



Congregations have...

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The culture of a congregation holds critical factors for faithful growth in God's Word. Church communities can build trust, Christ-like relationships, and support that helps weather the storms of teenage and young adult years. They can also develop an unhealthy atmosphere, making it easier for young people to walk away. While not all-inclusive, Warmth, Challenge and Grace best describe what young people told us helped keep them attached to the church community.

Warmth is characterized by displaying Christ's love for all people and a personal invitation to be a part of the community of believers. Warmth strives for every guest and regular attender to be greeted and made comfortable. A strong welcome helps dissipate confusion or distraction and allows their experience to be focused on God's gifts for them.

Beyond the initial welcome, warmth happens when all baptized members are consistently reminded they are a vital part of the Body of Christ. In these communities, personal and corporate stories of grace, failure, and joy are told. People with various levels of ability and across generations are known and want to know others. No congregation or individual can do this perfectly, yet we strive to see and reflect God's love for us to others.

Challenge is characterized by a willingness to share the truth in love, so all may know and remain in the saving faith of Jesus Christ. Challenge doesn't just let sin and conflict slide. It is willing to engage in tough spiritual conversations, especially with teens who are struggling. Standing firmly in God's Word, it faces the questions and confusion youth experience living in the darkness of sin. These conversations start with good listening and do not deflect difficult topics. Instead, they build relationships through honest, open discussion centered around God's living Word and promises.

The other opportunity to provide challenge comes as believers seek to live out their faith through the work of the Holy Spirit. Challenge doesn't underestimate young people. Instead it gives them opportunity to live out their various vocations, even when it stretches them. It can be hard to give young people opportunities to serve and lead, especially when there is the potential for failure. Members should be encouraged to take the work of Christ seriously in their various vocations.

Grace is characterized by echoing God's love and forgiveness of us to others. The words of confession and absolution should be our regular vocabulary, especially as young people struggle with faith. Young people are learning (and failing) so much so quickly. As youth grow and change, they need parents and supportive adults to constantly remind them of their chief identity as God's baptized child. Grace creates an environment where questions are not feared, attacked or ignored. As young people struggle they need a community of believers who show support, address concerns head on, and remind them of the God who sent His Son for them. It keeps their answers and identity focused on Christ rather than on sports, social media or other distractions.

There is no prescription or program for creating a culture of warmth, challenge, and grace. It is going to look different for every congregation. The work of creating this environment cannot be rushed or superficial. It can be especially hard and rewarding when this kind of environment can be created across lines of ethnicity, socio-economic status, and other cultural dividing lines. It takes the work of the Holy Spirit within congregations to reflect the love of Jesus and point always to the cross. Congregational communities can be a teen's testing ground for seeing if God's love described in His Word is effectively applied and active in real life. When warmth, challenge, and grace are done well, they can be transformational for teens. ■