

Student ministry leaders and parents share goals

March 27, 2025

BRENTWOOD, Tenn.—Anecdotes often portray parents and student ministry leaders at odds, but both groups share a desire to see the next generation grow spiritually. Each also believes they have a positive, healthy relationship with the other.

A study from Lifeway Students and Lifeway Research explores the perspective of [churchgoing parents of teenagers](#) and [student ministry leaders](#) in local churches. Both emphasize the spiritual health of their students and say they want to work together to see the next generation become disciples of Christ.

“For believing parents, a key goal is that their teenagers develop a genuine faith in Christ—a desire shared by student ministry leaders,” said Chad Higgins, coauthor of [Define the Relationship: Growing a Parent Ministry that Brings Families and Churches Together](#), a book based on this research.

“Both want students to grow spiritually healthy and mature in their walk with Christ. To align on this, we need to move beyond tracking church attendance as the sole measure of faithfulness and help parents understand and discuss terms like ‘spiritually healthy’ or ‘growing in Christ’ in meaningful ways.”

What do Christian parents say?

Lifeway Research surveyed 1,001 parents who regularly attend church and have at least one child in grades 6-12. They shared hopes for their children,

experiences with student ministry and if they feel they could use some help.

When asked their biggest priority for their student's future, 2 in 5 (41 percent) say their main goal is spiritual well-being. Around half as many point to emotional well-being (19 percent) and physical well-being (18 percent).

Fewer choose financial well-being (9 percent), having a profession they enjoy (9 percent) or relational well-being (4 percent).

Most parents place spiritual (71 percent), emotional (66 percent) and physical (60 percent) well-being of their student's future as one of their top three priorities.

Almost half (45 percent) say financial well-being, a third (32 percent) choose their student having a profession they enjoy and a quarter (25 percent) say relational well-being is one of their top three highest priorities.

"All the potential priorities listed for parents are good things," McConnell said. "This is the tension that exists in every Christian home. Parents are forced to consider if seeking the kingdom of God and encouraging their student to do the same is of first importance or one of many things they want."

Seven in 10 churchgoing parents (71 percent) actively encourage their students to be engaged in the Christian faith, including 37 percent who strongly encourage them.

Far fewer say they leave their spiritual development up to their student (12 percent), share information about different faiths without trying to influence their student (11 percent) or leave their student's spiritual development up to their church (6 percent).

Most parents feel their encouragement has paid off. Seven in 10 (72 percent) say their student often or consistently lives out a belief in Jesus Christ, with 42 percent saying their student does so often and 30 percent saying they do so consistently. One in 5 (20 percent) say their student has shown interest in following Jesus. 

Still, parents have concerns about their student and their spiritual growth. More than 9 in 10 (93 percent) are at least a little worried their student will become distracted by worldly things. Nine in 10 (90 percent) have some concern about their student giving into peer pressure.

Almost as many (87 percent) say they have some level of concern about their student focusing on professional growth while neglecting their spiritual growth. Four in 5 (80 percent) are at least a little concerned their student will feel unsure about their faith.

Additionally, 5 in 6 (85 percent) say they're at least a little concerned about their student regularly attending church once they move out.

"Church leaders often notice students' high commitment to sports and extracurriculars and can feel like they compete with church involvement," said Higgins, co-host of the [Youth Ministry Booster](#) podcast.

"Without real relationships with families, it's nearly impossible to have priority conversations that don't come across as accusatory or speculative. This lack of connection can fuel the perception of conflicting goals, even when the core desires of leaders and parents align."

Most parents (62 percent) say they're equipped to help their student develop spiritually, while 36 percent feel the opposite. Yet, 94 percent agree they want to become more equipped for this, and just 5 percent disagree.

This may be where parents would like help from student pastors. Only 2

percent say they're not willing to partner with their church's student leader to help their student grow spiritually, but 72 percent say they are open to that partnership. One in 5 (20 percent) aren't sure, and 7 percent say their church doesn't have a student ministry leader. 

What do student ministry leaders say?

For their part, student ministry leaders want to partner and work with parents, but many have limited time and feel overwhelmed. Some leaders are full-time staff members, while others serve as volunteers.

"Student ministers and other leaders are working hard to create a safe, nurturing environment where students can grow spiritually," Higgins said.

"They're also seeking true partnership with families, moving beyond a one-size-fits-all discipleship model. Leaders want to communicate where students are and collaborate on the best ways to foster spiritual growth together."

The average week for a student ministry leader includes a large portion of their time engaged in preparation work alone (11 hours) or with church staff (seven hours).

Most other time is invested in the students themselves, including four hours at student ministry activities, two hours with students one-on-one and two hours with students at their extracurricular activities or hanging out. Much less time involves adult volunteers in the ministry (two hours) or parents (one hour).

Still, equipping parents is an area in which student ministry leaders want to improve. When asked what they'd love to see their ministry do more of next year, if they could do it well, leaders often pointed to increased involvement with parents.

Around 7 in 10 say they'd want to increase their equipping of parents with tools to disciple their students (70 percent) and training of parents to disciple their students (67 percent).

Many also say that if they could do it well, they would love for parents and student leaders to grow in their relationships with each other (46 percent) and for parents to grow in their relationships with each other (41 percent).

Almost as many leaders say they'd want to improve sharing information with parents to keep them aware of new elements of youth culture (38 percent).

Half of student ministry leaders (52 percent) say they would want to train Bible study leaders of students next year. Fewer point to a priority of offering big events to attract more students (33 percent). Another 23 percent would want to offer girls' ministry activities.

As leaders see a need to do more training and equipping of parents, they also see parents who want to be engaged in the spiritual development of their student.

Three in 4 (76 percent) say parents in their church are concerned about their student's spiritual development. Additionally, 7 in 10 student ministry leaders (71 percent) say parents in their church are proactive in encouraging their student to engage in the Christian faith.

Despite all the desire to partner with parents and do more training, most student ministry leaders (57 percent) say they don't have a clearly defined strategy for ministering to parents.

"Student ministers should recognize it's tough for parents to replicate something they've never experienced," Higgins said.

"If parents grew up without a model of discipleship in the home, they're

learning from scratch. Understanding this can help ministers approach parents with empathy and support as they navigate their role.”

Student ministry leaders aren't only concerned about what happens at church. Around 3 in 4 (73 percent) say they have sought to partner with parents to encourage spiritual activities at home, but some have been disappointed with the results.

More than 2 in 5 leaders who have tried to partner (43 percent) say parents don't even try to engage at home in the spiritual activities they suggest, while 40 percent of leaders say the parents at least try it.

Three in 10 (30 percent) say the parents like it, but half as many (15 percent) say the students enjoy it.

A quarter believe the activities have worked for many families for a short time (25 percent), 7 percent say these activities worked for many families for a long time and 15 percent don't think they've worked for most families. Around 1 in 6 (17 percent) say the results have been very encouraging.

Ministry leaders point to several challenges that have limited the success of these efforts. Around 2 in 5 (42 percent) say parents don't have time to prepare. Three in 10 (31 percent) believe the activities have been things parents did not want to do, while 27 percent say the students haven't wanted to participate.

A quarter (24 percent) say church leaders don't have time to plan and communicate the connection between the church's efforts and parents' efforts in students' spiritual development.

One in 10 student ministry leaders say the parent-student activities expected too much time together (11 percent) or the format of the activities has not been enjoyable (11 percent). One in 20 (5 percent) say the topics haven't been relevant.

Some leaders blame busyness (7 percent), while others say it's apathy and the activities not being a priority (4 percent). A few say the parents' efforts are not tied to the church's efforts because the parents are non-Christian or unchurched (3 percent).

"Holding two informational meetings a year won't shift the tide of discipleship in the home, if that's our goal," Higgins said. "We want to see leaders build ongoing, meaningful connections that empower families to grow together in faith."

The online survey of 1,001 student ministry parents was conducted Jan. 30 to Feb. 9, 2024, using a national pre-recruited panel. The sample provides 95 percent confidence that the sampling error from the panel does not exceed plus or minus 3.2 percent.

The online survey of 1,056 student ministry leaders was conducted Feb. 8 to Feb. 28, 2024. The sample provides 95 percent confidence that the sampling error does not exceed plus or minus 6.2 percent.