

Why They're

An insightful **new report** from The Evangelical Fellowship of Canada and several partner groups examines **why** and **when** Canadian young adults are **leaving, staying** and **returning** to church.

By Karen Stiller

Engagers



PHOTO: DESIGNPICS.COM

Sam Grottenberg is a 21-year-old Canadian male who lives in Calgary and loves Jesus and His Church. Grottenberg was raised by parents whom he describes as “dedicated Christ followers.” They prayed and read the Bible with him, and Grottenberg clearly remembers talking about spiritual things throughout the week, not just on Sunday morning.

“I could go to my dad, and my mom too, with theology and beliefs I was wrestling with. They supported me in trying to figure out what faith was for myself, and not dictating to me and saying ‘This is what you have to believe,’” he says. “There was the freedom to explore and understand Christ for myself.”

Growing up, Grottenberg’s church was an intergenerational experience – which he loved – complete with a mentor named Bill who “absolutely affirmed me and

walked with me through my early days of serving in the Church. He was always there to support me.” Grottenberg had what he calls “tangible experiences with God” throughout his teen years. “That really stuck with me, even when politics and crap happened in the church. That gave me something to hold onto,” he says.

Grottenberg’s regular participation in church life as a young adult and his ongoing openness to God make him an Engager – and a minority among his peers – according to *Hemorrhaging Faith: Why and When Canadian Young Adults Are Leaving, Staying and Returning to Church*, a new report commissioned by the EFC Youth and Young Adult Ministry Roundtable and sponsored by the EFC, Great Commission Foundation, Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship of Canada, Stronger Together 2011 and Youth for Christ Canada.

The research project – the first of its kind in Canada –

Fence Sitters



PHOTO: GLOWIMAGES.COM

surveyed Canadian youth aged 18 to 34, investigating their spiritual lives as children, teens and young adults, and their subsequent church attendance patterns.

Engagers like Grottenberg generally still attend church and feel positive about it. Six out of 10 Engagers affiliate with an evangelical tradition. Engagers are the most positive about the churches they know, but the other three spiritual types identified in the project – Fence Sitters, Wanderers or Rejecters – are negative (see sidebar by Rick Hiemstra for more insight into these four spiritual types).

The research project consisted of three phases: a literature review of existing academic research on this topic, much of it American; interviews with 72 young adults from across the country that helped shape subsequent survey questions; and then the survey itself conducted by Angus Reid Forum, an on-line research panel that facilitated 2,049 survey respondents in June 2011.

"This has been a long time coming," says Grottenberg, who was not a participant in the survey. "I'm glad there's finally a voice to what I've seen happening to my peers and my age demographic in the Church. The report is an affirmation

Wanderers



PHOTO: DESIGNPICS.COM

Rejecters

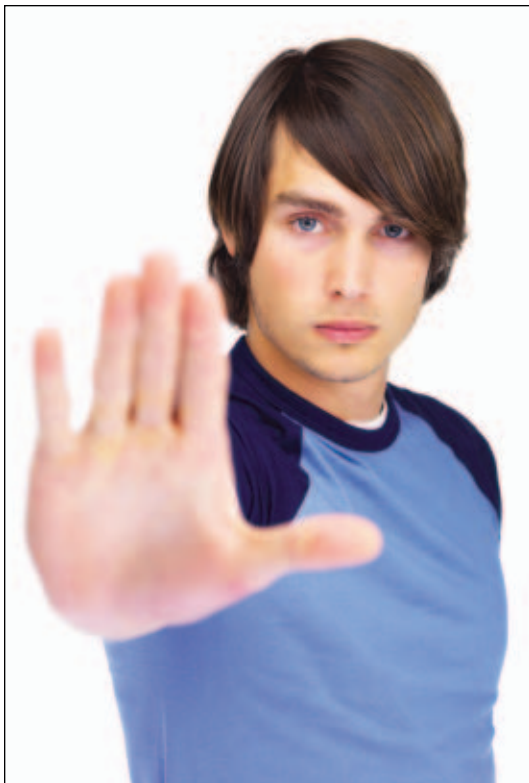


PHOTO: DESIGNPICS.COM

to me of what I've been observing."

And what Grottenberg has been observing is many youth leaving Canadian

churches and not coming back anytime soon.

Hemorrhaging Faith reports that "By young adulthood only one in 10 respondents raised in Catholic and main-line traditions reported attending religious services at least weekly – compared to four in 10 raised in Evangelical traditions."

The report, available at hemorrhagingfaith.com, carefully takes more than a hundred pages to dissect the survey and responses in detail, quote respondents (anonymously),

Leaving

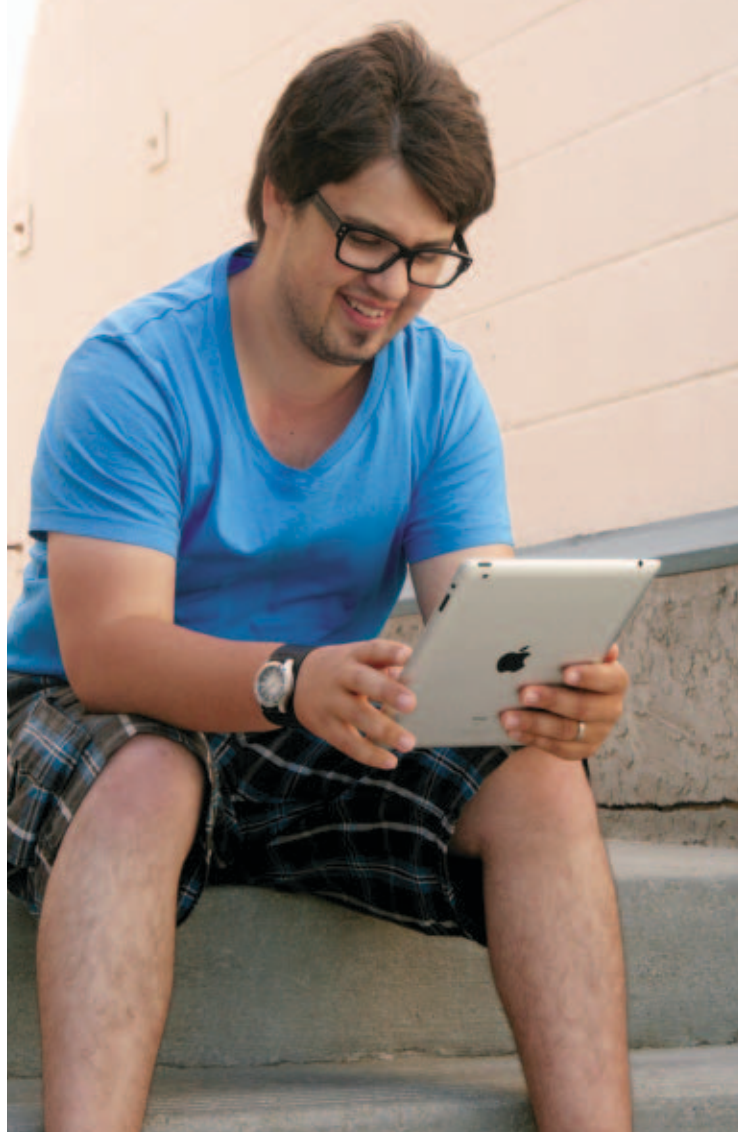


PHOTO: JOELLE DUBBER

Engagers like Sam Grottenberg generally still attend church and feel positive about it.

and provide some evaluation and responses to the why and when of those who leave, stay and return.

Exit Interviews

"There is a wonderful gift in this report," observes Aileen Van Ginkel, vice-president, ministry services for the EFC. "It's actually like exit interviews. By listening to those who are leaving, you have a huge opportunity to find out why."

John Wilkinson is chair of the EFC's Youth and Young Adult Ministry Roundtable, and executive director of Youth Unlimited (Toronto YFC). "For those of us who are close to what is going on in youth ministry across Canada, the research findings are not so much surprising as they are confirming," says Wilkinson. "Many who have grown up in church are no longer regularly attending by the time they reach their adult years. We have heard their stories but now this research validates their actual departure. More importantly, it provides a glimpse behind the curtain as to why and the challenge that needs to be addressed. We should not take the findings lightly."

James Penner is co-author of *Hemorrhaging Faith*, a youth specialist and co-founder of research firm James Penner and Associates. For him the report is "a call for

mainline churches to take more seriously the young adults within their midst and ask the question, 'What does it mean to hear them even if it changes some long-held structures?' That's a creative and important conversation that mainline churches may have to start more than others," he says. "And evangelical churches need to ask themselves, 'What happens at the transition points for youth when you have these fabulous programs and para-church ministries that start and stop?'"

The significance of transition points – those pivotal moments that change a youth's life because of changing circumstances in their home life or church, and/or significant birthdays that move them from one age group and one church program to another (or none at all) – may be one of the most startling insights provided by *Hemorrhaging Faith*.

Bruno Désorcy, a Montreal-based cultural sociologist who oversaw the francophone portion of the project, wants to highlight "one thing that was very important and true for all of Canada, but especially Québec. The moment the young adults grew from children to young teenagers, or teenagers to young adults – that is where we lost them most of the time. Transition times are critical."

Reg Bibby is a sociologist in Lethbridge, Alta., and author of books such as *Restless Gods: The Renaissance of Religion in Canada* (Novalis, 2004 [2002]). He was not involved in the research and writing of *Hemorrhaging Faith*, but read it at *Faith Today's* request as a veteran of Canadian religion surveys on religion. The importance of transition points caught his attention as new information as well. "The fact that when we are looking at decline, the decline between childhood and teen is greater than the subsequent teen to young adult drop-off is significant. That blows a stereotype right there," says Bibby.

Transitions that open the exit doors of the Church for youth aren't just about birthdays, says Rick Hiemstra, director of research and media relations for the EFC. "The report showed something very important – that transitions are not just when youth go off to college, but transitions are also what they experience going on around them in the church, like when a youth pastor leaves and church just isn't church anymore to them, so they stop going."

In many cases, says Hiemstra, churches and parents do not handle transitions well. "We lose more kids transitioning between Sunday school and youth programs than from teenagers to young adult status, sometimes



***Hemorrhaging Faith* is a research report commissioned by the EFC and several partners.**

because that is when parents give them the freedom to choose whether or not they go to church," says Hiemstra.

"They've never been in the service, we've spent years teaching them that there is nothing going on of interest to them upstairs during the service, then they age out of Sunday school, so why would they be suddenly interested in what we are doing?" he asks.

"Young adults experience culture shock, and anyone who experiences culture shock just wants to go home. The very basic reason you come to church on Sunday is to say thank you to God for your salvation, but the fundamental reason most youth come is because Mom is dragging you."

Dragging you to a place that, especially for the Wanderers and Rejecters types, simply does not seem worth attending.

"When I look at their patterns of staying, leaving and returning, the findings are the same as we're finding for the population as a whole," Bibby says. "It's relational links and the involvement that touches family life and their own life. Those relational links are so critically



The data suggests a greater decline in the early teens than in the early 20s. "That blows a stereotype right there," says Reg Bibby.

important, at the end of the day my overarching interpretation is that this whole question of who will stay and who will go depends on people being able to define their involvement as worthwhile. If they can find worthwhile ministry, they will be involved. If they can't, no one will."

Hemorrhaging Faith identifies four major reasons why youth find their church worthwhile and stay in or return



PHOTO: DESIGNPICS.COM

The View From Quebec

By Bruno Désorcy

One thing that really struck me when I was doing interviews for the *Hemorrhaging Faith* project was how we need to teach children from the very beginning to think Christianly, not to learn lessons by rote. That is one thing the Church needs to

learn, that the adults need to learn also.

Thinking Christianly might mean admitting we don't have the answer. It's pretentious to think we have all the answers. Personally, and mostly through the interviews I conducted in Québec, I learned we need to make space for different kinds of spiritual expression in the Church – sometimes going to church on Sunday morning is not the answer for teens who want to follow Christ. It may be something like a youth group or a small group for young adults. We're talking about entry points.

Young adults, although they may have been raised in evangelical or Roman Catholic churches, are generally biblically illiterate, especially in Québec. You can ask them

who spent three days in the big fish, and they will answer "Pinocchio." Many parents in Québec and beyond have totally cut their relationship with not only the Church, but with everything religious.

There is hope, but only if we do not try to "play church." We need to distinguish between tradition and traditionalism. Traditions are good because they leave us with a sense of belonging. Traditionalism is unhealthy because it doesn't leave room for other spiritual expressions of following Christ. We need to make a clear distinction between those two.

Evangelicals are very good at proclaiming the message, but the problem comes when we get to the meaning. The meaning is the life beyond the message. This raises the question of the theology of incarnation. How do we embody the message for young adults? Sunday morning worship is not enough. We need to get into solid relationships of discipleship with them. That's what happened to me 30 years ago. Someone had the courage to invest time, money, heart and mind in my life. And that story is about incarnation. **FT**

BRUNO DÉSORCY is a Montreal-based cultural sociologist who oversaw the francophone portion of the *Hemorrhaging Faith* research project.



“Parents probably don’t feel they are influential, but in long-term stability of spiritual centredness, the family is actually more important than the Church,” says Don Posterski.

to it. These “drivers” to church involvement are spiritually engaged parents, experiences of God, vibrant community, and empowering teaching and beliefs. Each driver has an evil twin, of course. A “barrier” identified as a factor that keeps youth away. They are spiritually disengaged parents, lack of experiences of God, stagnant community, and restrictive teaching and beliefs.

Parents Outweigh Church

“Parents probably don’t feel they are influential, but in long-term stability of spiritual centredness, the family is actually more important than the Church,” says Don Posterski, author, researcher, cultural strategist and consultant for *Hemorrhaging Faith*.

“If you look at the barriers and drivers, the power of modelling, the consistency of life and the transmission of values, there’s no greater predictor for spiritual perseverance than the family you are brought up in. The Church probably needs to spend some

time thinking about how they can assist parents in the nurturing of kids and some dimension of spiritual formation.”

In fact, the survey respondents who fit in the Engaged category reported growing up with parents who modelled their faith authentically, engaging in practices for their own spiritual growth that their children witnessed. They watched their parents pray, read the Bible, and grapple with their own spiritual lives in an open and transparent way.

Parents of Engaged young adults also dialogued about matters of faith with their children. According to the report there were frequent “instances where parents deliberately pass on their faith. Contrary to common belief, this usually doesn’t look like lecturing. The most effective faith instruction takes place organically.”

“When it comes to the faith commitment of parents,” John Wilkinson says, “it is hugely important that their children observe their faith as a lifestyle throughout the week if it is to make a statement about its vibrancy and authenticity. They are very quick to recognize a faith that lacks depth and true meaning and fast to distance themselves from it.”

That finding resonated with John McAuley, executive coach at The Leadership Studio at Muskoka Woods and

The Four Spiritual Types

By Rick Hiemstra

The *Hemorrhaging Faith* online survey in June 2011 included 2,049 respondents. Based on their answers, they can be divided into four different groups.

Engagers (23%) Church is good



PHOTO: DESIGNPICS.COM

Most young adults who are in church on Sunday are Engagers. Almost all Engagers report having experienced God’s love and answers to prayer. They are more likely to be female than male. Engagers generally report having opportunities to serve and lead in their local church and having attended Christian camps and mission trips. Engagers are the most likely to have a parent born outside Canada. Their parents are most likely to have consistently lived out their faith at home and in a church context.

Only a minority of Fence Sitters

attend church on a regular basis, but their attitudes toward church are still somewhat positive. Many have made life choices that conflict with the moral teaching of the church. They are likely to report having experienced God’s love and answers to prayer, but also think it would be hypocritical for them to attend church. Most feel their church makes a positive difference in their community, but is not as accepting of people as it should be. They don’t read their Bibles regularly, but many still pray. Their parents have likely been inconsistent in their patterns of church attendance and practice of spiritual disciplines. They may still want church, but on their own terms.

Fence Sitters (36%) Could I have church on these terms?



PHOTO: GLOWIMAGES.COM

part of the *Hemorrhaging Faith* project team. He remembers walking in on his own dad, head bowed, Bible open on his lap. “I stood there at the door and looked at him, and I remember having this epiphany that this was real for my dad. This was really real.”

McAuley remembers the experience as powerful, and the memory was reassuring as he moved into his own parenting years. “We might really beat ourselves up as parents because we’ve been given this paradigm of what it means to lead family devotions, but we’ve also been given this beautiful paradigm of the overflow of your life from Deuteronomy, that we teach our kids as we walk along. When parents read that they need to be engaged, it doesn’t have to be this big thing,” says McAuley. “It’s as you walk along the road.”

Authenticity comes up again and again in the *Hemorrhaging Faith* research, within the home but also inside the church doors. “We need to be a church that creates a place that admits we haven’t arrived yet ourselves,” says McAuley.

“Fence Sitters, Wanderers and Rejecters think churches should solemnize gay and lesbian marriages in the same way they solemnize heterosexual ones.”

“We’re not finished, we’re not there yet. If we just confess that, young people will say, ‘I can actually still belong there.’”

And even though youth who leave the Church and stay away frequently cited what they perceive to be the Church’s disapproval and negative treatment of the gay community (file that under Restrictive Teachings and Beliefs), there is a sense among the researchers this issue does not necessarily need to be a deal breaker.

Looking at the four categories, “from Engagers to Fence Sitters to Wanderers to Rejecters, the last three think churches should solemnize gay and lesbian marriages in the same way they solemnize heterosexual ones,” explains James Penner.

“For the Engagers, it’s a minority that supports this position, so this definitely is a key issue. The perception of the vast majority of young adults is that we have handled this issue very badly as a Christian Church.”

But there is a sense in the millennial generation, ac-

Wanderers have left the church building, but have not yet shaken the dust off their feet. Their parents are likely to have stopped attending church, thus bringing their own attendance to a halt. They find church

Wanderers (26%) Church is not for me



PHOTO: DESIGNPICS.COM

moral teaching incompatible with their lifestyles and almost never attend. Wanderers think church has a positive role to play in society, just not in their lives. Prayer and Bible reading are almost completely absent from their lives. Those who hold onto their childhood religious identity usually do it for their families – the rest are likely

to have written off organized religion. Wanderers, like most young adults raised as Christians, do not join other faiths.

Rejecters almost never darken the door of a church anymore. While they report having been raised Christian, half now say they are atheist and almost all have cut ties with organized religion. They are more likely to be male than female, and report no experience of God’s love or answers to prayer. Rejecters didn’t have opportunities to use their gifts in church or to be involved in leadership. They are cynical about the motivations of Christians, reject Christian moral teachings, and find the Church judgemental and unaccepting. The parents of most Rejecters never consistently lived out their Christian faith before their children. For Rejecters the Church is out of touch, and attendance is pointless. **FT**

Rejecters (15%) Church is bad

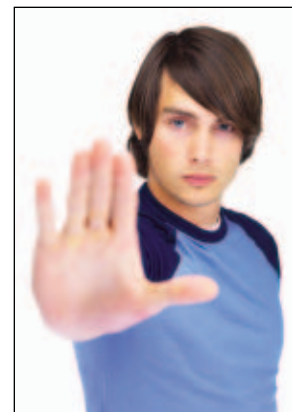


PHOTO: DESIGNPICS.COM

RICK HIEMSTRA is director of research and media relations at The Evangelical Fellowship of Canada.

Tips for Engaging Young People

By Jeremy Postal

It's hardly a surprise to most churchgoers to hear young adults are bailing out of church in concerning numbers. This elusive group of formerly or soon-to-be formerly churching young people are characterized as wandering, curious, technologically savvy and somewhat tired of the Church. Despite our best efforts to serve them great coffee, simulate community and use clever marketing hooks to catch their attention, Jesus and His Church don't seem to be a top priority for many.

The tumultuous years between finishing high school and graduating university are vital years for the Church to engage in the life of young people. Here are ten areas of engagement which will help churches – clergy and laity together – hold onto this generation – and even call it back.

- 1. Engage Scripture.** The active and systematic exploration of Scripture promotes Jesus, His Kingdom and its values. Young adults given the opportunity to dialogue with Scripture themselves find the meta-story of Scripture attractive. Careful teaching and understanding are crucial.
- 2. Engage Mission.** Engaging with real mission promotes a faith outside the church in and among the realities of work, campus and relational life. For many, this is where a skeletal faith takes on flesh.
- 3. Engage Authentically.** Authenticity promotes depth, trust and credibility with young people beyond the superficial. This means we must invite them into our lives – and not just for a moment! This generation values authenticity and transparency over the Photoshopped and finely tuned smoke and mirrors we like to provide them in the name of relevancy. Real relevancy is found in the muck of real life.
- 4. Engage Longevity.** In a culture of change and transition, longevity promotes consistency, stability and familiarity in young people's lives. Longevity serves to help orient wanderers and is one of the few constants within their shifting worlds. Serving the next generation in ministry is a long-haul project.
- 5. Engage the Issues.** Dealing with taboo and morally grey issues is important. Topics continually discussed in coffee shops and pubs revolve around sex, wealth, justice, power, alcohol, marijuana and political movements like the Montreal student protests. Engage by offering a biblical narrative and a grace-based perspective. We all need help with these topics, but young adults especially.
- 6. Engage Multi-generationally.** The treasure of multigenerational ministry is felt most strongly by our next generations. Engaging young people in the lives of those younger and older promotes biblical mentorship models and encourages a unity found in the diversity of our local churches.
- 7. Engage Short-Term Projects.** Short-term projects promote hands-on service without the big scary C-word – commitment. Show young adults a cause and invite them into a one-off volunteer or service experience, and you'll help craft memories, relationships and future commitments.
- 8. Engage Young Leaders.** When young leaders serve in key positions of church authority and responsibility, we promote "church ownership" and offer a great visual demonstration for other young people considering their own role and identity within a church. Churches which have significant influence in the lives of young people often put youth first in their budget, resource, personnel, communication and ministry practices. Simply, when young people lead, young people will follow.
- 9. Engage Story.** When we tell stories, it promotes more stories being told, many of which will surprise and shock you. We must tell better stories! Three true stories I constantly tell young adults are (1) stories about myself and the Church, stories they already know but never thought I'd admit to, (2) stories about them they never suspected I'd know and (3) stories of God.
- 10. Engage Simple Living.** Churches that promote spiritual practices like Sabbath, hospitality and generosity are places where young adults enjoy interacting. Simple living encourages a slower, more rhythmic pace to life. There is a reason Zen marketing works among young people – they don't want to live the overworked and over-cluttered life of their parents. Slow down your church calendar and watch as more young adults engage with you. 

JEREMY POSTAL has spent more than a decade working primarily with a lost and wandering crowd of 20 somethings. He is based in Whistler, B.C., and writes regularly at jeremypostal.com.



Rachael Harder: The first message we want to send to young people is that they belong.

cording to Penner, that there is a way through this issue – and others like it. Although these are thorny paths, we can still allow people to have different perspectives and still belong to a Christian community.

For Rachael Harder, co-author of *Hemorrhaging Faith* and part of Penner's research team, it would be helpful for the Church to consider the issue is perhaps less about someone's sexuality and more about identity.

"When we deny those that are same-gender attracted the right to act on their sexual orientation, they interpret our actions as rejection of them.

"We may think we're communicating disapproval of action only, but to the rising generation, what a person does and who a person is are interchangeable. Regardless of their sexual orientation, the first message we want to send to young people is that they belong. From there, we trust the Spirit of God to transform people into His likeness," says Harder.

"I would say to church leaders and parents, 'Let's not shy away from it, let's grapple with it, let's understand the underlying issues here – that it really is about identity.' And are we doing anything to speak a message louder than what the world speaks?"

Discomfort, says Harder, should not be our guide in dealing with this and other painful issues.

Grace must play a part in the conversation, says Bruno Désorcy. "We need to show grace every time, leave room for repentance, and pray for strength for people who are struggling."

A focus on who God is, how beautiful marriage was designed to be, and our own peculiar brokenness can also help take the sting out of what is perceived by young adults to be harsh judgement of others.

Majoring on Jesus

And remember, suggests Posterski, "to focus on the big issues of faith, and by

that we mean major on the majors, focus on the essence of faith rather than the endless expressions of church doctrine. Let's continue to champion the best, but let's also love the reality."

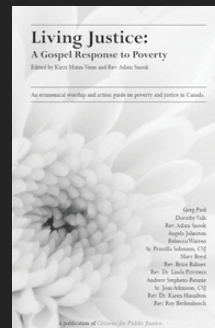
Let's talk about Jesus and not topics, adds John McAuley, who admits to being most intrigued by the million or so Fence Sitters in Canada (Penner's estimate).

"Those one million young people may not go to church, but they may come to camp," McAuley observes. In fact, Christian camp experience and short-term mission trips were a common part of the Engager identity.

"Bill Hybels has said for years that the Church is the hope of the world. I believe Christian camps are the hope of the Church," says McAuley. "Every church should have a strategy to get more kids to camp. And a lot more camps need to be creative places to invite people to belong. When we come at them, we are often asking them to surrender their own views, but

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if we can get them to encounter God in Christ, then they will surrender to love.”

Christian camp and mission trips are probably so significant because they lend themselves well to a direct and moving experience with God, which is something Engagers say they have had, and Rejecters say they have not.

Those dualities of experience, leading to dramatically different outcomes for young Canadian adults, characterize the entire report. “When we asked if the pastors could answer their toughest questions, for those who stayed, the majority

said ‘Yes.’ For those who left, the majority said ‘No,’ ” says Penner.

“That would speak to a role that someone in the congregation needs to play. It may not be the pastor. It can be informal – in fact, informal is probably better.”

Hemorrhaging Faith, says Penner, is “a wonderful invitation to do some analysis of one’s own congregation.” He does not expect anyone to be terribly surprised at what *Hemorrhaging Faith* reveals. “I think we know this to be true. Here’s what I think needs to happen. There doesn’t need to be a lot of talk about this as much as

there needs to be some silence. I would simply encourage congregations to prayerfully take the report to God and then out of listening there will come a wonderful sense of where to take it.”

Hemorrhaging Faith: Why and When Canadian Young Adults Are Leaving, Staying and Returning to Church is available at hemorrhagingfaith.com. **FT**

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Love Movement Calls Youth to a Deeper Understanding of Love

By Carol Lowes

Ben Porter and Joel Gordon launched a charity in February to help teens and churches gain a more biblical understanding of love.

The Love Movement offers a video series called *Take Action* for small groups and is also preparing to launch a national TV series for Christian youth called *Love Is Moving*.

“Love is a lifestyle which the Church must live out, but it seems like many people do not understand fully what love is,” explains Porter, who works as a counsellor at the Gateway men’s shelter in downtown Toronto, a ministry of the Salvation Army.

Christian love is more than dropping off clothing or canned goods at a shelter. And it’s different from the kind of “selfish sexual feeling” that popular culture equates with love, he says.

“When you read the Bible and understand who God is and why He created us and why Christ died for us, you see that love involves deep, selfless action, always lifting the other above yourself in service and care.”

Donating to needy people is loving, but it’s not a full expression of love when donors don’t “have contact with the people they are trying to give love to,” says Porter.

To challenge Christians, especially teens, to deepen their understanding and practice of love, the group hopes to offer even more resources at lovemovement.org alongside their existing *Take Action* curriculum for schools, Christian clubs and church youth.

Porter and Gordon also visit schools and churches to talk about how God’s love differs from portrayals of love in the media and those that spring from human nature.

Porter is also busy writing a book called *The Search for*

Love about God’s message of love to humanity, and what churches can do to live out biblical teachings about love.

Co-founder Joel Gordon, a television producer, plans to begin filming the TV series *Love Is Moving* this winter, featuring youth using the Love Movement curriculum to embark on art projects and service initiatives in their communities. Churches are currently invited to contribute video recordings for the TV show, which will also include some in-studio discussion as well as showcase Christian artistic expression.

Porter and Gordon hope many churches will use their video materials as part of a series of evenings or discussion sessions about selfless biblical love and how churches can serve their communities better.

The Love Movement also is working on a documentary film which follows how God has been moving the ministry forward.

The documentary called *In Search of Love* started out as “a translation of Ben [Porter]’s research for his book to a visual form.” The research originally aimed to “show the lack of understanding of love among youth and how that plays out in relationships. And it evolved into a documentary chronicling the development and growth that we’ve experienced through the Love Movement” in its first year, says Gordon.

A lot has happened since February when the Love Movement had its Toronto launch event featuring guest speaker Josh McDowell, drawing 900 teens and young adults. Gordon and Porter are trusting God that there is a lot more to come. **FT**

CAROL LOWES is a freelance writer in Ajax, Ont.