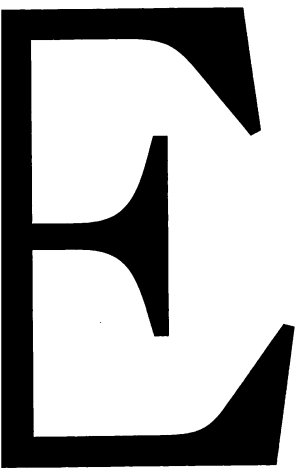


EXCLUSIVE SURVEY

By Rick Lawrence

The Best PRACTICES of A GO-TO youth ministry

We asked 23,000 Christian teenagers what topics and concerns they crave talking about with their youth pastor, and which ones they don't. And we asked them to tell us why they stay connected to their church, and what would make them jump ship.



very year we conduct the largest survey of Christian teenagers in the world. Because we have ready access to almost 23,000 kids attending one of our Group Workcamps or Week of Hope experiences (groupworkcamps.com), we get boxes and boxes of responses by the end of summer. It's a massive process to compile these results, and I got my first look at them a few weeks ago, when I was leading a widely divergent group of national youth ministry leaders through a two-day exploration of the future of youth ministry. The timing couldn't have been better, because the message Christian teenagers are trying to communicate in these survey results has a profound impact on our future direction.

The first stage of the "future of the church" exploration I led these ministry leaders through sounds simple, but in my experience, is one of the toughest disciplines we face in life—it's answering one of Jesus' favorite questions: "What do I want?" The question is at the core of an iconic encounter Jesus had with a man who had a hopeless future.

Jesus was walking near the sheep gate in Jerusalem, next to the infamous little pool the locals call Bethesda. There are five covered walkways, or porticoes, that lead to the water's edge. And in the shade of these porticoes there lies the ugly reality of a wrecked humanity: "...A multitude of those who were sick, blind, lame, and withered, waiting for the moving of the waters; for an angel of the Lord went down at certain seasons into the pool and stirred up the water; whoever then first, after the stirring up of the water, stepped in was made well from whatever disease with which he was afflicted."

Among those who are living-but-dead, there is a man who has made this awful place his home for 38 years. And though everyone in Jerusalem knows exactly why the "withered" wait and groan under the porticoes of Bethesda, and though there is no doubt about what they want, Jesus nevertheless asks the man: "Do you wish to get well?"

The sick man would have every right to take offense—every right to scowl and spit at the man who mocks him by asking him what is an obvious question: "What do you want?" But instead, the man tells Jesus what he wants: "Sir, I have no man to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up, but while I am coming, another steps down before me." Rather than wait to help him into the pool, Jesus does what the pool cannot—he tells the man to get up off the floor of the porticoe, grab his pallet, and walk away from a life that was really a death sentence.

Telling Jesus what we want is crucial in our partnership with him.

The crippled man's story is also our story—it takes courage to say what we really want, and courage to own it without reservation. In that large and eclectic gathering of ministry leaders, we spent almost two hours wrangling at tables and as a group over this tipping-point question: "What do we want for youth ministry?" And the answer we all, in the end, rallied around was this:

"Young people ruined for and rooted in Jesus."

This macro ministry goal dovetails perfectly with what Christian kids say they want at church. When we asked them what they most want to talk about with their youth pastor, their top

answer was this: "Getting a better understanding of what Jesus really said and did, and how faith in him matters in my own life."

Of course, all youth ministries would agree with this mission—aren't we all focused on "rooting" teenagers in Jesus? Yes. But in my experience as editor of GROUP for 25 years, and in my study of the research that has framed youth ministry, it's clear that our "want" has often not translated into "practice." Merely wanting something to happen, as we all know, is only the first step in a journey. It's our *practices* that determine our progress toward our want. And in *practice*, most youth ministries don't organize everything they do around helping kids get what they want: "Get a better understanding of what Jesus really said and did, and how faith in him matters in my own life."

This dynamic is what led me to write, more than five years ago, the book *Jesus-Centered Youth Ministry*. The idea is to live out the life motto of C.H. Spurgeon, perhaps the greatest preacher of all time: "In everything you do, make a beeline to Jesus." A youth ministry that not only wants Jesus to be the center of everything, but develops beeline practices that *guarantee* he's at the center of everything, will experience a burgeoning magnetic swirl around the person of Jesus and a resulting bumper-crop of spiritual fruit.

The diagnostic question is simple yet challenging: "Is this thing we're doing right now, or plan to do, helping kids 'get a better understanding of what Jesus said and did?' " The more you make it possible to answer "yes" to that question, the more your ministry will naturally orbit around Jesus—in *practice*, not just wishful thinking.

And now, on to the survey results. There is much here that is well worth mining, so I asked three youth ministry veterans I respect to look at the raw results and give me their takeaway. You'll see their insights interspersed with the survey results. And I'd love to hear your own takeaway—just email me at rlawrence@group.com with your comments...

HIGH-INTEREST ISSUES IN YOUTH MINISTRY

We asked Christian teenagers how interested they are in talking with their youth pastor (or another adult ministry leader) about 15 divergent issues—they ranked each issue on a continuum from 1 to 10, with the bottom of the scale representing “no interest” and the top of the scale representing “high interest.” Here are their “**high interest**” choices, from top to bottom:

HIGH INTEREST CHOICES

ISSUE	INTEREST
Jesus —Getting a better understanding of what he really said and did, and how faith in him matters in my own life.	29%
My Future —What’s my purpose in life, and how do I find it?	26%
Going Deeper with God —I feel like I’m sort-of drifting along in my relationship with God, and I’d like to know how I live my life more “all in” with him.	25%
Youth Group —What I like and don’t like about youth group, and how I fit or don’t fit in youth group.	22%
Friendships —I wish I knew better how to make and keep friendships, and deal with challenges in my current friendships.	19%
Barriers to Faith —The things that bother or confuse or turn me off about Christianity in general.	17%
Forgiveness and Grace —Dealing with the hard and unmerciful feelings I have toward myself, or others, because of choices and mistakes I’ve made or they’ve made.	17%
The Church —What I like and don’t like about the church, and how I fit or don’t fit in church.	16%
Family Challenges —Sometimes life in my family is so hard or painful, I just need help and perspective on how to make it.	14%
Pressure and Stress —I feel like I’m under stress almost all the time, and I need help learning how to handle it.	14%
Social Media and Technology —How to have a healthy balance and a wise approach to my “online” life—the way I use technology (like texting) and social media sites (like Facebook or Twitter).	13%
Sadness and Depression —I want help dealing with the sadness and even feelings of depression I have sometimes.	10%
Death —Dealing with the struggles and emotions I feel over people I know who’ve died.	10%
Relationships and Sex —What’s “normal” in a relationship, what’s “going too far,” and how can I learn to honor God and handle myself well in relationships?	9%
Harming Myself —I need to talk about patterns and habits in my life that are purposely harmful to me (like cutting or binge drinking or eating disorders).	9%

THE SURVEY DEMOGRAPHICS

Almost all the teenagers who filled out our survey (97%) say they “consider themselves to be a Christian.”

A lesser percentage, but still a very high number (85%), say they’ve “made a serious commitment to Jesus Christ.”

Three-quarters of the kids we surveyed (76%) attend church at least once a week (40% attend once a week, and another 10% attend three times a week or more, and 26% attend twice a week).

Four out of five (82%) say they attend only one church on a regular basis. Of the one out of five (18%) who attend more than one church, almost all (90%) attend just two.

The median age of our survey respondents is 16, with an age range from 12 to 19 years old.

Six out of 10 of our survey-takers (61%) are girls, and four out of 10 (39%) are guys.

NO-INTEREST CHOICES

And here are their “no interest” choices about issues, from top to bottom:

Harming Myself	39%
Relationships and Sex	23%
Sadness and Depression	17%
Family Challenges	15%
Social Media & Technology	15%
Pressure and Stress	13%
Death	12%
Friendships	12%
Youth Group	10%
Forgiveness and Grace	10%
The Church	10%
Going Deeper With God	9%
Barriers to Faith	7%
My Future	4%
Jesus	4%

SHOULD I STAY OR SHOULD I GO?

We asked Christian teenagers their top three reasons they've decided to stay involved in church and/or youth group, and here's what they said:

REASONS THEY STAY INVOLVED

The friendships I have at church.	57.0%
Opportunities to grow deeper in my relationship with God.	42.6%
Opportunities for service and missions.	39.1%
My youth pastor or the "lead" youth worker.	22.3%
Help for living my Christian life outside of the church—at school, home, and work.	21.4%
Fun activities and games, or trips to fun places (like amusement parks).	19.5%
Opportunities to learn more about my faith.	19.1%
Camps and retreats.	18.8%
My parents want me to stay involved.	11.7%
Support and encouragement for the challenges I face in life.	11.6%
I'm committed because it's the right thing to do.	9.9%
My small group.	8.9%
Opportunities to serve as a leader	8.6%
I feel loved and "seen" for who I am at church.	8.4%
An adult ministry leader who's not the "lead" youth pastor.	5.9%
I feel challenged to grow as a person at church.	4.6%
I'm afraid that if I stopped going to church my life would go downhill.	2.7%

We also asked these kids about possible reasons why they'd decide to leave their church and/or youth group—we told them to choose their top three possibilities:

Not growing deeper in my relationship with God.	45.2%
No opportunities for service and missions.	29.7%
Little support and encouragement for the challenges I face in life.	24.9%
My friends stop coming.	22.0%
Few opportunities to learn more about my faith.	21.9%
I don't feel loved and "seen" for who I am at church.	20.3%
The "lead" youth pastor leaves.	18.0%
It's boring to me.	17.5%
I don't feel challenged to grow as a person at church.	12.3%
My small group disbands or key people leave it.	12.0%
I decide I can follow Christ without necessarily going to church.	11.9%
What I'm learning at church/youth group has little impact on my everyday life.	11.6%
Few opportunities to go to camps and retreats.	11.6%
Few fun activities and games, or trips to fun places (like amusement parks).	8.9%
I'm pretty sure that if I stopped going to church nothing in my life would suffer.	5.8%
Few opportunities to serve as a leader.	5.3%
An adult ministry leader other than the "lead" youth pastor leaves.	4.8%
My parents tell me it's my choice whether or not to stay involved.	4.5%

TOP NEEDS

AVERAGE SCORE

I need help building a positive relationship with God	2.66
I need help building a positive relationship with my parents	3.47
I need help managing or dealing with the stresses in my life	3.65
I need someone to help me answer some of my big doubts about the Christian faith	3.79
I need help understanding the Christian faith better	3.82
I need help in knowing how to share my faith with friends and others	3.88
I need help with my academics	3.92
I need help figuring out my future choices (college, job, career, marriage, etc)	4.00
I need help dealing with depression	4.01
I need help with my overwhelming commitments	4.06
I need help dealing with the pain I feel in life	4.09
I need help developing more and better friendships	4.15
I need help ending my dependence on drugs or alcohol or tobacco	4.20
I need help with making better moral choices in my life	4.22
I need help in receiving forgiveness for things I've done	4.4
I need help with living a healthier lifestyle—eating better and exercising	4.44
I need help with time management and discipline in my life	4.51
I need help resolving conflicts	4.83
I need help sorting out sexual issues (sexual activity, gender issues, homosexuality, etc.)	4.91
I need help with girlfriend/boyfriend issues	5.18

is to discount or explain away the results as flawed, skewed, or unrepresentative. I'm sure these results are tainted by all of that—but I'm not going to make the mistake to keep what 20,000 Christian kids are trying to say at a skeptical distance. I'd challenge your assumptions, but I'd challenge them in a way that would mirror of what kids

- “Kid’s today *need help* discerning their faith...period. Though most youth ministries touch on the top four in this survey, they’re more likely to focus on the bottom-feeder topics such as peer pressure, drug and alcohol, boy/girl relationships, conflict resolution, yada, yada, yada. Should we talk about these topics? Sure. But they shouldn’t be the backbone of our ministry.”