

How to Not Leave the Church

There is a growing perception that youth are leaving the church. I am not sure if I fully agree with this perception. Anecdotally, I think everyone knows someone who has left the church for one reason or another. Whether or not, this statement is anecdotally true, or statistically true I believe that there are things we can do to help build “staying power” in to the lives of our students. There are no guarantees here, but... my assumption is, if these elements are a part of your students lives already they will be less likely to leave the church.

The Must Haves

These are kind of obvious but as far as staying power goes, without these you kind of have no hope. Why not have a conversation with your teen about these elements it may lead to some great discussions. You may even have to ask yourself as a parent if there are some elements presented here that you may not see in your own life.

- **A Realization of Salvation** – Do you know that you are saved? It seems simple but many teens struggle with an assurance of their own salvation. It is good to be able to pinpoint when and how you crossed the line of faith. For many students this is a gradual thing that over time they simply realized that they believed and it is sometimes a great idea to draw the proverbial line in the sand and pray a prayer or make a declaration in a journal so that there is an official understanding of when and how.
- **A Personal Faith** – Has your teen moved beyond “Yo Mama’s religion?” Can they truly say that this faith is theirs because they believe it or is it simply something they are participating in because they have to. Let me reassure you parents, if the latter is the case this is simply more of a reason to keep making them come.

As far as making them come is concerned there are many factors involved in this fight. Boredom, laziness, sleepyhead syndrome, the list can go on. I think you might have to ask yourself this question, is making my child come to church for one hour going to kill them? Probably not. It might seem as though you might die with all of the arguing but trust me it is the better alternative than leaving them at home to play on the internet.

Is your child bored at church? Ask a few questions? What is boring? The music, the preaching? The whole thing? Is there another service you can attend with your child? Is there a better church for your son or daughter? Isn’t the goal to get your child in church, or is it to get your child to attend your church? Bottom line, I want your child to attend church even if he doesn’t attend mine.

- **Great Friends** – Every teenager needs friends but Christian teenagers need great friends. Friends who will keep them accountable and support them in their faith journey. Friends who will see them at church, youth group and school. These kinds of friends are found best within a youth group small group and if your student is not plugged in to a small group I would encourage you to get them in to one asap.
- **The Ability to Share your Testimony** – Simply put, teens need to be able to speak out loud about their faith. The reality is that in Junior High, Senior High and Post high school your student will be asked why they believe and what they believe. Your teen should be able to clearly articulate at least the basics of how they became a Christian and what that means to them.
- **The Ability to Ask great Question and Find their Own Answers** – It is never a bad thing to ask questions. Especially questions about Christianity. There is a lot about the bible and Christian history that is confusing and often convoluted. It is important that teenagers ask these difficult questions and even better, learn how to get their own answers. Answers can be found in all kinds of places. They can search their bibles, ask a pastor, wander around on the internet, read books. Even the process of seeking the answers is good for students to have, it will help them in every area of life.

The Better ifs

These are, in my opinion, essential but, they can be harder to cultivate in ones own life without a mentor or youth ministry opportunities. As with the Must Haves the Better ifs are no guarantee that a student will choose to stay in church but these next few elements are “game changing” in terms of life impact.

- **The Ability to Pray “Out Loud”** – You never know when you will need this but I see it as absolutely essential to growing up in church. As an adult in church we get called upon to pray out loud, whether in a small group, at a family function, in a meeting or even in a church service and its better for us to be prepared and to feel comfortable rather than intimidated.
- **A Devotional Life** – It is absolutely essential for personal spiritual growth that every one of us develop a continual habit of daily prayer and bible reading. It does not have to be long or drawn out just something that gives your teen a break from the ever revolving world where they can focus on Christ and His work in their lives. This can involve journaling, bible reading, devotional books, etc.
- **Multiple Serving Experiences** – God grants us all Spiritual Gifts. It is His desire that we experience Joy and fulfillment from serving in our

area of giftedness. The best way for us to learn where we fit in as a part of the body of Christ is to serve in multiple areas, to try out different roles until we find one that fits us perfectly.

- **Multiple “God” experiences** – What I mean by this is there have been many times in my life where I knew I had truly met God. These have happened in prayer, in worship experiences, through communion and through books I have read where God was truly speaking to me. When a teenager goes through turmoil I want them to know with all certainty that there have been times in his/ her life where God was undeniably “real”.
- **A Missions Trip Experience** – These trips are mind changing, life changing and usually involve a bit of a paradigm shift. Every student should have the opportunity to go on at least one missions trip before they graduate from youth ministry. Of course, we will periodically offer missions trip experiences but often the most life changing experiences happen when we head off on a trip on our own. These are the times when we truly realize that we desperately need God and rely on him even more. On another note a missions trip develops a heart for lost people in the students who attend them.
- **Baptism** – Simply put, the longer they put this off the easier it is not to do it... I have come to realize that Baptism is not simply a step of obedience, it is crucial to our ongoing development as Christians. I have seen to many of my students “stall out” in their faith simply because they refused the simple act of baptism.
- **Mentoring** – Every teenager needs someone, other than a parent, who loves them and cares for them and will build in to their lives. This can be found in many forms, youth leaders, grandparents, uncles, aunts, pastors, teachers... just someone who will lift up and support your kid when life gets too hard. I also would like to mention that I believe every student should be building in to the lives of someone younger than them. This kind of relationship gives great perspective to teenagers to see the world through the eyes of someone younger. It really cuts down on selfishness and self-centredness

The Most Important Thing

A kid can have all of the above and still leave church. Many times I will watch a great kid, with all of the right things, walk out of our youth ministry and walk right out of the church. That is why I have come to the conclusion that this next point is the most important thing for **NOT** leaving the church. I have realized that no matter how great your student’s youth ministry experience is unless this element has been a regular part of his experience growing up chances of him staying in church are still negligible.

- **Habitual Weekend Church Attendance** – It is absolutely essential that your student gets used to coming to church at least 3 – 4 times a month. Church attendance is a very visible indicator for spiritual growth, it is not the only indicator but a lack of attendance can be an indication that something is not right within their spiritual lives. If attendance as a family in the growing years is optional or sporadic, attendance as High School students or young adults will continue to be optional and sporadic sometimes even more so.

In the end our choice to leave the Church or NOT leave the church is still our choice. As students grow up and begin to make their own decisions the spiritual foundations they have built in their younger years will have huge impact on their adult years. We are attempting as a youth ministry to build staying power into the lives of your kids but in the end I realize that it's not about me, or church it's about a personal decision and I am just attempting to make that decision easier to make.