The Church Sticking Together

Kara Powell, Brad Griffin, and Cheryl Crawford

Wouldn't it be great to find the youth ministry silver bullet? Neither of us has seen (or used) an actual silver bullet. In our culture today, the silver bullet has become synonymous for a sure thing.

The problem is, sure things in youth ministry are rare. Programs come and go, as do communication channels and strategies for reaching kids on the margins. Who would have guessed the power of online social media a few years back or the number of middle schoolers in our groups who use smart phones?

While sure things are rare, one phenomenon that is not as rare as we would hope is students leaving the faith after they graduate from our youth ministries. As we have examined other research, our conclusion is that 40 to 50 percent of kids who are connected to a youth group when they graduate high school will fail to stick with their faith in college.[1]

Let's translate that statistic to the kids in your youth ministry.

Imagine the seniors in your youth ministry standing in a line and facing you. Now, imagine that you ask them to count off by twos, just like you used to do on the playground to divide into teams. The ones will stick with their faith; the twos will shelve it.

In an effort to understand this drop off as well as give youth leaders, churches and families tools they need to help kids develop more lasting faith, we at the Fuller Youth Institute (FYI) launched the College Transition Project. As we were planning our College Transition Project six years ago,[2] our FYI research team hoped to find *one thing* that youth workers could do that would be the silver bullet for sticky faith; the one thing that would develop long-term faith in students. We hoped to find one element of youth ministry programming (e.g., small groups, mentoring, justice work) that would be significantly related to higher faith maturity in students.

Kara Powell is Executive Director of the Fuller Youth Institute, a faculty member at Fuller Theological Seminary, and author of books in youth ministry and leadership. **Brad M. Griffin** is the Associate Director of the Fuller Youth Institute where he develops research-based training. **Cheryl A. Crawford** is Associate Professor of Practical Theology and Director of the Youth Ministry Program at Azusa Pacific University.

(This article can be found online at http://stickyfaith.org. This article was adapted from *Sticky Faith, Youth Worker Edition* by Kara Powell, Brad Griffin and Cheryl Crawford. Zondervan 2011).

This silver bullet would launch our high school graduates on a journey of faith that would help them not only survive but thrive across the transition to college and life beyond.

We haven't found that silver bullet. While small groups, mentoring, justice work, leadership and a host of other youth ministry programs are important, the reality is that kids, ministry programs and spiritual development are far more complex than that.

Intergenerational Stickiness

It turns out that intergenerational relationships are one key to building lasting faith in students. Silver bullet? No. Helpful if we want students to live their faith beyond high school? Absolutely.

Sadly, many high school students lack these significant relationships. In our effort to offer relevant and developmentally appropriate teaching and fellowship for teenagers, we have segregated (and we use that verb intentionally but not lightly) students from the rest of the church. In interviews and open-ended survey questions, participants shared reflections like this one: "The students seemed to be very separated from the rest of the congregation. Maybe fixing that gap would help unite the church."

That segregation causes students to shelve their faith. Our study of nearly 500 youth group graduates from around the country has revealed the following important insights about the power of intergenerational relationships in building sticky faith.

Intergenerational Insight #1: *Involvement in all-church worship during high school is more consistently linked with mature faith in both high school and college than any other form of church participation.*

The closest our research has come to that definitive silver bullet is this sticky finding: High school and college students who experience more intergenerational worship tend to have higher faith maturity. Of the many youth group participation variables we examined, involvement in intergenerational worship and relationships had one of the most robust correlations with faith maturity. This is true for our students' senior year of high school and their freshman year of college.

Intergenerational Insight #2: *The more students serve and build relationships with younger children, the more likely it is that their faith will stick.*

Granted, some of your teenagers opt to serve in children's ministry because they want to avoid going to the regular service. And sure, others volunteer because their schools require service hours.

Yet, even in the midst of these mixed motives, the high school students we surveyed who served in middle school or children's ministry seemed to have stickier faith in college. Part of that is probably due to the type of student who is likely to volunteer to serve younger children, but nonetheless, more than just babysitting, being involved in children's ministry seems to be faith building.

Intergenerational Insight #3: *High school seniors don't feel supported by adults in their congregations.*

As a research team, we weren't all that surprised that, of five major sources of support (adults in the congregation, parents, youth workers, friends in youth group and friends outside youth group), high school seniors ranked adults in the congregation last.

What did surprise us was how far behind they were the other four groups. One graduate reported that his church "would talk about having students involved, but they never really did." Another reflected that

church members "wanted nothing to do with us... I think they see us as kind of scary in that we're the people on the news, you know, who are dealing drugs and getting pregnant and all those sort of things...keeping us separate and treating us like we were a hazard."

Intergenerational Insight #4: *By far, the number-one way that churches made the teens in our survey feel welcomed and valued was when adults in the congregation showed interest in them.*

More than any single program or event, kids were far more likely to feel like a significant part of their local churches when adults made the effort to get to know them. One student beamed as he said, "We were welcomed not just in youth group; we were welcomed into other parts of the ministry of the church: the worship team on Sunday mornings, teaching Sunday school to kids and helping with cleaning and serving. All these other types of things really just brought the youth in and made them feel like they had a place and even feel like they were valued as individuals."

Becoming a 5:1 Church

One of the goals we give churches that want to take sticky faith seriously is to reconsider the traditional 5:1 ratio.[3] Many youth ministries say they want to have a 1:7 ratio of adults to kids on their winter retreats (meaning they want one adult for every seven kids), or a 1:5 ratio of adults to kids for their small groups. But what if we reversed that? What if we said we want a 5:1 adult-to-kid ratio in our youth ministries?

Before you panic because you think you're now supposed to recruit five small-group leaders for every one kid and you're already having a hard enough time recruiting one adult for every five kids, please relax. We're not talking about five small-group leaders. We're talking about five adults who are willing to commit to investing in one teenager in little, medium and big ways. Here's how we have seen churches embrace 5:1 through a variety of creative paths.

Put a 5:1 Twist on Existing Programs

The good news is that, as you intentionally move your programs toward 5:1, you don't have to start from scratch. Your youth ministry and your church already host events that, with some careful planning, could easily become more intergenerational. Consider these possibilities:

- Invite an adult Sunday school class to join your students on their next mission trip.
- Invite students' parents to your fall kick-off and prime your volunteers to invest relational time not only in students but parents too.
- Encourage your high school guys' small groups to attend annual men's events (crawfish boil, steak fry, chili cook-off, whatever your church does).
- Ask your women's ministries if their upcoming events (like Saturday teas or ladies' outings) can be geared for teenage and younger girls too.
- Ask if your senior adult ministry would be open to pairing up with teenagers for the next food pantry program.

The bottom line is that, if you plan ahead, you can capitalize on momentum from existing events instead of starting them all from scratch. Whenever possible, invite the larger church body to get on board with your 5:1 vision, and explain that the goal is to build lasting faith in students.

5:1 Teaching

If you're serious about sticky inter-generational relationships, you probably will need to launch a few new catalysts for 5:1.

One excellent opportunity for new 5:1 dialogue is your Sunday teaching. Odds are good that you've got adults and kids sitting in Sunday school rooms, separated only by a few walls (and, as a youth worker, you hope those walls have really good sound insulation). What if you periodically removed those walls and invited kids and adults to experience God's Word together?

5:1 Worship

We've heard from many innovative churches about how they are involving students in congregational worship—often after many years of segregated Sunday programming. A few churches have even canceled Sunday morning youth ministry in order to bring generations together in worship.

A church from St. Louis we dialogued with recently wants adults and kids to experience the same worship service every week, yet they also want to make sure their teenagers feel connected to their peers. So, every Sunday after the intergenerational worship service ends, the high school students meet for 30-45 minutes to talk about how to live out the sermon that next week at school. That way, students know they'll have a focused, lively conversation every week with their friends.

In an effort to bring a sticky intergenerational flavor to their morning worship, one Denver church decided to make their youth choir the choir for the main Sunday morning service. They were initially concerned that the service would shrink down to teenagers and their parents, but the opposite happened. Their 11:00 worship service became one of the most popular services. Adults who had invested in those kids throughout their childhood and adolescent years couldn't wait to have the teenagers lead them in music worship.

We're not advocating that churches cancel their Sunday youth groups or disband their adult choirs. Churches must do what they feel is appropriate for their own contexts. Every church should ask the simple question, "How can we increase adult-teen interaction during worship?"

5:1 Mentoring

Many churches include mentoring in their 5:1 paths. Through these empowering relationships, students are able to spend intentional time with adults who can impact and shape their spiritual journeys. The more adult mentors who seek out students and help them apply faith to daily life, the better. Among 13 different ways adults support high school kids, two variables stood out as significantly related to sticky faith over time: feeling sought out by adults and feeling like those adults "helped me to realistically apply my faith to my daily life."[4] Especially as we wrestle with how to train our staff and adult volunteers, helping kids connect the dots between their faith and their everyday lives should take priority if we're looking for long-term impact.

On one all-church retreat we heard about, participants were encouraged to find one person from a different age group and strike up a conversation. Participants were challenged to keep this conversation going once a week for six weeks. Carlos, a ninth grader, and Belinda, his grandmother's age, connected on that retreat and committed to the six-week trial. Six months later, they still get together to talk regularly.

Some youth leaders, realizing that the adults in their congregation are too busy to meet regularly with a teenager, have offered less intensive 5:1 connections. One church in our Sticky Faith Learning Cohort in Pasadena is asking adults for a few hours per year to connect with a kid based on a mutual interest, such as gardening, cooking or auto repair.

Another Texas church in our cohort identified members who could meet weekly with graduating seniors for a few months. That limited time commitment created great success in connecting youth group students with innovative and godly congregation members of all ages.

Another church in our learning cohort has decided that they are already a multigenerational congregation—everyone gathers together in the same space at the same time. But they aren't satisfied with being multigenerational. They want to truly become *inter*generational, focusing their worship, budget, priorities and language around what it means to connect with one another in mutuality across age groups. One practical way they are addressing this shift is changing the way they talk about mentoring. They've determined that mentor/mentee language can be a hindrance because it implies a multigenerational, top-down relationship. The kind of 5:1 relationships they hope to foster are rooted in mutual influence, where old and young shape one another in profound ways.

5:1 Rituals

San Clemente Presbyterian Church had already embraced the importance of intergenerational relationships before FYI started our research. As a result, while other churches are taking 5:1 baby steps, they are sprinting ahead.

When students graduate from sixth grade, they're presented with a Bible with inscriptions from their parents and other friends of the family. When those same students enter junior high, they are taken on a confirmation retreat and officially become members of the San Clemente body.

At the beginning of their senior year of high school, students hike to the top of Half Dome in Yosemite with the youth pastor, the youth ministry volunteers and the senior pastor. According to Dr. Tod Bolsinger, the senior pastor, "This tradition is so important, I have parents of elementary-age children telling me to keep in shape so I can take their children on this rite of passage hiking experience."[5]

At the end of their senior year, the church hosts a blessing ceremony for all high school students, graduating seniors, parents and congregation members. These sorts of annual rituals shape both the DNA of the church as well as the sticky faith of the students.

The Role of Parents in 5:1

When we speak with groups of parents about 5:1, we often feel them look in the direction of their youth pastors, as if it's the leaders' job to build a 5:1 web for their kids. However, parents should assume the primary responsibility for linking their kids with five or more caring adults. The youth worker's role is to come alongside parents as partners in the process, only taking the lead when parents aren't able to create the needed 5:1 strands. A few months ago I (Kara) met a single mom who understood that she was ultimately responsible for surrounding her son with loving adults, especially men who could fill the void created by his absent father. This mom had a brilliant idea for helping her son visualize their family's sticky web. In the hallway between their bedrooms, this mom has hung a few large collage picture frames, each of which has several openings for pictures. As her son builds a relationship with an adult—especially with a man—she takes a picture of her son with that adult. Then she places those pictures in her frames to remind them of the amazing adults already surrounding their family. The blank picture frames that are yet unfilled reinforce that there are more enriching 5:1 relationships still to come.

Help parents connect the dots between their kids' faith and the influence their kids' coaches, teachers and neighbors have on them from week to week. When we meet with our own kids' teachers for parent-teacher conferences, we now share our vision for bringing adults around our kids to help them flourish in all of life and ask how we can support their roles within that web. Another parent told us that she has committed to gather the parents of all the kids in her son's small group at the beginning of each school year for a barbecue. She wants to encourage

them to pray together for their kids and to begin to look for ways to invite each other into the circles of influence around their kids.

From Silver Bullets to Red Rover

Building sticky faith in young people is a complex process. But as they are released into a web of relationships where they are shaped and changed by the lives of the people in your congregation, research shows encouraging signs that this helps faith stick. Think of your 5:1 strategy like a targeted Red Rover game, where you exercise your passion as a youth leader to call upon adults you know and trust to enter the very high calling of shaping the life of a student. No silver bullet. No magic wand. Just living out Jesus' call to make disciples.

Notes

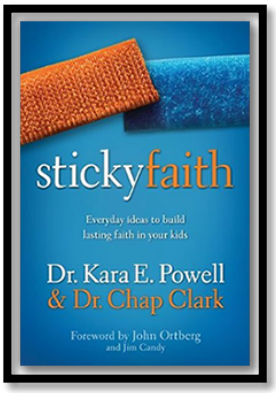
[1] In September 2006 , the Barna Group released their observation that "the most potent data regarding disengagement is that a majority of twentysomethings—61 percent of today's young adults—had been churched at one point during their teen years but they are now spiritually disengaged" (Barna Update, "Most Twentysomethings Put Christianity on the Shelf Following Spiritually Active Teen Years," The Barna Group, September 16, 2006). According to a Gallup Poll, approximately 40 percent of eighteen-to twenty-nine-year olds who attended church at age sixteen or seventeen are no longer attending (George H. Gallup, Jr. "The Religiosity Cycle," The Gallup Poll, October 19, 2006 . Frank Newport, "A Look at Religious Switching in America Today," The Gallup Poll, October 19, 2006. A 2007 survey by LifeWay Research of over one thousand adults ages eighteen to thirty who spent a year or more in youth group during high school suggests that more than 65 percent of young adults who attend a Protestant church for at least a year in high school will stop attending church regularly for at least a year between the ages of eighteen and twenty-two. (LifeWay, "LifeWay Research Uncovers Reasons 18 to 22 Year Olds Drop Out of Church," LifeWay Christian Resources, http://www.lifeway.com/article/165949. In this study, respondents were not necessarily those who had graduated from youth group as seniors. In addition, the research design did not factor in parachurch or on-campus faith communities in their definition of college "church" attendance. Data from the National Study of Youth and Religion published in 2009 indicate an approximate 30 percent drop in frequent religious service attendance across multiple Protestant denominations. Christian Smith and Patricia Snell, *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009). Fuller Youth Institute's estimate that 40 to 50 percent of high school graduates will fail to stick with their faith is based on a compilation of data from these various studies.

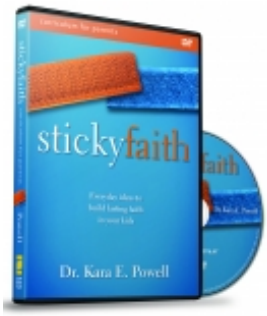
[2] The College Transition Project is a culmination of six years of study of 500 youth group students as they transition into college, including two three-year longitudinal studies and two interview studies. The goals of this research are to offer help to parents, leaders and churches in building a faith that lasts, or "sticky faith." See our About on our website for more details: http://stickyfaith.org/about-sticky-faith.

[3] This vision was inspired by the research of our friend and colleague Chap Clark.

[4] Note that these weren't just what students chose as most important to them but what seemed to have the strongest connection to the faith variables in our survey. Erika C. Knuth, Intergenerational connections and faith development in late adolescence, Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation (Pasadena, CA: Fuller Theological Seminary, Graduate School of Psychology, 2010).

[5] See David Fraze, "A Church in the Intergenerational HOV Lane," FYI E-Journal, February 2, 2009, (http://fulleryouthinstitute.org /2009/02/a- church-in-the-intergenerational-hov-lane.)

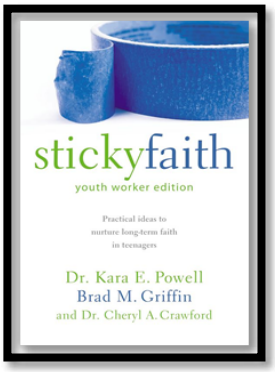


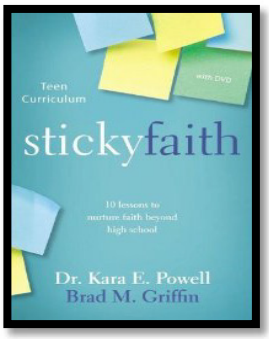


Sticky Faith: Everyday Ideas to Build Lasting Faith in Your Kids

Kara Powell and Chap Clark
(Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011)

Nearly every Christian parent in America would give anything to find a viable resource for developing within their kids a deep, dynamic faith that "sticks" long term. Research shows that almost half of graduating high school seniors struggle deeply with their faith. Recognizing the ramifications of that statistic, the Fuller Youth Institute (FYI) conducted the "College Transition Project" in an effort to identify the relationships and best practices that can set young people on a trajectory of lifelong faith and service. Based on FYI findings, this easy-to-read guide presents both a compelling rationale and a powerful strategy to show parents how to actively encourage their children's spiritual growth so that it will stick to them into adulthood and empower them to develop a living, lasting faith. ***Sticky Faith Parent Curriculum***, a video-based study, gives parents practical, tested ideas that launch kids of all ages into a lifelong journey of faith and service. Through personal, real-world experiences of research and sharing, the *Sticky Faith Parent Curriculum* enables parents to instill a deep and lasting faith in their adolescents.





Sticky Faith: Everyday Ideas to Build Lasting Faith in Your Kids

Kara Powell, Brad M Griffin, Cheryl A. Crawford
(Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011)

As youth workers are pouring their time and energy into the students in their ministries, they are often left wondering if they've done enough to equip their students to carry their faith into adulthood. The Fuller Youth Institute has done extensive research in the area of youth ministry and teenage development. In *Sticky Faith*, the team at FYI presents youth workers with both a theological/philosophical framework and practical programming ideas that develop long-term faith in teenagers. Each chapter presents a summary of FYI's quantitative and qualitative research, along with the implications of this research, including program ideas suggested and tested by youth ministries nationwide. ***Sticky Faith Curriculum for Teenagers***, a 10-session book and DVD study, gives youth workers a theological and philosophical framework alongside real-world, road-tested programming ideas. The study is designed to help high school students develop a solid foundation that endures through the faith struggles they will face in college. It enables youth leaders to impact to their students with a faith that sticks.

Stick Faith Website

Fuller Youth Institute
http://stickyfaith.org

Sticky Faith & Fuller Youth Institute Websites

(*Click on image to go to the website.*)