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## Declining Participation in Christian Youth

Christianity has long been a staple of culture the world over. It has spread with civilization, and influenced cultures for over 2000 years. Recently, however, the number of Christians in the United States is declining. Since 2007, the percent of Americans identifying as Christian dropped from 78% to 70%, with nearly 23% of the population having no religious affiliations (Burke). This change poses a significant problem to our society's declining morality, as Christianity is mostly responsible for what are usually accepted as basic morals. While the drop has been seen in all ages, races, and ethnicities, millennials and youth have seen the largest change (Burke). They are less involved, less interested, and many are leaving their faith once they reach adulthood. For anyone involved with a Christian church, the decline in the quality and quantity of the next generation is obvious.

Although there are a number of reasons for this decline, there are two major factors that affect a youth's involvement in their church: the quality of their youth ministry, and the religious influence from parents in the home. The reason for a church's poor youth ministry may vary depending on the church. For many youth, it's a lack of depth. Fun meet and greets, candy, and superficial, repetitive "Jesus loves you"s can only hold a teenager's attention for so long, as discovered by Carol Lytch in a study conducted for her book, *Choosing Church (What Attracts and Keeps Youth)*. A sense of

belonging, meaning, and opportunities to develop competence were all things that consistently drew youth into the church (*What Attracts and Keeps Youth*). While these elements can be fairly easy to incorporate, they are also easily left out of a program. Churches become so desperate to grow their youth ministries that they become all about attracting youth and forget the things that will make teens want to stay. A study by the Barna Group found that 66% of teens ranked worshipping and making a connection with God as the most important thing they looked for in a church and youth group (Steptoe). If a church is investing all of their time in flashy attractions, they are neglecting the things that teens truly want, the things that will keep them within the group.

Perhaps the largest factor in teens' attitudes toward church is their parents. Parental influences greatly shape children and youth, both consciously and subconsciously. Religion is no exception. Over half of young adult children follow their parents example in remaining affiliated with the same religious traditions and beliefs (Zietlow).

For a parent to successfully pass on their faith, they need to be consistent (Zietlow). They must live what they preach, and do so as consistently as possible. A religiously disinterested youth may not be shunning their faith so much as they are reflecting their parents' own noncommittal attitudes (Rymarz and Graham). Without a constant model, youth lack a religious role model to follow (Zietlow). Beyond a constant example, there must also be a good relationship between parent and child (Zietlow). No matter how zealous their faith, a distant, overly strict, or overbearing parent will have far less success in passing their faith on to the next generation.

Fathers in particular have a strong impact on a youth's view of religion, says Dallas in an article that summarizes both personal observation and external studies on fathers and religion. Fathers have historically been the leaders of the family's spiritual life, providing a moral example and religious instruction (Dallas). Even as society's view of fatherhood shifts, dads are still greatly influencing the course their children take (Dallas). Research conducted by Vern Bengtson found that 56% of fathers and children with close relationships shared similar levels of religious participation, while only 36% of those with weak relationships shared close levels of religious participation (Dallas). Essentially, the better the father-child bond, the more likely that child will engage in and remain with his faith. When approached from a slightly more psychological perspective, this isn't surprising. God is typically presented as a male, fatherly figure. When a youth's own father is present, engaged, and loving, they are more likely to have a positive view of a relationship with God (Dallas). On the flip side, if the youth had an absent or abusive father, they may have a harder time having a strong relationship with God (Dallas), as they have no reference point for what a healthy father-child relationship looks like.

What can be done to remedy these issues? In the case of ineffective leadership, the remedies are a little simpler. The teenage years are a time of exploration and uncertainty, with many unsure of where they belong. Thus, a youth ministry should evoke a sense of belonging. Giving students a physical space that is "theirs" can help, as they have a space that isn't some multipurpose recreation room, but someplace just for them (*What Attracts and Keeps Youth*). A balance between being "open" enough for new members, but "closed" enough to retain current members, should be found (*What*

*Attracts and Keeps Youth*). Small groups and integration with the overall church life help create a sense of cohesion and “family” (*What Attracts and Keeps Youth*).

Secondly, today’s secular world causes many teens to crave a sense of meaning. Meaning can be created by not just skimming the surface, but delving into deeper conversations and even personal faith journeys. Adult leaders can share their own faith journeys, and there should be at least one trusted person that can speak with youth about their faith journeys (*What Attracts and Keeps Youth*). Discussions about rituals and traditions within the church that do more than just superficially describe them, but delve deeper into their origins and purposes can help give youth a greater understanding of their faith.

My own personal experience leads me to believe that youth conferences are an excellent way to instill meaning in a young person’s life and faith. I attended four throughout high school, three of which were smaller and more focused on the Midwestern area, and one that was a national conference. For me and many of my peers, the smaller conferences were a much better experience, as they dealt with more purely spiritual topics and weren’t afraid to dig deep into the spiritual issues teens face. The national conference felt more like a party, aimed at getting youth excited and engaged, but not really giving them anything deep to hold on to once they left. There was so much going on that it was easy to get caught up in running from one speaker to the next, and not always a lot of time for reflection. At the smaller conferences however, there was a little more free time, and small group discussions were built into the schedule. Analyzing what you had heard so as to participate in these discussions gives

youth a better chance of really absorbing what they learned, instead of immediately forgetting it.

Youth should also be given opportunities to develop competence (*What Attracts and Keeps Youth*). Discussion and activities that help students know what their talents and spiritual gifts are, as well as acting upon them, give youth a chance to be more actively engaged (*What Attracts and Keeps Youth*). Youth can also benefit from developing leadership potential and skills (*What Attracts and Keeps Youth*) by participating in church-wide activities that engage and provide learning opportunities.

In the case of parental influence, there are less apparent solutions. In general, if there is little or no faith life at home, it can be very difficult to introduce one. A parent discovering or re-kindling their faith can help, or another family member such as a grandparent may step in to take youth to church. Some particularly driven youth may be inspired to find God on their own, even without a religious upbringing, but this is less common. Unlike problems within the youth ministry, the issue of parental influence doesn't have any particular solution.

Whatever the reasons for the lack of youth involvement, it is a problem that needs to be addressed. By seriously analyzing their youth programs, churches can identify their weak points and come up with ways to fix them. They should also focus on instructing not just the youth, but the adults, so that the faith can be more effectively passed on. By implementing strategies such as these, Christians can take a more active role in creating a stronger, more faithful next generation.

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