

Editor's Note: Have you ever wondered what factors in teenagers' lives God uses to draw them to faith in Christ? We asked! Here are some of the findings of a special study.

Most of us who have survived for any length of time in youth ministry have learned how to get feedback from students and make adjustments to how we do ministry. That was the approach we took in a recently completed research study.

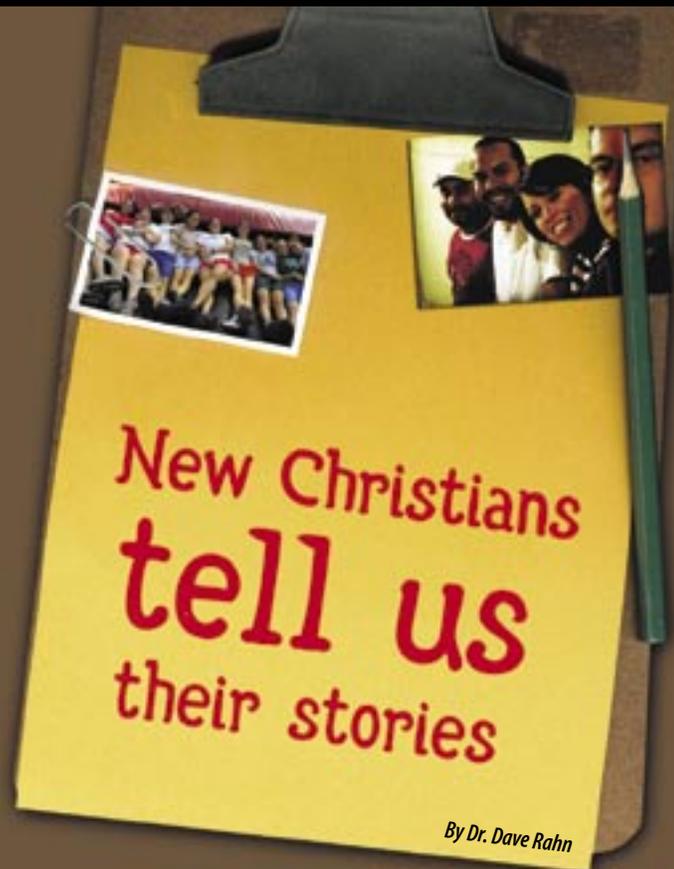
It all began in 2002 when NNYM's Ministry Council discussed the best way to allocate resources toward the most effective contribution to evangelism fruitfulness among high school students. Being unaware of any research that could help answer this practical question, they contacted Huntington University Link Institute. Could Link do research that would help us all discover what evangelism factors are most commonly present among adolescents who have recently come to faith in Christ?

"Yup," we said – with a little help from our friends! After a couple of years of brainstorming among the Association of Youth Ministry Educators, eight professors from colleges and seminaries around the country volunteered students from their classes to help out. A team of professors and students from Azusa Pacific University, Denver Seminary, Bethel College (Indiana), Huntington University, Gordon College, Taylor University, and Nazarene University College contacted 395 different ministries from 14 states for the research. They ultimately interviewed 70 young people between the ages of 16 and 20 who had initially put their faith in Christ sometime during or after the year 2003.

When a smaller team of graduate students from Huntington gathered in the summer of 2005 to analyze these stories, we discovered a few things that any of us might learn by asking our own careful questions of recent converts.

Seriously. Try this yourself.

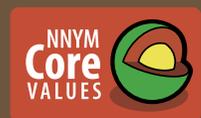
First, after you find students who would describe themselves as "becoming followers of Christ within the past two years," toss them the following open-ended question. Then take very detailed notes as you listen to their responses: ***Tell me everything you can remember about your experience of first choosing to become a follower of Jesus Christ.***



Only after they have stopped talking should you pause in your writing. You can then ask these three follow-up questions to see if anything else surfaces in these teenagers' stories, but be careful to record any responses under a different heading called "prompted":

- **First, can you identify any (other) persons or relationships that you think were especially influential in your decision to become a follower of Jesus Christ?**
- **Can you name any (other) programs, locations or activities that you think were especially influential in your decision to become a follower of Jesus Christ?**
- **Were there any (other) situations or circumstances going on in your life that you think were especially influential in your decision to become a follower of Jesus Christ?**

Once you've collected your own stories, you can analyze them for common themes. That's what our research team did. An earlier study to help us tighten up our interview process gave us 18 different categories that we could use. Four grad students and a professor independently examined every single interview and determined which categories were represented in the stories given



Intentional Evangelism

We are intentional in evangelism. Based on sensitivity to the Holy Spirit's leading, we reach out to students, sharing Christ in a loving, relational manner.

by these new followers of Christ. If you manage to collect a lot of stories you will hear some of the 18 categories mentioned more often than others.

Here's the list we used, arranged in order from what we heard most often to those categories we heard less frequently in the stories we collected. In our analysis, we gave a weight of *2 points* to that part of a young person's story that was mentioned after we asked our first question. *One point* was given to something that was only mentioned after one of the three "prompted" questions was asked.

See how the order of our list matches up with the stories you hear from your young people.



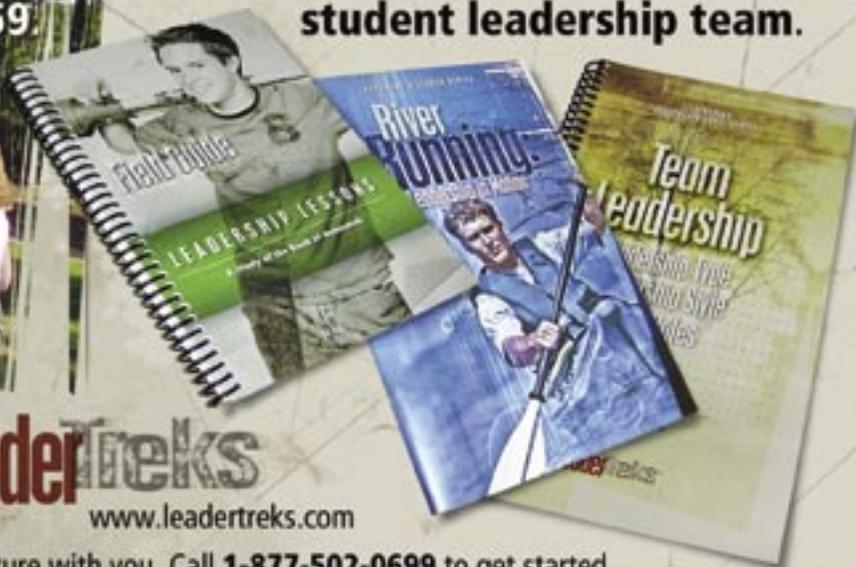
Most-mentioned influences in becoming a Christian?

1. Church Camp/Retreat/Special Event/Conferences
(DEFAULT when unspecified camp experience is mentioned)
2. Personal (Internal) Turmoil
3. Friends – Non-verbal
(DEFAULT when friends are mentioned; caring, accepting, example, presence...)
4. Specific Challenge to Act
5. Attending Church
6. Friends – Verbal (inviting, counseling, challenging, coaching...)
7. Church Youth Ministry Involvement
8. Parents
9. Parachurch Youth Ministry Involvement
10. Youth Leader(s) – Verbal (inviting, counseling, challenging, coaching...)
11. Other Family Members
12. Youth Leader(s) – Non-verbal
(DEFAULT when youth leaders are mentioned; caring, accepting, example, presence...)
13. Family Stress/Crisis/Divorce
14. Dating Relationships
15. Parachurch Camp/Retreat/Special Event/Conferences
16. Other
17. External Crises
18. Other Adult Church Leader(s)

Develop the future.

Student leadership training that comes to you for only \$59.

Curriculum to fire up and maintain your student leadership team.



LeaderTreks
www.leadertreks.com

LeaderTreks wants to develop the future with you. Call 1-877-502-0699 to get started.

This magazine is published quarterly by the National Network of Youth Ministries 12335 World Trade Drive, Suite 16 San Diego, California 92128 Telephone: 858 451 1111 Fax: 858 451 6900 netmag@youthworkers.net www.youthworkers.net

| | |
|---------------------------|------------------|
| President | Paul Fleischmann |
| Executive Director | Doug Tegner |
| Managing Editor | Mark Stephens |
| Senior Editor | Doug Clark |
| Art Director | Joel Sawyer |
| Content Liaison | Cheri Turner |
| National Accounts Manager | George Lawson |

| | |
|-----------------------|--|
| Regional Coordinators | |
| Great Lakes | Keith Krueger kkrueger@nnym.org |
| Great Plains | Open |
| Mid Atlantic | Open |
| New England | David Kemper dkemper@nnym.org |
| Northwest | Chris Renzelman crenzelman@nnym.org |
| South Central | Open |
| Southeast | Open |
| Southwest | Mike De Vito mdevito@nnym.org |

Back to the interview. Ask this second question: **Of all the special influences that you just described about your decision to become a follower of Christ, which one would you identify as most important?** Now you have some more information to analyze, and you can use the same categories as identified above. Here's how the order of our category list changed when reflecting how often students named a factor as most influential on their decision to become a follower of Christ:

The most important factor in becoming a Christian?

1. Friends – Non-verbal
(DEFAULT when friends are mentioned; caring, accepting, example, presence...)
2. Friends – Verbal (inviting, counseling, challenging, coaching...)
3. Parents
4. Personal (Internal) Turmoil
5. Youth Leader(s) – Non-verbal
(DEFAULT when youth leaders are mentioned; caring, accepting, example, presence...)
6. Other Family Members
7. Dating Relationships
8. Youth Leader(s) – Verbal (inviting, counseling, challenging, coaching...)
9. Church Camp/Retreat/Special Event/Conferences
(DEFAULT when unspecified camp experience is mentioned)
10. Parachurch Youth Ministry Involvement
11. Other
12. Specific Challenge to Act
13. Family Stress/Crisis/Divorce
14. Attending Church
15. External Crises
16. Other Adult Church Leader(s)
17. Church Youth Ministry Involvement
18. Parachurch Camp/Retreat/Special Event/Conferences

Our interviewees also supplied us with information about **the religious practices of the family in which they were raised**, as well as describing **any personal religious experience they remember having while they were children of 10 years old or younger**. This information was used in our further analyses.

Feel free to ponder the data you collect and consider how it should impact your evangelism activities. But after doing some statistical analyses of the stories we collected and cross-checking this info with students' gender, family religious background and childhood religious experiences, I feel confident in offering *three practical implications from our research*.

First, it makes sense to equip Christian teenagers to articulate their faith to their non-Christian friends. Our analysis showed that teenagers with little or no religious background are especially responsive to this sort of verbal outreach from friends.

Next, make use of camps, retreats, or conferences when it comes to evangelism. We found that such events are most important for the conversions of teenagers with little or no religious background. They are also very effective when they include a "specific challenge to act." And, for whatever reason, these pointed invitations to begin a relationship with Christ are especially significant when trying to evangelize males.

My final suggestion is to blend the first two. Focus some energy on equipping Christian teenagers to invite their non-Christian friends to camps, retreats, or conferences. It's a different *kind* of verbal coaching, but it seems to pay off, especially on those teens coming from less religious backgrounds. ↻

Special thanks to Dr. Tom Bergler of Huntington University for his help in preparing this article.



Dave Rahn is the vice president of YFC/USA Ministries and director of Huntington University's MA in youth ministry leadership (www.youthministryleadership.com). He is a youth ministry researcher, author, speaker and leadership strategist. Dave has over fifty published articles and three co-authored books to his credit. He is a contributing editor for Youth-Worker Journal and writes the Outreach Notebook column for Group. His home is in Huntington, Indiana, where he lives with his wife, gets visits from his two college-age children, networks with youth pastors and—whenever possible—hangs out with high school students. He's been doing some form of youth ministry for over 33 years.

JOIN NOW!



The National Network of Youth Ministries links youth workers for encouragement, spiritual growth, and sharing resources in order to expose every teenager to the gospel of Jesus Christ, establish those who respond in a local church, and disciple them to help reach the world.

Join the Network

We need each other. We are better together! The Network links people on several fronts, from individual youth workers, to denominations, ministries and organizations, as well as other Networks. At the core is the Network Covenant signed by every Network Member. Jesus' prayer in John 17 compels us to unite "that the world may believe."

If you are not already a Covenant Member, please go online to www.youthworkers.net and click the "join" button. Agree to the Network Covenant, fill out the form and send your registration today. You can also call to join at 1-800-367-6696.

JOIN FOR FREE >>