

Study probes why college students leave church

by [Piet Levy](#)

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PASADENA, Calif. (RNS) Millions of college freshmen are overwhelmed right now trying to make new friends, adjusting to more rigorous school work and learning to live away from home. Whether they also find time for church during their first two weeks on campus will set the mold for the rest of their college years, according to new research.

These findings come from a six-year study of approximately 500 Christian youth group members, conducted by Fuller Theological Seminary's Fuller Youth Institute in Pasadena, Calif.

The study's results will be released Sept. 17 in "Sticky Faith:

Everyday Ideas to Build Lasting Faith in Your Kids." The book examines why, according to a 2006 report by Christian research firm Barna Group, 61 percent of 20-somethings who regularly attended church as teenagers later left the pews.

The study implies that parents and church leaders need to do a better job preparing high school seniors to maintain their faith.

Only one out of every seven students surveyed said they were well equipped for college, and less than 50 percent of seniors with doubts talked about them with others, said Kara Powell, executive director at Fuller Youth Institute, and co-author of "Sticky Faith."

What also hinders students is being too dependent on youth faith group worship. Nearly 60 percent of seniors surveyed attended intergenerational worship and possessed a higher faith maturity in college, Powell said.

Nevertheless, 40 percent of freshman said they had difficulty finding a church in college, Powell said, and students' perception of faith made it all too easy for them to shove it aside.

"Students' view of faith was that it was like a jacket, something they can take on and off if they feel like it," Powell said.

"One of the heartbreaking things, and why that two-week window is so influential, is that students feel guilty when they make mistakes and feel hypocritical and so full of remorse that they don't feel like they can then show up at church."

Powell suggested that parents share their own transitional experiences, and discuss their mistakes and good choices, so their kids can trust to share their concerns and struggles with them.

Parents should also go visit churches with their kids near their college campuses, or visit new churches close to home, to prepare them for finding a new place of worship.

Youth pastors should also nudge seniors to think about what they should look for in a new church and how they can be active Christians in college, said Jonathan Morrow, a youth-oriented equipping pastor at Fellowship Bible Church in Murfreesboro, Tenn., and author of the book "Welcome to College: A Christ-Follower's Guide for the Journey."