

Deeper discipleship stems tide of young adults leaving the church

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DALLAS—A significant percentage of students walk away from their faith and church after high school graduation. [The Barna Group](#) has reported six out of ten "20-somethings" involved in church during their teen years failed to translate their faith into early adulthood.

So, whose fault is it?



Rachel Scott (left) and Shelby Byrd (right), seniors at Plano East High School, speak at a student-led retreat sponsored by First Baptist Church in Richardson. (PHOTO/Courtesy of Randy Johnson at First Baptist Church in Richardson)

Barna Group President David Kinnaman suggests teenagers disengage from church after graduation due to lack of substantial discipleship. In other words, teenagers are not given the opportunity to grow and form their faith.

In the [National Study on Youth and Religion](#), Christian Smith discovered a shallow faith he calls "Moralistic Therapeutic Deism" as common among teenagers. Most teenagers equate Christianity with being a good, kind person, and they believe it exists to help people feel better about themselves. God is Creator but also distant, and he selectively is available to take care of one's needs, they believe.

Can teenagers' exodus from the church after high school be blamed entirely on youth ministries that fail to create disciples of Christ?

Greg Bowman, minister to students at [First Baptist Church in Duncanville](#), says "no."

"The whole church and parents need to be involved. Parents need to see themselves as the main disciplers of their teens," Bowman said.



A Luke 10 mission team from Tallowood Baptist Church in Houston journeyed to San Antonio to pray for a hospitalized leader of their church. After leaving San Antonio, the team headed west to the Grand Canyon where they connected with young people who live in the area. (PHOTO/Courtesy of Jerome Smith, Tallowood Baptist Church)

Church provides one of the few places teenagers can create intergenerational relationships. From small children to senior citizens, teenagers and churches should take advantage of this potential, Bowman said.

As a student minister, Bowman seeks to connect parents and adults with teens. He provides resources to parents and teens who are new to the ministry at a New Parents Fellowship Night, when he explains the ministry to parents and students.

Every fall, First Baptist in Duncanville devotes 30 Days of Prayer by adults for the teenagers. Daily prayer topics include issues such as sexual purity, friends and spiritual foundation. Bowman hopes church members not only develop a habit of praying, but also that adults in the church realize there are teens who have nobody who regularly prays for them.

Brett Levy, minister to youth at [First Baptist Church in Georgetown](#), agrees. Watching the culture become highly individualistic, he believes the church subconsciously is moving in the same direction.

Levy asserts the professionalization of the church has contributed to the problem, meaning the separation of students from families and the church at large.

"We don't have the influence (parents) think we do," Levy said, insisting students need adults in their lives to rally around them in support, prayer and discipleship.

Levy works on Sunday mornings with about 40 adults, to whom he gives the title of "minister."

"We've given them that title, and it comes with authority and responsibility," said Levy.

He also has ministry teams, made up of students who are responsible for planning and executing youth events. He provides any help they may need and guides them, but he tells the students it's their own ministry.

The youth ministry hopes to teach and equip students to serve in the church, take ownership of their ministry and live out their faith. Levy hopes to create a culture of service, so when students graduate from high school, they will search for a church where they can serve.

"Discipleship is a process," insisted Randy Johnson, youth minister at [First Baptist Church in Richardson](#).

Johnson, who has been youth minister at the Richardson church 27 years, sees discipleship as three-fold—educational, practical and evangelistic.

In the education process, students learn biblical concepts and disciplines of discipleship such as Bible study and prayer.



A Luke 10 mission team from Tallowood Baptist Church prayed together, seeking God's guidance about where they should serve. (PHOTO/Courtesy of Jerome Smith, Tallowood Baptist Church)

In the practical process, students learn by doing—putting into practice what they have learned. For an annual student-led retreat, students develop a theme, work with adult volunteers and Johnson to research topics, serve as keynote speakers and lead small-group discussions.

Throughout, it's an evangelistic process, in which students learn being disciple means sharing what Christ has done in and for them.

"Some want to separate evangelism from discipleship, but I think they go hand in hand," Johnson said.

Jerome Smith, student ministry coordinator at [Tallowood Baptist Church in Houston](#), has led two trips he calls "Luke 10 Missions"—a mission trip that is not planned but led entirely by the Holy Spirit.

Students must apply and attend five months training, in which they meet consistently with their team to pray over a map of the United States, read Luke 10, memorize Ephesians 6:10-20 and receive training on the Holy Spirit.

Knowing the majority of people in the church say they do not hear from the Holy Spirit, Smith seeks to provide his students with an opportunity to seek God's voice and respond to it.

"I want the Bible, the word, to come alive for them," said Smith.

John Kaminski, an upcoming senior, attended the Luke 10 Missions trip last summer. Kaminski's group ended up in Joplin, Mo., working at a Salvation

Army, only after the group made an unplanned route change taking them the long way to Joplin.

While eating lunch at a fast food restaurant, Kaminski and his team felt the Holy Spirit leading them to pray for the restaurant employees. Nervous, but determined to follow the Spirit, the group prayed for the workers.

A couple of days later, Kaminski remembered a specific girl who worked there, and he felt the Spirit telling him she was the reason they took the long route to Joplin.

"My knowledge of the Holy Spirit and how it works grew tremendously. It strengthened my courage to pray in awkward situations and praying in dark places," Kaminski said.

Kaminski knows there will be times when it feels as though the Holy Spirit isn't leading him, but he is confident, knowing it will strengthen him as long as he prays to the Lord with a sincere and completely open heart.

An article published by the Barna Group in 2011, stated shallow Christianity was a reason teens leave the church as young adults. According to the study, 20 percent of young adults who attended church as a teenagers said, "God seems missing from my experience of church." Twenty-three percent stated, "The Bible is not taught clearly or often enough."

Has the church provided students with a shallow, flimsy message of Christianity that crumbles as soon as the safety wheels are gone?

Bowman believes students are inheriting a shallow faith from the church. He stresses the importance of church leaders not only teaching discipleship, but also being involved in it on a personal level.

"I don't shy away from teaching strong, biblical theology to teenagers. They

can handle it. It's not just a bunch of kid stories. It's new everyday," he said.

In his student ministry, Bowman seeks to think beyond the six years a student is a part of the youth group. He envisions where students could be in five, 10 or 15 years and works to equip them so they will have healthy marriages, serve in churches and be involved in missions.

Bowman often asks himself, "Am I laying the foundation to plant seeds that will grow?"

Levy shares a similar desire in his own ministry.

"We want to develop leaders for later in life—leaders in their jobs, churches and the world. Leaders leading for Jesus," Levy said.