

Protagonist Corner

Refusing to Confirm and Ditch: High School Youth Who Have Integrated into the Adult Membership of the Church

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“Where are the high school youth?” That is not a question that I like to hear in the church! But it is a question that is asked when the high school youth of a congregation are visibly absent. This question almost always comes forth with a sense of frustration when it gets dropped at Christian education meetings, in the sanctuary before worship, and even in the church parking lot. We ask this question because we baptize infants and children and make promises to nurture and guide them so that they will grow in faith and live as disciples of Jesus Christ. When those who have been baptized express faith at confirmation and later fail to live out that profession during their high school years through the life of the church, the whole body of Christ suffers. In my ministry context we call this “confirm and ditch.”

The good news is that not all high school youth are missing from the life of my church. So in February of 2017, in hopes of learning what leads high school youth to be active and with the support of Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, I completed fourteen interviews with high school youth who live out their faith in a variety of different ministry areas: youth group, mission trips, worship, Sunday school, Bible study, church leadership, Presbytery Youth Council, family practices, and ministry outside the church walls. The approximately thirty minute interviews were recorded and transcribed, and as I read through the transcriptions, common themes began to emerge, helping me to better understand what leads high school youth to be active in the church.

According to my research, youth who are active in the life of First (Scots) are often active for several of the following eight reasons. First, their parents have encouraged and modeled for them active participation. Second, they feel a strong sense of community within the body of Christ. Third, they embraced the opportunity to join the church through confirmation. Fourth, they are involved in church-wide worship on Sunday morning. Fifth, they are passionate about serving others through mission work. Sixth, they feel that their faith and the church are sources of strength and comfort during tough times. Seventh, they see their faith as their worldview or lens for living. Finally, they feel that youth are valued within the life of the congregation. While each of these themes was prominent throughout the interviews, the first two seemed to have the biggest impact on our active high school youth: parents who have encouraged and modeled active participation and a sense of community within the larger church.

Parents are one of the main reasons that these high school youth are active within the church, and they play a more important role than the pastor, Sunday school teacher, youth advisor, or even the really hip youth minister. Interviewees explained that their parents encouraged them to participate in church starting at an early age, and this encouragement continued through middle school, confirmation, and into high school. When one of our high school youth was nominated to serve on a church committee,

her mom told her, “Oh, you have to do it. You’re a[n adult] member now. You have to do it.”²¹ And she did. These parents not only encourage their youth to participate, but they also model for them what it means to live out the Christian faith, so their youth shared laundry lists of the activities and leadership roles that their parents have been involved in at church. These parents also demonstrate their faith through their everyday words and actions. While reflecting on her own faith formation, one youth explained, “I feel like the most important thing for [my brother] and I...has been [our parents] encouraging us in our faith, and...really exemplifying what it means to be a Christian.”²² These parents have also incorporated faithful practices or routines into family life by having regular faith conversations, service projects, or worship as a family. One youth explained, “Since I was little, every night [my family]...sit[s] down and pray[s] together...It’s a little routine.”²³ Other research projects confirm the important role that parents play in the faith formation of their children. In *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*, which reports findings from *The National Study of Youth and Religion*, Christian Smith writes, “The most important social influence in shaping young people’s religious lives is the religious life modeled and taught to them by their parents.”²⁴

It was also clear that high school youth who are active within the life of First (Scots) feel a strong sense of community with the entire congregation. This sense of community is not limited to same age peers or the adults serving as youth ministry leaders, but involves people of all ages. Over and over these youth described how experiences with children, younger and older youth, and adults of all ages in the congregation have impacted their faith in Jesus Christ. When one youth reflected on the relationships he has formed in the church, he shared, “I...really like the older people in the congregation...It’s really been great to see how much we have in common...and they’ve been able to teach me so much.”²⁵ Another youth explained, “It’s cool...to have the same adults surrounding me now that I am almost seventeen that I did when I was in preschool...I remember growing up with them.”²⁶ For these youth, the church is their family full of additional moms, dads, sisters, brothers, and other relatives prompting one youth to share, “I feel like I have a church full of grandparents.”²⁷ And it was this sense of community that led these youth to profess faith in Jesus Christ, join as adult members, and continue to be active in high school. When asked why she professed faith in Christ, one youth replied, “It was having such a community of support around me. Some of them I knew since I was little and baptized, and some I met when I was in sixth grade, and having people to look out for me and encourage me in my faith really helped.”²⁸

It should not be surprising that the two main themes that appeared in these interviews involve the two groups of people who make promises at a child’s baptism: parents and the congregation. However, in a day and age when the responsibility of youth ministry is often delegated to a youth pastor and youth ministry is frequently segregated from the rest of the congregation, these themes suggest some corrections. First, we need to better support parents in their faith and in their role as spiritual leaders for their children. In *Soul Searching*, Christian Smith also writes, “The best way to get most youth more involved in and serious about their faith communities is to get their parents more involved in and serious about their faith communities.”²⁹ Second, while age specific ministry practices like youth Sunday school, youth group, and youth retreats are important, we must provide more opportunities to connect our

young people to the rest of the body of Christ where faith formation happens. Is the question “Where are the high school youth?” being asked in your ministry context? May God help us all keep the promises we make at baptism.

Notes

- 1 Interview with a First (Scots) high school youth, February 8, 2017.
- 2 Interview with a First (Scots) high school youth, February 6, 2017.
- 3 Interview with a First (Scots) high school youth, February 19, 2017.
- 4 Christian Smith, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2005), 56.
- 5 Interview with a First (Scots) high school youth, February 2, 2017.
- 6 Interview with a First (Scots) high school youth, February 6, 2017.
- 7 Interview with a First (Scots) high school youth, February 6, 2017.
- 8 Interview with a First (Scots) high school youth, February 6, 2017.
- 9 Smith, *Soul Searching*, 267.