



# WHY COLLEGE FRESHMEN DROP OUT OF CHURCH

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In recent years surveys have indicated that most college freshmen active in church in high school are not connecting to church in college. Some said, "Nine out of ten are dropping out." Another said it's not nearly that bad, it is "ONLY seven out of ten". So, why is it happening? For most, I believe it is a combination of things. Here are some reasons that I observe.

## High school seniors feel they have graduated from church

My church does a beautiful Senior Sunday with a slide show in the services, introduction of each senior, often a special message or speaker directed toward them and then a really nice banquet type meal for students, parents and grandparents after the service. It is first class. This past May following that great Sunday, one of the graduating seniors attended Sunday School again over the rest of the summer. They were done.

## College is busier

I am convinced most do not go with the plan to drop church. It is just a fact that college is busier than high school with either increased academic expectations or activities or both. It is easy for a college freshman to just assume that church will fall in somewhere there, because it has in the past. The first month passes and they have not connected anywhere and that usually is the end of it. A Christian student has to be intentional about connecting to a church. Intentionality is key!

## Parents Ok dropping out

I always hate saying this because it is an unfair statement in many ways. Here is what I mean. Many parents who are active believers and very involved in their church dropped out while they were in college and so they assume that their son or daughter will drop out but will come back as they did. Somehow, somehow that message is communicated to the students. I encourage parents to talk about and encourage faith involvement the same as they talk continually about keeping up their grades and maintaining their scholarships, etc.

## Moral failure

Most college students go to college looking for friends and fun. Often in finding friends and fun they are exposed to and participate in things they had considered wrong just a month before. Sometimes, students get drunk or have sex due to new friends and an attempt to find a place they fit. This "moral failure" on their part produces a sense of guilt or failure that drives them away from their faith involvement. I tell College Ministers that all their early talks and messages must include talk of forgiveness...even when that is not the topic.



## **Bigger college churches**

It is just a fact that the majority of churches are small. Students have often grown up in and attended what I call "Cousin Churches". They knew everyone in the church and their aunt was their Sunday School teacher. At college most churches reaching out to students are larger and students who visit often feel uncomfortable and compare it to their home church. It is different and feels very uncomfortable.

## **We don't have a good "Next Step System"**

Many Youth Ministers feel their job is done when the student graduates. Many churches do not have a good transition group or strategy from youth to what is next. It is difficult to go from a high school Bible study group to a "Singles Group" with 30 year olds. Where do they fit?

## **Exposure to a variety of ideas, questions and doubt**

Obviously, one of the things that happens at college is students are exposed to different beliefs, religions and skepticism about Christian faith. A professor may openly ridicule Christian ideas and beliefs. We must help students know that doubt and honest questions are not contrary to a healthy faith and that everything a professor says about faith and the Bible is not necessarily accurate. But, it is easy to feel the person up in front of the class is an expert in all they say.

## **Feeling Overwhelmed**

A freshman girl said to me this week she was just scared. It is not one thing she is scared about; it is just the bigness and change of it all. Consequently, students tend to withdraw and isolate themselves because it just is overloading their system.

## **Churches have separated youth**

I believe a huge mistake that we are making in attempting to do the best job of youth ministry is that we are separating youth from the rest of the church. We have special youth everything. That is part of why they feel they have graduated from church when they graduate from high school. I had a text message today asking me to check on a certain freshman guy who was not doing well. He had visited a church Sunday but said, "there was a bunch of old white people there." He is white and the church he grew up in has a bunch of "old white people" in it. We must integrate our youth into the church as a whole.

Some of these reasons are issues we must address in how we do church and youth ministry. Some of it goes to helping and encouraging parents in working with their sons and daughters prior to and while in college. Part of it goes to understanding all that is happening in the lives of college freshmen and doing all we can to connect people to them who get it.



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It has been said that the two greatest times of change in a person's life are birth to age one and high school graduation to Christmas. We don't leave new born babies on their own and expect them to survive. Why should we expect college freshmen to be fine on their own? The University President said to me once, "Parents have every right to expect someone to look to the spiritual welfare of their children. I cannot do that, but I can help you do that.". Most colleges are not geared to or planning to help students spiritually. That is up to us. We have to do a better job of it.