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*Sticky Faith, Youth Worker Edition*

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Requests for information should be addressed to:

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# 1

## the not-so-sticky faith reality

*I guess for a high school student I had an okay understanding of my faith, but in college I was really forced to own the values that I thought I had and make my own decisions . . . I would definitely not say I've arrived by any means, but I feel a lot of growth going on at this point.*

—Becca

*After Young Life and my youth group at church and everything like that . . . I graduated and went off to college, and I didn't hear back from those people again. They didn't make any effort to stay in touch. So that was kind of a disappointing experience.*

—Trevor

I (Kara) have two favorite professional football teams.

One is the San Diego Chargers. I'm from San Diego and have been following my beloved Chargers through their ups and downs for three decades.

My second-favorite team is whoever is playing the Oakland Raiders.

My love for football has been passed on to my son, Nathan. His top team is the San Diego Chargers ('atta boy!). His second-favorite team is the New Orleans Saints, a team he's rooted for since our family went to New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina to build homes for displaced families.

For Nathan's birthday a few years ago, we bought him a Chargers pennant and a Saints pennant. Being a Type-A mom, I suggested we tape his two new pennants to his bedroom wall that night. So Nathan and I put Scotch tape all over the back of the pennants and positioned the two flags on his wall right where we wanted them, staggered about 12 inches apart. They looked great.

For a few hours.

By the time Nathan woke up, both pennants were in a heap on the ground. The tape hadn't held.

Since the Scotch tape had failed, we decided to upgrade our tape selection. Before he went to bed that night, Nathan and I rummaged through our office supplies and found masking tape. Once again, we covered the back of each pennant with tape and hung them both up on the wall, hoping they would stay there.

The next morning, both pennants were still up. Nathan and I gave each other high-fives, excited that the masking tape had worked.

To our chagrin, when we got home that evening, both flags were back in that same dreaded heap on the ground.

So we pulled out the big guns. We grabbed our duct tape, plastered it across the back of the pennants, and for a third time hung both flags on Nathan's wall.

Both pennants were still hanging on the wall the next day. And the day after that. And the day after that. In fact, it's been over three years—and the duct tape has held. The pennants stuck.

Brad, Cheryl, and I wish we could say the same was true of the faith of teenagers in youth groups across the country—including the groups each of us works with. We wish we could say that the faith of these youth is so strong that even three years after high school graduation, they were still sticking with the Lord and with the church.

But we can't. To be honest, we've talked with countless high school graduates whose faith hasn't stuck three months, let alone three years.

The more that we at the Fuller Youth Institute study and talk with youth leaders and kids, the more we see that kids' faith is usually

more like Scotch tape or masking tape. Maybe, just maybe, that faith is cohesive enough to hold them together through high school. Just barely. But then they graduate and tragically fall away.<sup>1</sup>

## **Tiffany's Story**

From the first Sunday she walked into our high school ministry when she was in ninth grade, Tiffany plunged into every activity. She was deeply committed to knowing Jesus and making Jesus known. Any event we offered—youth choir, beach days, weekend service trips to Tijuana—Tiffany was there. Not only was she there, but she usually showed up at least 30 minutes early to see if she could help.

And help she did. She was especially good at making posters. She and I would spread paper across our youth room floor and try to come up with creative images to promote upcoming events or reinforce the teaching topic for the next week. When we made posters together, we talked about our mutual desire to know Jesus and help others know him too.

Around eleventh grade Tiffany started to change. She began to wear lots of dark, heavy makeup.

Her skirts grew shorter. A lot shorter.

She stopped arriving early for youth ministry events. She rarely signed up for anything. When I asked if she wanted to help with posters, she said she was too busy. Throughout Tiffany's senior year, her involvement at church grew more and more sporadic.

Six months after Tiffany graduated from high school, she became pregnant. She felt confused and ashamed—and wanted nothing to do with our church. Or me.

Her dad called me from the hospital the day Tiffany gave birth to her son. Although Tiffany had avoided me during her pregnancy, I asked her dad if she would be okay with me visiting her that day and meeting her son. She said yes.

When I walked into Tiffany's hospital room, I felt like the clock had been turned back three years. She had no makeup on and greeted me

with a smile, clearly glad to see me. After we chatted for a few minutes, Tiffany offered to let me hold her son. It was the first time I'd ever held a baby who was only a few hours old. I told her so, and she grinned.

I asked Tiffany if I could pray for both her and her son, and she said yes. As I walked out of the hospital, I continued to pray—that the Lord would use this new son to somehow draw Tiffany back to her faith.

Any hope I had that Tiffany would reconnect with our church or with the Lord was shattered within weeks. I have no idea where she and her son are today.

I'm left with all sorts of questions: What happened to poster-making, attend-everything-our-youth-ministry-offered Tiffany? Why did her faith—a faith that seemed so vibrant at first—fail to stick? What could we have done differently that might have helped her develop a faith that would last?

## **Kids' Faith Isn't Sticking**

If you are a youth leader, I'm guessing you have your own "Tiffanys." In fact, there are more "Tiffanys" than you may realize. The board of the National Association of Evangelicals, an umbrella group representing 60 denominations and dozens of ministries, has passed a resolution deploring "the epidemic of young people leaving the evangelical church."<sup>2</sup>

But is it really an "epidemic"? Does the data suggest that the number of youth group kids exiting from the faith is more like a trickle or a flood?

That's a tough question to answer, and one made more complicated by a few slippery terms. For example, what exactly is meant by a "youth group kid"? Is it a kid who is connected when he or she graduates from high school, or is it a kid who was connected at some point during high school? Unfortunately, a large percentage of kids don't stick with their faith throughout high school.

And how is "exiting from the faith" defined? If a college freshman doesn't go to church but prays before big exams, has she left the faith or not?

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.<sup>3</sup>

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. (I'm sure they are smiling adoringly at you, their beloved youth leader.) Now, imagine that you ask them to count off by twos, just like you used to do on the playground to divide into teams: "1 . . . 2 . . . 1 . . . 2 . . . 1 . . . 2 . . ." The 1s will stick with their faith; the 2s will shelve it.

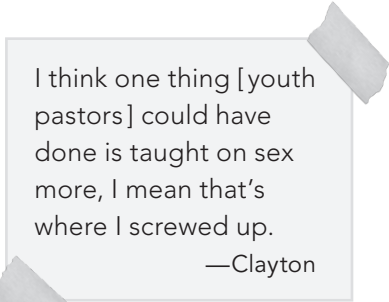
As someone who's been working with teenagers in youth groups for almost 25 years, I'm not satisfied with a 50 percent rate of Sticky Faith.<sup>4</sup>

Are you?

I doubt it.

Here's another alarming statistic: Only 20 percent of college students who leave the church planned to do so during high school. The remaining 80 percent intended to stick with their faith—but didn't.<sup>5</sup>

As has been rightly pointed out, college is often a season of experimentation for teenagers who were raised in the church and are learning to truly own their faith. That hunch is in some ways supported by the encouraging statistic that somewhere between 30 and 60 percent of youth group graduates who abandon their faith and the church return to both in their late twenties.<sup>6</sup> Yet those young adults have already faced significant forks in the road regarding friendship, marriage, vocation, worldview, and lifestyle, all while their faith has been pushed to the backseat. They will have to live with the consequences of those decisions for the rest of their lives. Plus, while we can celebrate those who eventually place their faith back in the driver's seat, we still grieve over the 40 to 70 percent who won't.



I think one thing [youth pastors] could have done is taught on sex more, I mean that's where I screwed up.

—Clayton

## College Students Gone Wild

From the movie *Animal House* to the Asher Roth song “I Love College,” college life has been depicted as a nonstop merry-go-round of sex, drugs, and alcohol, with a few hours of study thrown in here and there. Granted, sex, drugs, and alcohol are not the ultimate litmus test of a college student’s spirituality. (We’ll say more about that in chapter 2). And of course, media portrayals of college kids are certainly exaggerated. Nonetheless, since more students are partying than we might realize, and since students’ partying often affects their relationship with God, it’s a factor we have to discuss as we consider what makes faith stick.

Each month, just less than 50 percent of full-time college students binge drink with alcohol, abuse prescription drugs, and/or abuse illegal drugs.<sup>7</sup> According to one analysis conducted by a professor of public health at Harvard University, the percentage of fraternity and sorority members who binge drink has climbed to 80 percent.<sup>8</sup>

This heavy alcohol consumption is costing students—a lot. According to one estimate, college students spend \$5.5 billion each year on alcohol—more than they spend on soft drinks, tea, milk, juice, coffee, and schoolbooks combined.<sup>9</sup>

This widespread use of alcohol opens the door to the bedroom. Dr. Michael Kimmel, professor of sociology at State University of New York, has researched college behaviors extensively and has concluded, “Virtually all hooking up is lubricated with copious amounts of alcohol.”<sup>10</sup>

As a youth worker, you’ve almost certainly heard the term *hooking up*, a phrase that refers to a variety of sexual behaviors, ranging from kissing to oral sex to intercourse, without any expectation of emotional commitment. College seniors average nearly seven hook-ups during their collegiate careers, with 28 percent of them hooking up ten times or more.<sup>11</sup>

Kimmel vividly captures the wild tone of college campuses today by explaining the effects on local health care:

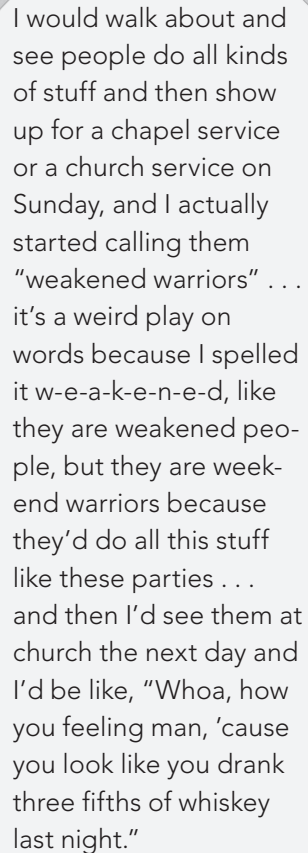
*Every single emergency room in every single hospital adjoining or near a college campus stocks extra supplies on Thursday nights—rape kits for the sexual assault victims, IV fluids for those who are dehydrated from alcohol-induced vomiting, and blood for drunk driving accidents.<sup>12</sup>*

## Christian Kids Gone Wild?

What about the kids who have spent their high school years in our youth groups? Are they as wild as the rest of college students?

The good news is that multiple studies indicate that students who are more religious and/or more likely to attend church or religious gatherings are less likely to consume alcohol or hook up.<sup>13</sup> Yet just because religious kids are *less likely* to party doesn't mean they aren't partying at all. In an exploratory pilot study we conducted early in our research, every single one of the 69 youth group graduates we surveyed drank alcohol during their first few years of college.

Cheryl focused her portion of our Sticky Faith research on youth group graduates who had been designated as "leaders" in their youth ministries in high school. Extensive conversations with these former student leaders revealed that loneliness and the search for friends seemed to push the buttons for everything else. The pri-



I would walk about and see people do all kinds of stuff and then show up for a chapel service or a church service on Sunday, and I actually started calling them "weakened warriors" . . . it's a weird play on words because I spelled it w-e-a-k-e-n-e-d, like they are weakened people, but they are weekend warriors because they'd do all this stuff like these parties . . . and then I'd see them at church the next day and I'd be like, "Whoa, how you feeling man, 'cause you look like you drank three fifths of whiskey last night."

—Andrew

mary reason students gave for participating in the party scene was because that's where "everyone" was. One student told her, "I don't think I've met many people who don't drink here. It's really hard to meet people if you don't drink." We found that students often made key decisions about involvement in these activities during the first two weeks of their freshman year.

The overall challenge of transitioning from high school to college was described well by one college senior we interviewed:

*Transitioning out of high school into college is like you're leaving on a giant cruise ship. You're heading out of this harbor and everyone's waving you off. Let's say this ship is your faith. As soon as you start sailing out to this new port called college, you realize you're in a dingy. You don't have this huge ship, and you're completely not prepared, and your boat is sinking! Unless there's someone with a life raft who's ready to say, "We got you. Come right here. This is where you can be, and this is where you can grow," you're done.*

## **Steps to Sticky Faith: Our Research**

At the Fuller Youth Institute, we want to partner with you to offer kids a stronger "ship" of faith and extend a life raft to those who feel like they are already drowning. In all of our research initiatives, our mission is to leverage research into resources that elevate leaders, kids, and families. Thanks in large part to a sizable research grant from the Lilly Endowment, the Fuller Youth Institute launched the College Transition Project. Our six years of College Transition research from 2004–2010 have been fueled by two goals:

1. To better understand the dynamics of youth group graduates' transition to college; and
2. To pinpoint the steps youth workers, churches, parents, and students themselves can take to help students stay on the Sticky Faith path.<sup>14</sup>

## the not-so-sticky faith reality

Much of our passion for Sticky Faith grows from our own experience as youth leaders. I (Kara) have been in youth ministry for 24 years. In addition to my roles as the executive director of the Fuller Youth Institute and a faculty member at Fuller Seminary, I currently volunteer as a small group leader at Lake Avenue Church in Pasadena. Brad is younger (and, as I like to kid him, less mature) than I am, but in addition to his experience as the FYI associate director, he's logged more than 15 years in youth ministry and serves as a youth ministry and worship volunteer at his church. Cheryl tops us all with more than 30 years serving kids and college students in various capacities. Her PhD research at Fuller focused on an intensive interview study within the College Transition Project.

In our nearly 70 years of combined ministry experience, we've seen God build in students the kind of faith that is life changing—for them and those they impact. We're all in touch with students, from our various seasons of ministry, whose faith burns brighter than ever.

But then there are those whose faith has fizzled. We've all wondered for years what our youth ministries could have done better. We are grateful to the Lord that this research has given us some answers, which we in turn want to share with you.

### ***Meet the Students We Studied***

Over the last six years, the College Transition Project has evolved into a comprehensive study of more than 500 youth group graduates using a variety of established research methods. You'll hear more from these students through quotes in sidebars and at the start of each chapter. At the center of our research are two longitudinal studies that focused on a total of 384 youth group seniors during their first three years in college. In many ways, these students represent "typical" youth group seniors transitioning to college (i.e., they come from different regions across the United States; they attend a mix of public, private, and Christian colleges and

vocational schools; and 59 percent are female and 41 percent are male). Yet in comparison to the typical student headed to college, the students in our sample tend to have higher high school grade point averages and are more likely to come from intact families. We also recruited students from churches that have full-time professional youth pastors, which means they are likely to come from larger than average youth groups (average youth group size is 50 to 75 students). From the outset, we want to admit that these factors bring a certain bias to our findings, a bias we diligently tried to counter by examining other research studies and by face-to-face interviews with students with more diverse academic, family, and church backgrounds.

In an effort to bring focus to our research, we recruited high school seniors who intended to enter college after graduation. For the purposes of our study, *college* includes studies at a four-year college or university, a junior college, or a vocational school. We can't be certain, but we think it's likely that our findings are also relevant to those entering the workforce or the military. Our hunch is supported by a parallel study indicating that church dropout rates for college students are not significantly different from the dropout rate for others from the same age group who do not attend college.<sup>15</sup>

### ***Defining Sticky Faith***

As we were initially conceptualizing our research project, we quickly ran into one important question: What exactly is Sticky Faith? While it's tempting to apply former U.S. Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart's famous definition of obscenity ("I know it when I see it"), that doesn't fly in academic circles. Based on the research literature and our own understanding of students, we arrived at three characteristics of Sticky Faith; the first two are relevant for all ages, while the last has heightened importance during students' transition to college.

***Sticky Faith is . . .***

1. *Both internal and external:* Sticky Faith is part of a student's inner thoughts and emotions, and is also externalized in choices and actions that reflect this faith commitment. These behaviors include regular attendance in a church or campus group, prayer and Bible reading, service to others, and lower participation in risk behaviors, especially sex and alcohol. In other words, Sticky Faith involves whole-person life integration, at least to some degree.
2. *Both personal and communal:* Sticky Faith celebrates God's specific care for each person while always locating faith in the global and local community of the church.<sup>16</sup>
3. *Both mature and maturing:* Sticky Faith shows marks of spiritual maturity but is also in the process of growth. We don't assume a high school senior or college freshman (or a youth worker, for that matter) will have a completely "mature" faith. We are all in process.<sup>17</sup>

The vast majority of kids we interviewed—even those who had thrived in college—reported that college had been a time of both challenge and growth, a period full of new perspectives and experiences. Reading through the transcripts, it seems that the typical college student sits down at a table full of new and interesting worldviews and people. Instead of allowing faith to be merely one of many voices clamoring to be heard, those with Sticky Faith had determined their faith would sit at the head of the table.

For more on the questions we asked in our College Transition Project, please see the Appendix as well as [www.stickyfaith.org](http://www.stickyfaith.org).

### *The Benefits of a Longitudinal Study*

We designed our study to be longitudinal, meaning we followed youth group graduates over time, so we could track their individual and collective journeys during their first three years in college. The majority of the students we surveyed took their first online or paper questionnaire during the spring of their senior year in high school, and then one or two online questionnaires during their freshman, sophomore, and junior years in college. Each wave of data collection allowed us to peel away less significant layers of the transition so we could focus on what lay at the Sticky Faith core.<sup>18</sup>

### **Sticky Findings and Sticky Faith Made Practical**

We have divided each chapter into two sections, the first of which is called **Sticky Findings**. In that first section, we summarize the most important things we've learned from our College Transition Project, from other parallel studies, as well as from our ongoing explorations of theology and Scripture. As researchers with a Practical Theology bent, we are convinced that simply crunching numbers about students' experiences and behaviors will leave us splashing around in the shallow end. It's when we pair our study of students with a thorough examination of theology and Scripture that we are able to dive into deeper waters.

The members of our College Transition Project research team have extensive backgrounds in youth ministry, enabling us to bridge the sometimes-wide chasm between empirical statistics and sound ministry programs. Our team's initial hunches about ministry implications were then tested and refined through one-on-one consulta-

tions with youth leaders, youth worker focus groups and summits, and nationwide seminars with youth pastors and volunteers.

A highlight of this iterative process was our yearlong Sticky Faith Learning Cohort. We invited 12 innovative churches from around the United States to apply our Sticky Faith research to their settings to offer more transformative youth and family ministry. Through two summits and monthly webinars, these churches became 12 diverse incubators for Sticky Faith ministry. My (Kara's) church was part of the group, giving me an up-close-and-personal view of the Sticky Faith process. The following year, we repeated this process with 16 more churches, for a total of 28 congregations whose stories are sprinkled throughout this book.

If you're interested in learning more about how your church could participate in future Sticky Faith cohorts, please visit [www.stickyfaith.org](http://www.stickyfaith.org).

Based on the Sticky Faith Learning Cohorts and additional dialogue with other churches of various sizes, denominations, and geographical locations, we can recommend a robust list of proven and practical ministry ideas. Those ideas are described in detail in the second section of each chapter, labeled **Sticky Faith Made Practical**.

## It's Never Too Early

Early in our research, we concluded that building Sticky Faith doesn't start when high school students are seniors, or even juniors. The reality is that students' faith trajectories are formed long before twelfth grade. Although we have devoted chapter 8 to the particular challenges of building Sticky Faith in high school seniors as they prepare for college, we encourage you to apply the rest of the book to all your high school students—and your middle school students, too. In fact, many of these findings have relevance for kids at even

younger ages. My (Kara's) three children are eleven, nine, and five years old; Brad's three children are nine, six, and three; our research impacts the way we and our spouses parent every day.

You'll be more likely to develop Sticky Faith in students when you share our research with parents of kids of all ages, as well as senior adults who have an understandably soft spot for their own grand-kids. Try to create as broad a Sticky Faith team as possible in your youth ministry or church (more on that in chapter 4). After studying seniors' transitions to college, Dr. Tim Clydesdale, a sociologist at the College of New Jersey, concluded, "Given the seeming importance of retaining youth for most religious groups in the United States, it is striking how haphazardly most congregations go about it."<sup>19</sup>

It's time to end the haphazard way we prepare kids for all they will face in the future.

It's time to get out the duct tape.

It's time to build Sticky Faith.

## **Above the Research: A Loving and Faithful God**

As much as we wish there were a foolproof plan for Sticky Faith, we will be the first to admit there isn't. There is no Sticky Faith silver bullet. There is no simple list of steps you can take to give youth a faith that lasts. Part of what makes youth ministry so demanding is that there are rarely easy answers.

That might be disappointing, but let us make a few additional admissions that we hope will encourage you.

- As much as we love research, we will also be the first to admit that we love God more.
- As much as we believe in research, we will also quickly admit that we believe in God more.
- As much we value sorting through data, we value prayer far, far more.

## the not-so-sticky faith reality

Whenever we share our research with youth leaders, including leaders who are grieving the way their own children have strayed from the Sticky Faith path, we are reminded of the God who transcends all research and all easy answers. We are struck by how much we need to depend on God for wisdom, strength, and miracles. After all, faith always involves a fair amount of mystery, hoping for things unseen (Hebrews 11:1). Ultimately, it is the Holy Spirit, not us, who develops Sticky Faith in kids.

As a result of our research, our nationwide conversations with kids and leaders, and even our ministry experience, we have learned much about Sticky Faith. We are full of suggestions. But our *top* suggestion is this: Trust the Lord with your kids and continue to ask—maybe at times beg—the Lord to build Sticky Faith.

## sticky discussion questions

1. When people decide to read a book, they are often trying to solve a problem. What problem(s) are you hoping to address by reading this book?
2. How would *you* define “Sticky Faith”?
3. As you think about your youth ministry leadership up to now, what have you done that has helped your kids develop a long-term faith? What do you wish you had done differently?
4. What are the ramifications for your youth ministry if you follow the advice that it’s “never too early” to start thinking about Sticky Faith?
5. Do you agree that the top suggestion for youth leaders should be to trust the Lord with kids and beg the Lord to build Sticky Faith? Perhaps you’d like to put this book down and pray for a few moments before you turn the page . . .