

CONTEMPORARY SPIRITUAL FORMATION

Family and Youth Formation

How families and ministries can help inherited faith become a lived life with God

A free, research-grounded resource for ministry teams. Designed for a focused fifteen-minute staff, vestry, elder, board, family-ministry, youth-ministry, or volunteer conversation.

05

What this names

The work of helping children, teenagers, and young adults receive Christian truth as more than familiar language. Durable formation brings teaching, practice, questions, relationships, discernment, and life with God together.

What to listen for

Not only whether a young person can give the expected answer, but where faith is becoming trust, prayer, repentance, service, belonging, and a way of meeting real life.

What this helps a team do

Build ministry environments where Christian conviction remains clear, difficult questions can be spoken, and faithful adults stay close enough to help truth become lived.

01 · THE FORMATION CHALLENGE

The handoff can look complete before the roots are deep

A young person knows the stories. They can find the passage, finish the sentence, and explain what the church believes.

Then life asks a question the worksheet never did.

Prayer seems unanswered. A trusted Christian fails. A political disagreement begins to feel like a test of belonging. A new spiritual practice offers immediate guidance. A feed supplies language for identity, healing, truth, and God before a faithful adult knows the question has formed.

The young person may still know every answer they were taught. What they need now is help learning how to live the faith when an answer does not settle the pain, the conflict, or the uncertainty in front of them.

The hidden part of formation appears when the young person asks something difficult and watches what the room does next.

Can the question finish?

Does uncertainty change the warmth of the relationship?

Can a trusted adult say, "I do not know; let us keep looking together," without treating uncertainty as defeat?

Can the adult tell the truth without turning the truth into an exit door?

Visible fluency is one part of durable formation

The ministry task is to notice what knowledge is becoming when life is not simple.

TEACH

Truth is named

Scripture and doctrine are taught clearly.

PRACTICE

Truth is inhabited

Prayer, repentance, service, and belonging become lived.

QUESTION

Truth meets real life

Pain, conflict, uncertainty, and discernment enter the room.

REMAIN

Relationship stays warm

Faithful adults stay close enough to keep forming together.

02 · FOLLOW THE MEANING BENEATH THE WORDS

Inherited language may remain while its authority changes

02 This does not mean their parents failed, their teachers were careless, or their childhood faith was false. It does not mean departure is inevitable. It means visible fluency and durable formation are not the same thing.

Information matters. Doctrine matters. Scripture must be taught clearly. Yet a completed curriculum can show what was covered without showing whether truth has become prayer, trust, repentance, service, wise discernment, and a shared life with other believers.

The same challenge appears when inherited Christian language begins carrying different meanings. A young person may still say *God, Spirit, prayer, trust, and truth* while relying on a different way of deciding what those words mean. Personal resonance may have become the final test. A digital community may now interpret an experience. A familiar phrase such as "trust God" may sound less like relief and more like a demand to ignore the self.

That is not permission to surrender Christian conviction. It is a reason to find out which conversation you are actually having.

Family and youth formation is not the work of controlling an outcome. No parent, mentor, or ministry can manufacture faith, prevent every departure, or guarantee a return.

It is the work of handing down a life with God, not only information about God. It is teaching the truth, practicing it in ordinary life, making room for honest questions, and remaining near enough for the young person to see what faith looks like when life is not simple.

The handoff is a shared life, not a controlled outcome

TEACH

Hand down the truth

Christian conviction remains clear enough to guide and correct.

PRACTICE

Live it in ordinary life

Faith becomes prayer, service, repentance, worship, and communion.

STAY

Remain near

Questions and correction do not have to end the relationship.

The work is not to guarantee the young person's spiritual outcome. It is to strengthen the formation environment for which the family or ministry is responsible.

03 · WHAT THE RESEARCH HELPS US SEE

A hard question may be engagement in vulnerable form

01

36%

of 1,296 current and former churchgoers ages 18 to 29 said they had not been able to ask their most pressing life questions in church.

Barna Group's *Faith That Lasts* project examined the experiences of young adults who had been active in Christian churches during their teen years. In the principal online study, 36 percent of the 1,296 current and former churchgoers ages 18 to 29 said they had not been able to ask their most pressing life questions in church.

That finding comes from research conducted between 2007 and 2011. It is not a current estimate for every teenager, family, or congregation. It does not tell us what prevented a particular question or what one ministry should have done differently.

It does name a ministry concern that remains recognizable. A young person may be asking a theological question, an emotional question, and a belonging question at the same time:

Does Christianity have room for what I am seeing?

Can I tell you what I actually think?

Will I still belong if I am not certain yet?

A question can expose distance, pain, confusion, resistance, or sincere inquiry. The adult cannot know which from the first sentence. What the adult can recognize is that the young person has brought the struggle into the relationship.

The first faithful move is not to assume that the question is an exit announcement. Let it finish. Say back what you heard. Ask whether you understood. Then decide together whether the moment needs an answer, a correction, a deeper question, lament, prayer, or time.

Receive the question before assigning the outcome

LISTEN

Let it finish

Do not turn the first sentence into an exit announcement.

REFLECT

Say back what you heard

Give the young person a chance to correct your understanding.

CLARIFY

Ask what is underneath

Theological, emotional, and belonging questions may arrive together.

RESPOND

Choose the faithful next move

Answer, correction, lament, prayer, a deeper question, or time.

A difficult question can be the moment a young person brings the struggle into the relationship.

04 · WHAT THE RESEARCH HELPS US SEE

Young people may need presence before they need a fast solution

54%

agreed that religious communities try to fix their problem instead of simply being present with them.

Springtide Research Institute reviewed its 2020 survey of more than 10,000 young people in a 2025 resource for faith leaders. Fifty-four percent agreed that religious communities try to fix their problem instead of simply being present with them. More than half said the most useful response during uncertainty was being allowed to talk.

Those findings do not mean young people never want answers, Scripture, teaching, or guidance. They do not make listening sufficient for every pastoral, safeguarding, or theological situation.

They clarify something many faithful adults already sense: speed can communicate before content does.

A quick answer may be correct and still tell the young person that the unresolved part of their experience is unwelcome. A leader may be trying to offer something solid while the young person hears that the room needs the question to disappear.

Presence is not passivity. It is the decision to remain attentive while truth, pain, and relationship stay in the same conversation. It gives an adult enough time to learn whether the question concerns doctrine, trust, harm, identity, anxiety, belonging, or several things at once.

In some situations, immediate action is necessary. A disclosure of abuse, danger, self-harm, exploitation, or serious mental-health concern requires the ministry's safeguarding and referral procedures. Patient listening should never become a reason to delay protection or qualified care.

In ordinary formation, however, a faithful adult who does not rush may offer something increasingly rare: a relationship in which uncertainty does not have to become isolation.

Presence is not passivity: it keeps truth, pain, protection, and relationship in the same faithful conversation.

05 · WHAT THE RESEARCH HELPS US SEE

A self-directed path can feel like ownership, not rejection

52 of 57

respondents in one small *Felt Commons™* own-audience poll said a spiritual path is something a person must find on their own.

One small *Felt Commons™* own-audience poll asked whether a spiritual path is something a person must find on their own. Fifty-two of 57 respondents selected yes, or about 9 in 10.

This poll was not a representative survey. It did not sample teenagers as a defined group, and it cannot tell a family or ministry what one young person believes.

It can prepare adults to hear a conviction that may arrive in different words: *If I did not examine it and choose it for myself, it does not feel like mine.*

That conviction helps explain why a spiritual shift may feel more like engagement than abandonment from the inside. A young person may retain Christian language, love Jesus, pray, and search for God while also changing where spiritual authority sits. Scripture may remain central, become one source among several, or be kept only where it confirms what already feels true.

The adult's task is not to treat every unfamiliar word as an enemy flag. Ask what the word means. Ask how the young person decides whether a spiritual claim is true. Ask what is permitted to correct intuition, experience, an influencer, or the response of an online community.

Understanding is not endorsement. It is how a ministry leader stops arguing with a position the young person has not actually taken and begins addressing the authority structure that is really present.

The hunger for a faith that is real, examined, and personally inhabited is not the problem. Christian formation can honor that hunger while refusing to make the self the final authority.

Listen for the hunger beneath the self-direction: a faith that is real, examined, and personally inhabited.

06 • THE THEOLOGICAL LENS

Hand down a faith that dwells in them

THE CENTER

The faith was inherited, and it also dwelt in him.

2 TIMOTHY 1:5

The picture is larger than a lesson. God's truth is taught within a life.

Formation inside ordinary life

Deuteronomy 6 places formation inside the ordinary life of God's people. Israel is told to keep God's words on the heart, teach them diligently to children, and speak of them while sitting at home, walking along the way, lying down, and rising.

Formation is carried together

The words are repeated, but repetition is joined to worship, memory, obedience, and the daily presence of adults whose own lives are also under God's command. The adults are not handing children a truth that applies only to the children. They are carrying it together.

Inheritance can become lived faith

Paul later reminds Timothy of the sincere faith that lived first in his grandmother Lois and his mother Eunice and, Paul is persuaded, now lives in Timothy (2 Timothy 1:5).

That distinction protects ministry from two opposite mistakes.

Inheritance is a gift, not the finish line

The first is treating inheritance as enough by itself. Christian language, church rhythms, and biblical knowledge are precious gifts. They should be handed down. Yet familiarity cannot substitute for the young person's own life of prayer, trust, obedience, repentance, service, and communion with God.

Ownership is not self-creation

The second is treating personal ownership as self-creation. Timothy did not invent the faith that came to dwell in him. He received a living witness, apostolic teaching, the gift of God, and a place within the people of God.

Inheritance and encounter belong together

Christian formation therefore does not choose between inheritance and encounter. It helps inherited truth become a lived relationship with God within the body of Christ.

Scripture makes room for struggle

That formation includes room to wrestle. Jacob's night at the Jabbok in Genesis 32 is not a formula for every question, but Scripture does not hide the struggle. Jacob contends, receives a new name, and leaves changed. The Psalms give worshipers language for grief, protest, hope, and the repeated cry, "How long?"

Truth can be carried by someone who stays

God is not protected by a ministry that silences every difficult question. Nor does making room for a question require the Church to pretend that every answer is equally faithful. Christian adults can listen carefully, open Scripture honestly, correct what needs correction, and keep the relationship intact while formation continues.

Truth and presence are not competing goods. The truth is not weakened when it is carried by a person who stays.

07 · WHAT MINISTRY TEAMS CAN MISREAD

Widen the evidence without losing conviction

MISREAD 01

"Correct answers prove the roots are deep"

Correct answers can show attention, memory, and genuine learning. They cannot show everything happening beneath the surface.

Ask where the truth is becoming practice. Can the young person pray in their own words, bring a real concern into Christian community, lament without pretending, serve someone different from them, receive correction without humiliation, and watch trusted adults follow Christ through grief as well as joy?

Do not discard the curriculum. Widen the evidence of formation.

MISREAD 02

"A hard question is the beginning of rejection"

A hard question can carry skepticism or resistance. It can also show that faith matters enough to examine.

Before assigning a motive, ask what sits underneath the question and whether something has made it urgent. Make clear that correction does not end belonging and that uncertainty does not make the young person an enemy. When a question cannot remain in the church, it may relocate without disappearing.

MISREAD 03

"Staying present means avoiding Christian boundaries"

Presence is not agreement with every belief, practice, or conclusion. It does not require a parent or leader to hide concern.

It does require the adult to separate the person from the position, the hunger from the method, and the relationship from the demand for immediate agreement.

Faithful adults can say, "I do not believe that practice can carry what you are asking it to carry, and I want to understand why it matters to you. I am still here."

08 · QUESTIONS FOR THE ROOM

Move from recognition to shared reflection

QUESTION 01

What does our ministry currently treat as evidence that faith is taking root, and what important forms of lived trust might our measures miss?

QUESTION 02

What happens in our rooms when a young person asks a question that is unresolved, politically costly, emotionally charged, or difficult for the adult to answer?

QUESTION 03

Which ordinary relationships and practices help young people experience Christian truth as a life with God rather than only information about God?

09 • USE THIS IN FIFTEEN MINUTES

Use one ministry environment without diagnosing one young person

READ • 2 MIN

Read **The formation challenge** aloud through the sentence, "The same challenge appears when inherited Christian language begins carrying different meanings."

NOTICE • 3 MIN

Read the three research observations silently. Ask each person to mark the observation most recognizable in the ministry context.

MAP • 4 MIN

Choose one ministry environment, not one identifiable young person, and use **Audit one formation room through five lenses** below.

DISCUSS • 3 MIN

Choose one question for the room. Let each person answer briefly without requiring a final solution.

NAME • 2 MIN

Choose one relationship, practice, teaching habit, safeguarding process, or ministry rhythm the team will examine or strengthen.

PRAY • 1 MIN

Ask the Father to make the team faithful in what it hands down, Christlike in how it receives each young person, and attentive to the Holy Spirit in the patient work of formation.

LEAVE WITH THIS

One formation room the team will examine

The meeting should end with a shared environment in view and one response small enough to revisit.

- Truth that is being handed down
- Practice that makes it lived
- Questions the room can hold
- Relationships that remain
- Discernment that tests what forms

The goal is not to solve a young person's spiritual outcome in fifteen minutes. It is to identify one part of the formation environment the team can faithfully strengthen.

10 · A PRACTICE TO CARRY FORWARD

Audit one formation room through five lenses

Choose one recurring ministry environment: a class, youth gathering, confirmation process, small group, family-ministry event, mentoring relationship, or volunteer team. Do not use the exercise to diagnose one identifiable young person.

01

Truth

What Christian truth is this environment designed to hand down? Is the teaching clear enough to guide, correct, and sustain a life beyond the room?

02

Practice

Where do young people pray, serve, repent, lament, ask for help, read Scripture, and watch faithful adults live what is taught?

03

Questions

Which questions can be spoken without changing the warmth of the relationship? Which questions may carry an unspoken social price?

04

Relationships

Who knows the young people beyond their attendance and answers? Who remains available after the lesson, the crisis, the disagreement, or the spiritual high has passed?

05

Discernment

How are young people learning to test an inner signal, a digital claim, an influential voice, or a political demand through Scripture, prayer, wise Christian community, time, and fruit?

Now name one change that would help this environment join truth, practice, questions, relationships, and discernment more faithfully.

Keep the change specific and small enough to review. The team is not trying to control a young person's spiritual outcome. It is strengthening the formation environment for which it is responsible.

11 • FORMATION-ROOM WORKSHEET

Record what the room hands down and what it needs next

Use the five lenses without naming one identifiable young person. Write what the team can observe, strengthen, and review.

Truth and practice

What truth is being handed down, and where is it becoming prayer, service, repentance, lament, Scripture, or faithful action?

Questions and warmth

Which questions can finish without changing the warmth of the relationship? Where might a question carry a social price?

Relationships that remain

Who knows the young people beyond attendance and answers? Who remains available after the lesson, crisis, disagreement, or spiritual high?

Discernment being learned

How does this room test an inner signal, digital claim, influential voice, or political demand through Scripture, prayer, community, time, and fruit?

One formation practice, relationship, or rhythm we will strengthen

Owner and review date:

12 • CONTINUE EXPLORING

Stay with the formation challenge

READ 01

01

When the Inherited Foundation Was Never Built On

READ 02

02

Fill-in-the-Blank Faith

READ 03

03

What Teens Hear When You Say "Trust God"

READ 04

04

Why Our Kids' Hard Questions Are Not Threats

RESEARCH NOTE

This brief synthesizes eight public Athority Ministries® articles assigned to the Family and Youth Formation resource in the approved 44-post source matrix. It draws on a small own-audience *Felt Commons™* poll and separately attributed external findings from Barna Group and Springtide Research Institute.

The *Felt Commons™* result describes one question answered by 57 members of an engaged, self-selected audience. It did not sample teenagers as a defined group and is not a population estimate.

[Barna Group's 2011 report](#) states that the principal online study included 1,296 current and former churchgoers ages 18 to 29 who had been active in a Christian church during their teen years. Thirty-six percent said they had not been able to ask their most pressing life questions in church. The project took place between 2007 and 2011.

[Springtide Research Institute's 2025 review for faith leaders](#) describes findings from its 2020 survey of more than 10,000 young people. Fifty-four percent agreed that religious communities try to fix their problem instead of simply being present, and more than half said that being allowed to talk was the most useful response during uncertainty.

USE AND BOUNDARIES

The research findings do not measure the quality of any individual family or ministry, diagnose a young person, establish why someone leaves a congregation, or prove that one ministry practice causes a later spiritual outcome. Measured findings are distinguished from ministry and theological interpretation.

Scripture engaged: Deuteronomy 6:4-9; 2 Timothy 1:5-7; Genesis 32:22-32; and selected biblical laments, including Psalm 13.

PREPARED AND SHARED BY

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