



Perspectives on Church and Faith



Insights from a questionnaire completed by students attending CBAC youth groups

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Introduction

One of the significant roles that the Youth & Family Department holds within the CBAC is **advocacy on behalf of youth and children.**

We long to see our Next Generations recognized for not only being the “future of the church,” but integral members of our churches now. To that end, we hold a commitment to listen to and present the voices of our youth. We have a legacy of researching the faith of our young people, and

this project is the next step in that legacy.

The purpose of this study was primarily to be a place where we could gather the voices of students, listen to their experiences, and learn from them. We maintain that we have much to learn about being the people of God by listening to our youngest voices.

Throughout the project, we have sought input from students at every level. We had input

from students and ministry leaders for our questionnaires, and the resulting findings. They have guided our findings and helped us interpret our discoveries and observations. We intended for them to be research partners for this complete process. We developed a research team, comprised of students and youth pastors, who helped us sift through the data, and identify four significant trends. We followed up on these learnings through focus groups with high school students.

I invite you to read slowly and carefully through these findings. Consider the reflections from our students and ministry leaders and take the recommendations for practice to your church leadership team. May this study help our churches take seriously the words of Psalm 78, which reminds us to pass faith from one generation to the next.

Rev. Dan Pyke
CBAC Director of Youth & Family

Shared Humanity



Overview

The Research Team noted the impact of Covid-19 on the faith of our youth, and saw how the pandemic was a shared experience. Emerging out of the questionnaire was an increase in youth engagement with prayer, reading the Bible, and a willingness to share their faith with others. The data seems to show that for many of the youth who

completed the questionnaire, Covid-19 was a catalyst for more positive engagement with spiritual disciplines. As we looked through the questionnaire's responses it seemed to point toward a sense of desire for connection and relationship.

As the research team discussed these results, we wondered if people were looking for comfort and some sort of hope and if that could result in non-Christian youth reaching

out to their Christian friends. Some people on the team identified that while Covid-19 could have helped people pursue faith more, it could also have 'pushed' people to be more isolated and feel alone. Considering these shared experiences, we ask: "Now what?"

Reflections of Research Champion team

Reflection 1

I recall, in the first half of 2020, hearing someone refer to the global experience of the pandemic to date as collective and personal trauma. I had, at that time, not reflected on why it seemed so many of us were living as though we were grieving loss. A popular expression has been "we are all in the same boat." Certainly, the vessel would determine the experience, but the stormy sea remains the same. It would be difficult to deny that this is one of the single largest shared humanity events in our lived history.

This became clearer to me as we reflected on the results of the research. Students, in various situations, are struggling with similar questions related to their faith and the state of the world. At the same time many have demonstrated an increased openness to talk about faith and seek answers within a biblical worldview. Many students are seeking out like minded peers - via youth gatherings, digital or in person - as people to navigate this storm with. They are turning to one another, parents, trusted adults, ministries, etc as places to process this together. I'm not certain this desire for collective processing is new, and would affirm it as biblical, but it is certainly an opportunity that we cannot afford to miss out on as youth ministries.

Reflection 2

The global COVID-19 pandemic has been a singular event in all of our lives. Inherently new, inherently destabilizing, inherently global in nature, COVID-19 has confronted each of us with change, loss, and the sheer scope of the unknown for much of the past two years.

As students step into conversations of faith, as they seek to point to hope in the struggle, as they seek to cross lines of separation in love and shared presence, the church needs to be aware of their newly-assumed, or perhaps recently-increased, role as ambassadors of reconciliation. I am moved to prayer for these young bearers of good news in classrooms, group chats, and churches. What steps do we take to equip them for continued ministries of presence, evangelism, and care for others as we move from this season into the next?

Consideration for Practice

- 1** *For many of us, our communities are back to 'normal' after the pandemic. Despite this, our society continues to navigate the ongoing effects and challenges resulting from Covid. Give space to grieve what was lost. Many of our students have lost out on common experiences, such as field trips, grad activities, and other events, because of provincial restrictions.*
- 2** *Consider leading students through Alpha's "Life on Purpose" curriculum, training students in mission and evangelism.*
- 3** *Challenge students to see God's continued hand upon and in our shared human experience. Point out where the church is actively displaying how to Jesus through our actions. Provide opportunity to do the same in community.*
- 4** *Intentionally create opportunities for mature students to be challenged to honestly question their own faith. Invite them to ask tough questions, and struggle through the answers together.*

Technology Dilemma



Overview

The tension for many Christian parents, youth pastors and leaders, and young people is the impact of technology on their faith.

When asked the long word question 'Has technology positively affected your relationship with God? How?' **62%** of respondents said 'yes'. However, when asked the question 'Has technology negatively affected your relationship with God?,' **48%** of respondents stated that 'yes,' technology has

negatively affected their relationship with God. This seeming contradiction identified by the Research Team was called the 'Technology Dilemma.'

We were able to identify several key themes from the long-answer responses about the positive and negative effects of technology on faith formation. The most popular theme identified for how youth identify technology has positively affected their relationship with God was 'Useful Videos and Information' followed closely by the theme 'Online Church/youth group.'

The most popular themes identified by **65%** of students who said technology negatively affects their relationship with God highlighted was that technology is distracting from their relationship with God.

When we asked the focus groups what the church's role should be in educating young people about technology, to our surprise the

youth replied that they didn't really think the church had a role. They pointed toward school and their parents as main sources of learnings. However, the focus group did also highlight that it would be useful if some of the teaching and values offered by adult Christian leaders could also help give guidance to how to interact with technology.

Reflections of Research Champion team

During the Covid-19 pandemic technology was an essential aspect of life. Online schools, online church and youth groups, communication with friends and peers, and entertainment purposes.

All of these required some form of technology, the real question is, 'Where does God fit into all this?'

The group of people who identified technology as a hindrance to their relationship with God often stated that technology posed a 'distraction' from their time with God.

This is not an uncommon theme, even outside of the Covid-19 pandemic technology has posed as a distraction from time spent with God. The problem that arose within the pandemic is the increased reliance on technology. With more resources and time being made available to use technology, the

distractions already provided become even more available than before.

The distractions made available are endless, simple things like an offline video game, to more complex struggles like battles with pornography addictions, a rise in technology usage gives more opportunity for these distractions to occur.

The group of people who identified technology as having a positive impact on their relationship with God seemed to outline the word 'resource'. 17% of people identified technology as providing them with resources to useful videos and information about God. Technology can

provide many outlets and resources which can be very beneficial to our faith. Two examples that come to mind would be the YouVersion app and the GotQuestions.org webpage. The number of God-focused sites, apps, and resources online are endless.

Questions I would like to see answered:

- *How can we provide more God-focused resources?*
- *Are there resources we can provide to not only provide information, but help battle distractions?*
- *In what ways can we make our resources more available?*
- *How can we aid in shifting the focus of people from their distractions and to God?*



Consideration for Practice

- 1** *Talk about the concerns and dangers of being online, including screen-addiction, cyber-bullying, and human trafficking. Don't shy away from these tough topics with your students, and share resources with parents.*
- 2** *Create dialogue with students so that content isn't simply downloaded or streamed, but allow for opportunity for meaningful engagement.*
- 3** *Engage in conversation that does not CONDEMN use of technology, but instead offers insights to how young people can use Christian teaching to engage in technology in ways that are constructive.*
- 4** *Invite students to put away their phones, dust off the Bibles, and invite them to read scripture from a physical Bible.*
- 5** *Consider offering training for parents around how they can help their children use technology in positive ways.*



Meaningful and Positive Conversations



Overview

One of the multiple-choice questions of the survey asked who were the people that meaningfully and positively contributed to deepening youths' relationship with God.

Remaining consistent with current literature and research, the top choice to the question 'What person(s) have meaningfully and

positively contributed to deepening your relationship with God (select all that apply)?' was 'parent/guardian'.

The subsequent most influential people identified by youth participants were: 'Pastoral Leader', 'Adult Members of your Church', 'Camp Staff/Director'.

These indications are not overly surprising; however, what stood out to the research team

was the responses to the long-answer question 'What was it that this person (s) did that was so significant for you in your faith journey?'

42% of respondents identified that "Meaningful Conversations" was an important action that helped them in their faith journey. The second and third most popular themes were: 'Encourage/Value Me' & 'Available/Supportive.'

Reflections of Research Champion team

Reflection 1

The specific topic of mentorship stuck out to me while reviewing the results because, throughout my faith journey, there have been several people who have had a significant influence on my life and walk with God. Depending on the season of life I was in, they played a crucial part in who I am today.

Connections such as these became much more crucial when we were faced with the isolation brought on by Covid-19. Fellowship was primarily based on virtual interactions. While important, there was a risk of hiding behind your screen because of how much harder it is to be real with people you only see through a screen. Having a supportive person whom you knew you could reach out to amid all the unknown was and continues to be a grounding experience.

I am a grade twelve student currently faced with the choice of what do to when I graduate in a few months. Some of the most helpful and productive processing I've managed to do on the subject has been thanks to my mentors. They offered life advice from their own experience, but more importantly, they allowed me to share my thoughts and feelings about

the subject. It was a relief to have someone listen to me and not interrupt mid-sentence to explain why my feelings were wrong.

Reflection 2

Having served in youth ministry for a long time, I've watched many students walk away from the church and faith. Through those observations, I began asking questions such as "What can we be doing now so that students are still following in Jesus in ten years?"

As I reflected on answers to this question, I began to notice the common elements among those students who continued to follow Jesus. Primarily, they were supported by relationships in their local church. The more meaningful relationships that a student had with adults in their local congregation, the greater the

likelihood that they would continue to follow Jesus.

As I reflect on these findings, I'm brought back to my own experiences as a high school student. Most of my church experience took place in the context of a small congregation, with few children or students.

As we consider how to see faith passed on to the next generation, we need to prioritize the quality of relationships.



Consideration for Practice

As the research team reviewed the data and saw which themes emerged, there was an important 'ah ha' moment. For many youth leaders there is a concern about 'not having' the answer. However, we recognized that students are not looking for adults to have all the answers, but they value the space to have conversations. Covid-19 was a significant reminder to leaders that we do not have all the answers. We could not answer "why?" or "how long?" However, we could provide time for relationships.

- 1 Invite students to come to a church leadership meeting and share their perspectives on faith and church. What do they wish the church addressed? What opportunities do students see to join God in your neighbourhood?*
- 2 Discover ways to involve students in ministries in your church, so that relationships are formed.*
- 3 Encourage adults to get to know the names of students in your church, and train them to have good conversations.*

Why do Youth Attend Youth Group?



For many of our youth groups, there is a gap in the experiences of those who now attend. Because of Covid-19, you may not have a single student who has attended a large-scale youth event, or have participated in a mission trip. As the research team engaged with the data, we became very curious about what motivated young people to attend youth group.

Why did some youth attend online youth gatherings? Why did some youth only come

back when we started to meet in person? What are young people hoping for our youth groups and churches? These are questions that youth leaders continue to ask and will continue to ask.

The most popular response to the questionnaire question about why youth went to youth group was to learn about God/Jesus (44%), this was closely followed by the reason of 'social/being with friends' identified by

(33%) of youth, which was followed by the theme of 'fun' which was shared by 27% of respondents. These statistics caught the eye of our research team. During our discussion we wondered about the line between 'fun' and 'learning.'

Resulting from this we asked our focus group a question about what type of 'places' they feel like they can be themselves. The responses were not surprising, as most focus group members stated that they felt like they could be themselves in places where they had friends or were with people who had similar experiences (such as sport teams).

This presents a challenge for many youth groups as they are often composed of youth from different schools, different social groups, and different communities. **We wondered:**

- *How can youth pastors/leaders create this type of environment as general Canadian society continues to shift dramatically from church culture?*
- *How do you create an exciting and engaging space when it is composed of such different people?*

Reflections of Research Champion team

Our research team was encouraged to see that many youth respondents were finding new ways to be involved in their church. As many churches moved online, the need to engage with new technology created opportunities and the need to have 'technology literate' youth take on more responsibilities within the church community.

As identified by the research team, respondents highlighted new ways that they were getting involved, while also emphasizing a desire for what that involvement could look like. When asked how 'Has your involvement changed since Covid-19?' 52% of respondents identified some form of change.

For some youth respondents their involvement

declined because their volunteer roles paused because of Covid-19 (kids ministry, nursery, etc.). This makes sense and was affirmed by our research team, the interesting element that emerged from the data was the new ways that youth were becoming involved. The new activities were mostly oriented around technology and cleaning. One respondent stated:

"Yes, my involvement has changed. My church has started getting people to sanitize their hands, so I have started getting involved in helping with that."


The final question of the questionnaire was 'Would you want to be more involved in your 'church community'?'. There were three options

on the survey: 'Yes', 'No', 'Already Involved'. 35% of youth respondents identified that they were already involved, however, 60% respondents indicated that 'Yes' they would like to be more involved. This was compelling for the research team and seems to demonstrate that the majority of youth desire to be meaningfully involved in their church's ministry.

Consideration for Practice

- 1** *Plan a day to serve your neighbourhood. Perhaps your youth ministry can partner with your ABW group, or another ministry. This way, you can serve together, and create space where meaningful relationships can begin to be formed. Access the Undercurrent resources available on the CBAC Youth and Family website.*
- 2** *Ask key students within your ministry how help new or prospective students feel welcomed and safe, invite them into helping you plan and design your regular youth gatherings.*
- 3** *Plan a training day, where youth and adults can be equipped to serve, and even invite students to do some of the training and planning.*





The Perspectives on Church and Faith Study sought to observe the current perspective of youth attending Canadian Baptists of Atlantic Canada churches on Christian faith, the church, and its role in their lives. The intention was to identify trends, learnings, and concepts and share these findings to parents and ministry leaders across Atlantic Canada to help inform their practice.

Several different community-based research approaches were used throughout the duration of this study; however, the main source of primary data collection is a quantitative questionnaire offered to youth ages who were connected (attending weekly youth groups, Sunday morning worship, etc.) to a CBAC church. The questionnaires were followed up by a research team comprised of CBAC youth and youth pastors, and findings were explored in a series of focus groups, also comprised of CBAC youth.

Find more information about the research process, and the distributed questionnaire on our website.