

Faith that stands the test of time

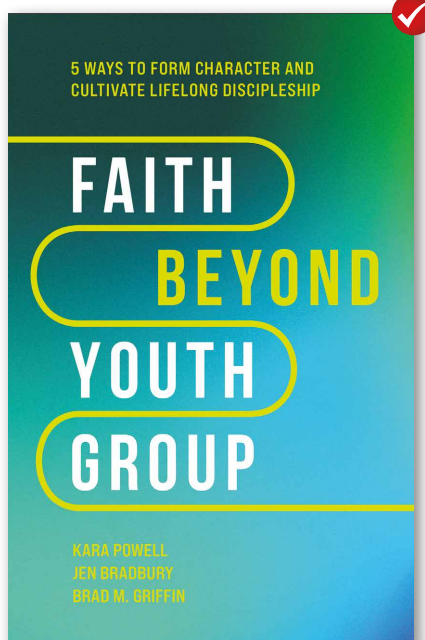
Jennifer Bradbury is an internationally known author and researcher and long-term youth worker whose current work focuses on faith formation for youth and young adults. I recently talked with her about her research and a forthcoming book written with Kara Powell and Brad Griffin.

What will readers encounter in your new book, *Faith Beyond Youth Group*?

The goal of our John-Templeton funded research was to help churches better instill Christlike character in teenagers. We surveyed youth leaders, did a comprehensive literature review on character formation, conducted 96 phone interviews with diverse youth ministry leaders and then visited seven noteworthy faith communities to explore how they formed character. What we found is a connection between character formation and long-term faith formation. When we instill Christlike character in teenagers, we give them a way to live out their faith beyond youth group.

From my prior work with a university student ministry, I've heard a great deal about 'Generation Z' being an incredibly anxious generation. Has your research and writing borne that out? If so, how can youth workers and families speak in a healthy way into that?

The number of teenagers dealing with



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anxiety increased during the pandemic, although they were already rising pre-pandemic. This fits with the countless stories we heard during our research about how teenagers are being impacted by anxiety.

Given this, it's increasingly critical for youth workers and families to address anxiety in healthy ways. One way to do this is by listening to (and believing!) young people when they say they're anxious, and responding with empathy, which also cultivates trust.

Another way of doing this is by exploring topics – like mental health – that teenagers care deeply about in a conversational manner. A really helpful tool for doing this is to invite adults to share stories of how they've encountered Jesus in the midst of anxiety and then dialoguing about their experiences. Such testimonies often become beacons of hope for anxious teenagers (and so, too, do the relationships that sometimes form as testimonies are shared).

In your prior books you've indicated that the notion of doubts and questions in the lives of youth is not only to be expected but can be a very good, healthy reality. How so?

Questions form faith. When Thomas doubted, Jesus met him in the middle of his doubt. Belief lay on the other side of Thomas' doubts. The same is true for teenagers, who are at a spot developmentally where they're naturally questioning everything in order to form their identity independent from the people closest to them.

Expressing their doubts and questions does several things in their faith formation:

(1) It allows them to be real and, in so doing, discover that they belong – questions and all – to a Christ-centered community that loves and cares for them. (2) It fuels growth. When teenagers leave a faith community with questions, they continue wrestling with them after they leave. They Google them; search their Bible for answers; text their youth pastors; have conversations about



them with their families and friends. They keep going until they answer the question for themselves, a process that gives them ownership over their faith as they learn what they believe and why. (3) It enables them to see the bigness of their faith. If teenagers aren't allowed to question or doubt their faith, they conclude that the world is too complicated for their faith; that there are certain questions that are just too big for God. In contrast, when young people have the forum to wrestle with their faith in real-time, they learn that there's nothing too scary for God and that their faith is relevant to every aspect of their lives.

What role do books and other published resources have in the faith formation of young people?

I think the role is three-fold: (1) Young people look to books to answer their questions about their faith. (2) Leaders are learners. We can't take people where we haven't gone ourselves. The more youth leaders are reading about their faith, the more they're growing in their own and equipped to help young people grow in theirs. (3) Good curriculum is invaluable. We're in a season where many youth leaders are burned out. They're exhausted from three years of constantly having to pivot what they were doing during the pandemic. They're longing to re-engage relationally with young people. The less time they have to spend preparing gatherings, the more time they can simply be present in the lives of young people – listening to and empathetically ministering to anxious people. Good curriculum can give youth leaders more time to do exactly that.

*Jeff Crosby is the president and CEO of ECPA, the trade association of Christian publishing. This piece is adapted from chapter nine of his new book, *The Language of the Soul: Meeting God in the Longings of Our Hearts* (May, Broadleaf Books). It is used by permission of the publisher. All rights reserved.*