

Conversation Starters with College Students

Church communities all over the country are anticipating and preparing for their young adults to come home from college for the summer. This is a great opportunity as a church family to reengage with these students and create a space of welcome.

The children we have raised within these church walls have now become emerging young adults within their student careers. They've experienced life on their own, made their own decisions, set their own hours, navigated their own dilemmas, encountered their own relationships, and resourced their own challenges.

These students are bringing home more than they left with as they are journeying through a crucial chapter of their lives. They are carrying with them spiritual and religious doubts, new politics, feelings of both anxiety and joy, their identities, and their experiences from their time at school.

As they arrive home, they'll be seeking to connect with their community in both familiar and new ways. How can we use this season to cultivate a relationship with our college class that supports them as they learn to make their way in this world? It begins by creating spaces for our returning young adults to let down their guard and to be honest about the things they are experiencing, growing in, and currently working through.

For church members, our first questions when students return are often focused on school:

- How did exams go?
- What are you doing for the summer?
- What's next? or What are your plans after you graduate?
- How was ___ University? or Why did you switch schools?
- How much longer do you have?

These questions are all intentional because it means you are asking them about their lives and trying to connect. However, not all students are in the same place and certain questions can make them uncomfortable. When anxiety is involved, disengaging is often easier rather than having to explain why they may not be in school anymore, how exams were very stressful, why they don't have an internship, etc.

Who they are and who they are shaping in to is so much deeper than what they do. Rather than beginning with a question when you see students at church, begin with an affirming and welcoming statement: "It's so good to see you!" - "I'm glad you're here!" followed by "How have you been?" You can continue the conversation from here with more relational and person-focused questions.

Let's take this important opportunity to reengage intentionally with these students we've known since they were young. Here are four tools to reshape the conversation from surface questions that can cause anxious feelings to deeper questions that give space for our young adults to share their story as they grow in trust with their faith community:

Walk alongside them. The key to college ministry is walking alongside students in their journey. We grieve alongside, rejoice alongside, and feel alongside... our presence and our listening skills become more of a posture rather than asking questions and taking action. Students don't always want or need their community to solve the things they are working through or exploring, but they do need their community to be *with* them in the journey. The greatest way we can serve our college class is by listening, staying interested, and being present.

- How can we support you? or How can I be praying for you?
- You are not alone.
- Tell me more.
- Tell me your story.

Focus your attention on the student. Each student is in a different place in terms of grades, knowing their future, attending school, etc. Therefore, questions that are focused on school can sometimes breed anxiety, fear of judgment, feelings of shame, or disconnect. Rather than asking about exams or future plans, ask questions that are focused on who they are becoming and what they may be interested in.

- What are you most interested in?
- What do you see yourself becoming?
- What are you reading or learning that's inspiring you?

Affirm what you see in them. Accept them for who and where they are. College students are in an age where they are trying on different personas and exploring who they are. Strong relationships stem from appreciating and accepting whom the other is and is becoming. Affirming our brothers and sisters in Christ is a simple way to empower them and call out their gifts and strengths. What leadership skills do you see?

- You are so great at ...
- Your presence is invaluable!
- Would you like to lead or help with ____?
- You bring ____ to the table. We are lucky you are a part of our community!

Encourage an adult-to-adult relationship. Each student is struggling to become an adult. While they don't yet fit in the adult classes, they are no longer youth. Try listening to their opinions and ideas. Invite them to discuss how they feel about various issues and respectfully share how you feel as well. Take the person in front of you seriously and listen to what unfolds.

- What's your passion around ____?
- Walk me through that or help me understand?
- What are the biggest questions you are working through?
- How is your faith different now?

College students still need their home church, just in new ways. And we need them! I hope you find these tools helpful to create a space that allows them to feel welcome. Let's unite as a faith community to reengage with students, loving them where they may be in their journey.