

Youth Retention: Factors that Influence Intent to Remain
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The numbers are concerning.

- Two-thirds (66%) of young people stop regularly going to church for *at least* a year between the ages of 18 and 22 (LifeWay, 2017).
- Four out of ten (40%) Millennials identify as religiously unaffiliated (Pew Research Center, 2019).
- Almost two-thirds (64%) of Millennials report going to church a few times a year or less (Pew Research Center, 2019).

What is causing young people to leave the church at such an alarming rate? And is there anything that can be done to stop the current trends?

Dudley's Eight Factors

In his book *Why Our Teenagers Leave the Church*, researcher Roger Dudley (2000) identifies eight factors that can help predict which types of teenagers are more likely to remain in the church when they are on their own. These factors include:

1. The mother attends church regularly,
2. The teenager attends Christian school,
3. The father attends church regularly,
4. The teenager participates in family worship,
5. The teenager considers Christian standards and rules reasonable,
6. The teenager is close to the local church pastor,
7. The teenager is close to Christian peers,
8. The teenager has mentor in the church (Dudley, 2000).

But do these factors still prove true, 20 years later?

The Eight Factors in Action

A 2019 study of 1,021 Christian young people examined Dudley's eight predictors in relation to survey data. To do this, researchers ran a frequency analysis to determine what "types" of teenagers "strongly agreed" with the statement "I intend to remain an active Christian when I am on my own" (Cincala & William, 2019).

Below are the demographic statistics (i.e., the % of participants that "strongly agreed" with the statement "I intend to remain an active Christian when I am on my own") for each of Dudley's eight key factors.

1. **Factor:** The mother attends church regularly.

A higher percentage of young people whose mothers attend church nearly every week intend to remain active Christians (67%), as compared to those whose mother attends church once or twice a month or less (48%) (Cincala & William, 2019).

2. **Factor:** The teenager attends Christian school.

A higher percentage of young people who attend Christian schools (76%) intend to remain active Christians, as opposed to those who attend non-Christian schools (58%) (Cincala & William, 2019).

3. **Factor:** The father attends church regularly.

A higher percentage of young people among those whose fathers attend church nearly every week (70%) intend to remain active Christians, compared to those whose fathers attend church once in a while or one to two times a month (57%) and to those whose fathers never attend church (52%) (Cincala & William, 2019).

4. **Factor:** The teenager participates in family worship.

A higher percentage of young people who participate in family worship almost every day and once or twice a week (73%) intend to remain active Christians, as opposed to those who attend once or twice a month (52%), once in a while (58%), or never (38%) (Cincala & William, 2019).

5. **Factor:** The teenager considers Christian standards and rules reasonable.

The percentage of young people who intend to remain active Christians is higher among those who strongly agree that the Christian standards/rules are reasonable (82%), as compared to those who somewhat agree (68%) or disagree (48%) (Cincala & William, 2019).

6. **Factor:** The teenager is close to the local church pastor.

The percentage of young people who intend to remain active Christians is higher among those who are very close (76%), somewhat close (75%), or moderately close (63%) to their pastors, as compared to those who are not close or distant from their local church pastor (44%) (Cincala & William, 2019).

7. **Factor:** The teenager is close to Christian peers.

The percentage of young people who intend to remain active Christians is higher among those who are very close (67%), somewhat close (73%), or moderately close (63%) to Christian peers, as compared to those who are not close or distant to Christian peers (30%) (Cincala & William, 2019).

8. **Factor:** The teenager has mentor in the church.

The percentage of young people who intend to remain active Christians is higher among those who strongly agree that their local church meets their spiritual need (85%), as compared to those who strongly or somewhat disagree (45%) (Cincala & William, 2019).

What Can I Do?

As we can see, Dudley's eight predictors of the type of young people that will remain in the church still hold true today. But what do we do with this information, and how can this knowledge change the trend of youth dropouts?

If you are looking to take tangible action to reduce the number of young people leaving your local congregation, here are a few things you can do:

- Create an environment of acceptance, offering spiritual help and mentoring to young people at the local church.
- Place a stronger emphasis on a love experience with Jesus than on standards/rules.
- Invest in young people in your congregation—no matter if you hold a leadership role in the church or not. Young people can use mentors of any age, race, gender, and church position.
- Encourage/enable parents to send their kids Christian schools where they can interact with Christian peers.

References

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