their unique point in life, teenagers place a great deal of emphasis on relationships. In fact, building relationships is the primary developmental need for teens.⁹⁶ They're not just interested in romantic relationships. They're looking for friends they enjoy, family members with whom they feel safe, and adults they can trust. The church can take steps to meet these needs. As families begin to share devotions and pray together, the relational bonds of the family will grow stronger. A teen organization at church provides a welcoming Christian peer group in enjoyable circumstances. But what the church is not giving teenagers is the gift of relationships with mature Christian adults.

In a typical church, how much interaction occurs between teenagers and adults? They attend the same worship service, but teens tend to group together with their friends. After the service the teenagers head off to their Bible study while adults go to the adult Bible study. Do teens sit in on voters' meetings? Does the teen group interact with their leaders and a few select chaperones, or do they spend time with other adults? As people visit and mingle in the gathering space or narthex, how much interaction goes on between teenagers and mature adults? The average church does not do a very good job of putting teenagers in contact with mature Christian adults who model what it means to love the Lord with all their heart, soul, and mind. If we want to keep teenagers in church, we need to change that.

This is where the extended church family comes into play. Teenagers are incredibly observant of how adults conduct themselves. They are constantly aware of adults who do not practice what they preach or who say one thing but do another. They notice the mature Christian adults in a congregation. Encourage these mature adults to keep modeling what it means to be a

⁹⁵ C.S. Lewis had this to say about the individuation process: "When a young man who has been going to church in a routine way honestly realizes that he does not believe in Christianity and stops going - provided he does it for honesty's sake and not just to annoy his parents - the spirit of Christ is probably nearer to him than it ever was before." C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, (New York: Macmillan, 1943), 163.

⁹⁶ Charles M. Shelton, *Adolescent Spirituality: Pastoral Ministry for High School and College Youth*, (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1983), 126.

Christian. Strengthen those adults with Word and Sacrament so that they keep fighting the good fight of faith. Mark DeVries writes that “every Christian teenager needs an extended family of Christian adults . . . and the church should be the primary vehicle through which teenagers are exposed to the adults who make up their extended family in Christ.”⁹⁷

But the church should be more specific with how it connects teens with mature adults. It’s not enough for teenagers to see adults in action. We need to be more deliberate about creating interaction between the two. We need a mentoring program. It’s important to understand the impact one good relationship with an adult can have on a teenager. Someone with whom the teen is comfortable and with whom they can relate is a tremendous force in their life, and creates a positive, lasting impression.⁹⁸ Most parents tend to agree that a non-parent can often exercise more influence over a teenager than a parent.⁹⁹ What the church needs is a program that pairs teenagers with a mature Christian adult, creates opportunities for dialogue and encouragement, and fosters relationships of trust and comfort.

This program could pair newly confirmed teenagers with an adult in the church who agrees to mentor the new confirmand. This relationship can be either formal or informal. The key is that these partners make time to talk with each other, get to know one another, and build a relationship of positive interactions and trust. The mentors must find the balance between accountability and guidance on the one hand, and encouragement and affirmation on the other.¹⁰⁰ Pastors and church leaders can offer a brief training seminar which helps the mentors identify that fine balance. This idea of a mentoring program can take different forms, but the idea behind it is that the church takes a proactive step towards surrounding teenagers with mature Christian adults who provide a helping hand on the path to adulthood.

Teenagers will not be the only beneficiaries of a mentoring program. The mentors themselves will often gain more than they give as they learn to view the world through the lens of another person. Parents, too, will greatly appreciate the help, especially parents who are not

⁹⁷ DeVries, *Family-Based Youth Ministry*, 116.

⁹⁸ Shelton, *Adolescent Spirituality*, 153.

⁹⁹ Balswick, *The Family*, 169.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 169.

yet spiritually mature enough to take the lead in developing their child's faith. God gives parents a great responsibility. They are to train up their children in the way they should go (Proverbs 22:6). They are to talk about God's Word at all times and in all circumstances (Deuteronomy 6:4ff). They are to bring up their children in the fear and instruction of the Lord. That's a tall order for anyone, even the most spiritually mature parents. So let's give parents a support system. Let's give their children Christian mentors who reinforce the truths they hear in church and live at home. Now is the time to refocus our efforts on connecting teenagers with mature adults. Take to heart these words: "In the long run, the teenagers in our churches will be impacted by significant experiences with adults much more than by the mountaintop youth group experiences that we spend so much energy creating."¹⁰¹ Relationships with adults are vital to maintaining our teens.¹⁰²

Worship and Bible Study

One of the keys to keeping teenagers in church and in the faith is to use the means of grace, the gospel in word and sacrament. The two most common arenas in which these means are presented are public worship and Bible studies. As pastors and youth leaders use the means of grace in these settings, they must keep in mind that teenagers have certain needs in these areas, too.

Teens tend to complain that public worship is boring and monotonous.¹⁰³ Many can certainly relate to that sentiment. Sermons seemed to last for hours, the same hymns were sung over and over, and worship seemed too similar from week to week. But worship should not be something to "endure." Churches can make worship more meaningful to all people, including teens. Begin by educating your congregation about what we do in worship and why we do it. Use notes in the bulletin, announcements during the service, and hold a series of Bible classes dedicated to exploring the topic of worship. Show people that there is a reason for everything we do, from beginning worship in the name of the triune God to standing for the Gospel lesson.

¹⁰¹ DeVries, *Family-Based Youth Ministry*, 120.

¹⁰² Kimball, *They Like Jesus But Not the Church*, 231.

¹⁰³ Goodman, "Why Young People Leave WELS: The 11 Recommendations," 6-7.

Work to create variety in worship forms. Claims of monotony in worship are often true. Worship planners can do better than alternate between the Common Service, the Service of the Word, and the Service of Word and Sacrament in Christian Worship. A church can still be liturgical without using one of these three specific liturgies. Worship planners should explore resources with other worship forms¹⁰⁴ and network with surrounding churches to see what they are doing. Consider writing a few original Confession and Absolutions so that people aren't just reciting the same old formulas. Use your Christian freedom to inject variety in worship.

Teens tend to complain about the music in churches, too. They want variety in hymns and different instruments accompanying them.¹⁰⁵ Churches can adapt to meet this desire. It may take some time to organize musicians and accompanists, but changes can be made. Start building the congregation's repertoire of hymns by adding new hymns. Enlist the help of the choir in introducing new songs. Find the hidden musicians in your congregation and ask them to play guitar or piano for you. Making all these changes doesn't mean that we throw everything out the window. We maintain the traditional while incorporating what is good from the new and contemporary.¹⁰⁶ With a little time, effort, organization, and planning, churches can give their worship new life.

When it comes to Bible studies, teenagers are not looking to be spoon-fed Sunday school truths. They don't just want to dip their toes into God's Word; they want to jump in and see how deep they can go.¹⁰⁷ Pastors should rejoice at this revelation, for all their tiring exegetical work has found another outlet. But teens aren't interested in hearing sixty minute lectures during Bible study. They want an engaging discussion of biblical truths. For the Bible study leader that means "less lecturing and more discussion-study. It means teaching and using Bible study

¹⁰⁴ WELS have several books of worship resources. Some of the most helpful will be *Christian Worship: New Service Settings*, *Christian Worship: Supplement*, and *Christian Worship: Occasional Services*.

¹⁰⁵ Goodman, "Why Young People Leave WELS: The 11 Recommendations," 6-7.

¹⁰⁶ Pastor Jonathan E. Schroeder wrote an excellent article on using the wealth of worship resources we have at our disposal, both new and old. He emphasizes that we should use treasures both old and new not because they are old or new, but because they are treasures. This article, which appeared in the March 2013 of the WELS Commission on Worship's newsletter, *Worship the Lord*, is entitled "Bring Out Treasures Old and New." It can be accessed at <https://connect.wels.net/AOM/ps/worship/Worship%20the%20Lord/8.%20Confessional%20Perspectives%20on%20Worship/59.%20Bring%20Out%20Treasures%20New%20and%20Old.pdf>.

¹⁰⁷ Balge, "Helping Our Students Grow to Christian Maturity," 1-2.

methods that dig into Scripture, rather than topical presentations exclusively.”¹⁰⁸ Don’t be afraid to dig deep and let people wrestle with God’s Word. Let them ask their tough questions, and then direct them to the depths of God’s Word for answers. Don’t water down the teachings of Jesus. Keep pointing them to Scripture, and help them understand what God is saying to them.¹⁰⁹

As you teach Bible studies, remember that imparting knowledge is only part of your goal. Cognitive goals are important, because people need to hear and know what the Bible says. But don’t stop there. Teach for affective goals. Aim beyond the intellect and touch the will and emotions. Teach in a way which moves God’s people to want to grow and gives them specific ways to grow. Teach in a way that helps them translate faith to life. Make the truths of Bible real. Show them how the lessons of Scripture apply in real life. Challenge your class to find ways to make scriptural truths real as they live during the week.¹¹⁰ Digging deep into God’s Word and finding real-life applications for it will lead to better engagement with the material and better retention of it. A stronger interest in, and better understanding of, God’s Word is key to keeping our teenagers in the faith.¹¹¹

Involving Teenagers

The study by WELS entitled “Why Young People Leave WELS” uncovered some eye-opening findings. Perhaps the most enlightening of these was that both pastors and leavers feel as though teenagers and young adults “don’t count” in church. “[Pastors made] significant

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 4-5.

¹⁰⁹ This is an excellent reason to have teenagers and adults in the same Bible study. Often teenagers are not as knowledgeable about Scripture as adults are (although, the opposite can be just as true). A person with decades of experience with Word of God will add more clarity and depth to conversations and discussions than will a person with a few years of experience. Each group will bring different perspectives on the Word, perspectives which can enhance the understanding of the group.

¹¹⁰ The reader is directed to pages two through five of the essay “What Can Be Done to Make Our Children Active Church Members?” for a more thorough discussion on the importance of teaching for affective goals. This essay can be found online at <http://wlsessays.net/files/GerlachChildren.pdf>.

¹¹¹ As we seek to revamp our worship and Bible studies, keep in mind these suggested changes are changes in style, not in substance. We don’t change because people ask for it. We change in order to open new byways for the gospel message to work. We don’t change everything on a whim, but we carefully examine our methods and procedures and look for ways to improve. The changes I have suggested in the previous few paragraphs are simply ways to make people more open to hearing God’s Word and to improve our presentation of the law and gospel. The Word of God is always efficacious, as Isaiah 55:10-11 tells us, but we can certainly present the Word in a way that speaks to people.

comments surrounding the fact that this age group is not engaged or made to feel that their opinions count; there is a feeling they (young adults) are not respected.”¹¹² That same study also reports that “this group [of young adults] complains that, after confirmation, there is nowhere to go. There is the feeling that young people are not taken seriously, have no meaningful input and play no significant WELS role.”¹¹³ It is not entirely clear how this attitude came about. Perhaps it developed slowly, without any malicious intent. But this attitude of WELS not caring for its young adults is turning teenagers away.¹¹⁴ If we want to keep teenagers in church, this pattern of not counting young people needs to stop.

The way to reverse this attitude in WELS is to involve teens and young adults. We need to create opportunities for them to be needed. This doesn’t mean we have to invent some new position in the church. In fact, doing so may give the impression that we have no “real” need for teenagers and are simply throwing them a bone by giving them an otherwise pointless job to make them feel needed or important. We can look for existing opportunities for service and start plugging teens into those roles. Teens can help teach Sunday school for children, either by assisting the teachers or by leading the singing time that traditionally begins the Sunday school hour. Teens are more than capable of canvassing and assisting in other outreach opportunities. Teens can help run a Vacation Bible School program, assist with a soccer or music camp, help out during work days on the church grounds, videotape sermons and services and post them online, and serve as ushers and acolytes during worship. They are even capable of planning teen group events and outings.

Yes, teens will require supervision and guidance. Yes, this means more work for a pastor or church leader. But we have a deep pool of talent and energy which we are not using. We have maturing souls to involve in the mission of the church. We have young adults who are an integral part of the body of Christ, and we need to show them how important they truly are to the

¹¹² Goodman, “Why Young People Leave WELS: A Summary,” 3.

¹¹³ Ibid., 11.

¹¹⁴ On a related topic, every church must ask itself what it is doing to go after the lost and straying teenagers in its care. At the risk of overgeneralizing, there doesn’t seem to be a concerted effort among WELS churches to reclaim its teenagers who leave. Why is that? Is it a lack of motivation? Is it a lack of time (which is really a pathetic excuse)? What steps can WELS congregations take to bring these wandering sheep back into the fold? That is a question every church must honestly answer. This question is worthy of more thorough treatment, but is beyond the scope of this paper.

church. Teenagers live in an age in which they are virtually unnecessary for the efficient functioning of society. We can challenge this concept by intentionally creating opportunities for these teens to realize their importance in the church. Showing that we care about what they bring to the table is a great first step.

We need to make an honest effort to involve teenagers and young adults. In addition to the suggestions listed above, there are many other ways for this demographic to get involved. More mature young adults can have an advisory role on the church council so that church leadership is aware of the needs and input of the younger adult members. Certain teens can be trained as evangelists who follow up on first-time church visitors. These teens can drop off welcome packages, deliver a handwritten note which thanks the visitor for attending, and help establish a relationship with this prospect.¹¹⁵ Responsible teens can lead a fundraising effort for the teen group. Young adults can “adopt” a shut-in or elderly member and visit them once a month, help with lawn care or household chores, and bring copies of sermons or prepared devotions to share. Alongside a responsible adult, teenagers can help staff a nursery for young children during worship.¹¹⁶

All of these suggestions are practical and doable. They will take work and organization, but they are real, meaningful ways for teens to serve and feel needed. The key is to communicate that young adults and teenagers play an important role in the body of Christ. When teens know the importance of their work for the church, they will take ownership of their faith. And when they own their faith, they are more likely to stand firm in it throughout their lives.

Continuing Education

Most churches have a Christian education system in place for children. They have children’s sermons or children’s church, plus Sunday school during the year and a Vacation Bible School during the summer months. Around the sixth or seventh grade, children start taking confirmation class as a way to learn the basic truths of Christianity. This confirmation class

¹¹⁵ In addition to utilizing the gifts of the teenage evangelist, imagine the impact on the prospect when he or she sees a young member of the congregation knocking on their door!

¹¹⁶ Many visitors ask about a nursery for their children. Providing a staffed nursery is part of being a welcoming church that caters to visitors. See Pastor Jonathan E. Schroeder’s handbook entitled, “Welcoming Worship” for other ways churches can be “visitor-friendly.”

typically serves as the path to “adult” (read: communicant) membership. After confirmation class there is usually a teen Bible study or a teen group which incorporates Bible studies into its activities. But then what happens? The next level in the taxonomy of education is usually geared towards adults. Older teenagers don’t feel like adults. They might be adults in the legal sense of the term, meaning that they are eighteen years old, can vote, enlist in the military, and buy guns, but they have yet to take their place in the “adult world,” where they work a full-time job and settle down to start a family. Those teens and young adults between confirmation and “adulthood” don’t have a lot of programming specifically geared for them. They feel too old to be stuck in the teen group with confirmation students, but they feel too young to be in Bible studies with a room full of parents and married folks. As a result, most teens feel out of place.

This approach to the Christian education of our teens is not ideal. Pastor Mark Zarling summed it up well when he said, “Our approaches to the teen members of our congregation represent a paradox that puzzles them at best, and alienates them at worst.”¹¹⁷ As a church body, we have left teens in no-man’s-land. They don’t know where they fit into the picture, and they don’t feel welcome, so they leave.

The other alternative to consider is that churches are sending the wrong message. With so little teen-specific programming and Bible study opportunities, we are sending the message that confirmation is the end goal of training children. Is there not a tendency in WELS churches to look upon teenagers as immature human beings, but to consider them mature Christians after they are confirmed? After years of guarding and guiding them, we suddenly kick them out of the nest and expect them to fly on their own. We leave young teens on their own to be faithful in making use of the means of grace, and we don’t help them grow into that joyful use.¹¹⁸ In other words, the church has become a place to make mature Christian teenagers, but not mature Christian adults.

This practice needs to change. Mark DeVries writes, “The first principle of family-based youth ministry is this primary goal: to equip young people to grow toward mature Christian

¹¹⁷ Mark G. Zarling, “Keeping Kids in the Kingdom,” 2. Presented to the Central Teachers’ Conference, Beaver Dam, WI, February 25, 1999. <http://wlsessays.net/files/ZarlingKids.pdf>.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 2.

adulthood (that is, to present them ‘perfect’ or ‘complete in Christ’).¹¹⁹ If we are serious about keeping teenagers in church, we need to shepherd them all the way through to Christian maturity and adulthood, not stopping when they are Christian teenagers. One of the ways to do this is to put together a plan for continuing Christian education during the teenage years.

The sad truth is that “most churched teenagers have just enough knowledge of the gospel to inoculate them against ever being transformed by it.”¹²⁰ They know enough to have a head knowledge of their Savior, but their faith is small and immature. They know enough to tell the basic gist of many Bible stories, but not enough to stand up to attacks on the Bible by the secular world. The education system we have in place is not fixing this knowledge gap, nor is it shoring up a weak faith with convictions of the truth. What churches need is a planned curriculum for students who have been confirmed. This course of study would be designed to supplement and enhance the lessons learned in confirmation.

Professor emeritus Kuske has outlined a proposal for this new curriculum for high school students in his essay entitled “Expanding the Nurture of High School Age Youth.” For brevity’s sake we will not go into the details of the plan, but merely mention some of the highlights. One of the priorities of this proposed curriculum is to develop personal Bible study skills to equip each child for personal study and growth. A second priority is to address specific spiritual subjects with which teenagers must wrestle in today’s world. The curriculum would go through both Old and New Testament books as subjects are brought up and discussed.¹²¹

There is sure to be some push-back against this idea. “It will take lots of work and time to prepare and commence.” Yes, it will. But isn’t it worth the effort if it keeps children in God’s Word? “Young people won’t want to do this.” Is that a true statement? Consider these words from seminary professor emeritus David Kuske:

It is true that high school students, given the independence youth enjoy today, want to be treated like and instructed like adults. At the same time, as they gain experience with life, they come to realize they still have much to learn and so are open to guidance that is

¹¹⁹ DeVries, *Family-Based Youth Ministry*, 73.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 154.

¹²¹ David Kuske, “Expanding the Nurture of High School Age Youth.” This essay is available at <http://wlsessays.net/files/KuskeYouth.pdf>. It really is a must-read for anyone who is seriously considering revamping their current program of education for youth and teenagers.

given by adults in a loving and non-demeaning way. So though young people may outwardly protest a prescribed course for them in the high school years, a well-planned and edifying curriculum which addresses the spiritual needs of youth will be accepted inwardly.¹²²

There is likely to be resistance from teens, especially the first few years' worth of students. But once this curriculum becomes standard procedure, the resistance is likely to fade, especially if it proves effective in keeping teens in the faith.

The biggest question about this proposed curriculum is how it would fit into the new model of teen ministry, which strives to put teenagers into Bible studies with adults. This will be a difficult line to walk, but this does not have to turn into an "either/or" situation (i.e., we either have the new curriculum or we have teens with adults in Bible study). Perhaps the new curriculum would be beta-tested in an adult Bible study with both teens and adults in the audience. Perhaps the new curriculum would only be scheduled for a few months each year. There are ways to mesh the two options without forsaking one. Each church must consider its particular situation and act in the best interest of its members.

Use The Right Tools

With all the new thoughts and ideas proposed in this thesis, it's easy to forget who is actually responsible for keeping teenagers in church. It's easy to think that our clever strategies, our eloquent sermons, our revamped Bible studies, and the newly-strengthened homes in our churches will be what keeps teens in church and in the faith. But it's not our efforts that keep teenagers in church; it's God's efforts. "Make no mistake about it. The work of preservation in the faith is just as much God's miraculous activity unleashed as the work of conversion to the faith. Let's not kid ourselves about keeping kids in the kingdom. Only the Lord Christ can protect and preserve."¹²³

God has given his church some powerful tools to keep his teenaged lambs in the fold. He's blessed his church with new ideas and strategies, with clever and innovative leaders, and with well-trained pastors. But the focus must always be on keeping each soul in touch with the life-giving Word, for it is only through that Word that the Holy Spirit will be unleashed. Keeping

¹²² Kuske, "Expanding the Nurture of High School Age Youth," 4.

¹²³ Zarling, "Keeping Kids in the Kingdom," 5.

teenagers in church means bombarding them with the good news over and over again. It means flooding them with the creedal truths of salvation. It means praying earnestly that God would work in their hearts and strengthen their faith through your efforts. It means lots of one-on-one ministry, using both law and gospel to show sin and grace to God's beloved children. God asks his ministers to be faithful in their efforts, and he promises to work through those efforts to achieve his purpose.

Is this reminder too simple? Not at all! This reminder is fitting, for it puts the focus where it needs to be - on the power of God and his Word. His law and gospel are the primary tools he has given us to keep teenagers in church and in the faith. Use them faithfully, for God will work through them.

Conclusion

Ministry with teenagers is not an easy task. In fact, working with teens in this day and age is more difficult than any other time in the last fifty years.¹²⁴ Teenagers face more distractions, more difficulties, and a world ruined by sin. Keeping them in the church is becoming harder and harder, but church is exactly where they need to be if they are to live as salt and light in this world (Matthew 5:13-16).

As we strive to keep teenagers in church, remember that there is no quick fix for this issue. There is no radical solution except one: the gospel. "The gospel is radical in the sense that it goes to the root of the problem, which is the sinful nature ... and it leads to the source of life, who is Christ crucified. Use the Gospel. Trust its power. Leave the results to God."¹²⁵

The way to keep teenagers in church is to change the paradigm for teen ministry. Change from a church-centered, home-supported model to a home-centered, church-supported model. Strengthen Christian families with the Word of God. Equip and encourage parents to teach gospel truths at home. Meet the spiritual needs of teenagers. Build relationships between teenagers and mature Christian adults. Involve teens in the mission of the church. Rethink worship styles and ways of studying the Bible. Provide appropriate programming for teenagers,

¹²⁴ Barna Group, "Role of Healthy Families in Youth Ministry."

¹²⁵ Balge, "Helping Our Students Grow to Christian Maturity," 6.

but keep the focus on the family. This new paradigm is not meant to destroy the old; it is meant to build a solid foundation of faith on the strength of the immediate and extended Christian families. That's how to keep teenagers in church: use the power of the gospel centered in the home and supported by the church.

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