

The Real Reasons Young Adults Drop Out of Church

Despite all the fear-driven presentations you've heard, not every young person is walking out of the church the moment they finish high school and never coming back.

Here's what you need to know. The young adults who do drop out of church often lack a firsthand faith—a faith of their own—and a relationship with Christ that matters deeply in their own personal life apart from their parents' pressure.

I've heard some pretty remarkable statistics about church dropouts—I'm sure you have too. Such as: 94 percent (some say 86 percent) of evangelical youth drop out of church after high school, never to return. The problem? Those stats are urban legends. They've not been validated, and research has never come to that conclusion.

Let's explore the actual statistics regarding young adult dropouts, and why they drop out:

The Truth: Some Young Adults Do Drop Out

The reality is there are dropout challenges, but it's not 94 percent or even 86 percent of evangelicals. Real research shows that faith is rather resilient from one generation to the next—but that does not sell the books, I know.

A few years ago, LifeWay Research examined the issue, looking at some of the things that help young adults stick, stay and have a robust faith. We wanted to know what it takes for a student to continue his or her faith through high school, college, the career years and beyond. (It's discussed in *Essential Faith* by Sam and Thom Rainer.)

We looked at the faith of students who attended a Protestant church (mainline or evangelical) twice a month or more for at

least one year in high school. Here's what we found: About 70 percent of young adults ages 18 to 22 stopped attending church regularly for at least one year. Is that a 70 percent dropout rate? With all the nuances and with all the caveats, we'd say so. That's a dropout rate, a much too high dropout rate.

Other research and studies among evangelical youth, however, indicate that number is almost certainly much lower (see the study mentioned earlier). And it should be noted that we found almost two-thirds of those who left in our Protestant study were back in church by the end of the study.

Why Do Young Adults Drop Out?

We also asked young adults why they dropped out of church. Of those who dropped out, about 97 percent stated it was because of life changes or situations. That's a pretty substantial number. Among their more specific reasons:

- They simply wanted a break from church (27 percent).
- They had moved to college (25 percent).
- Their work made it impossible or difficult to attend (23 percent).

About 58 percent of young adults indicated they dropped out because of their church or pastor. When we probed further, they said:

- Church members seemed judgmental or hypocritical (26 percent).
- They didn't feel connected to the people at their church (20 percent).
- Church members were unfriendly and unwelcoming (15 percent).

Fifty-two percent indicated some sort of religious, ethical or political beliefs as the reason they dropped out. In other words, about 52 percent changed their Christian views. Maybe they didn't believe what the church taught, or they didn't

believe what they perceived others in the church to believe.

Firsthand faith leads to life change and life-long commitment. More specifically, 18 percent disagreed with the church's stance on political or social issues, 17 percent said they were only going to church to please others anyway, and 16 percent said they no longer wanted to identify with church or organized religion.

What Can We Do?

The reason that many church-attending young adults stopped going to church upon graduating from high school? Their faith just wasn't personally meaningful to them. They did not have a firsthand faith. The church had not become a valued and valuable expression in their life—one that impacts how they live and how they relate and how they grow.

Church was perhaps something their parents wanted them do. They may have grown up in church, and perhaps they faced pressure from parents and even peers to be involved in church. But it wasn't a firsthand faith.

We cannot posture our student ministries to think like and act like a four-year holding tank with pizza. Instead, we need to prepare young adults for the spiritual challenges that will come and the faith questions they will face. Firsthand faith leads to life change and life-long commitment.

This post was inspired by a conversation about Firsthand Faith, a book by Ryan and Josh Shook.

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