

THE COLLEGE FAITH EXPERIENCE: GROWING, NOT SURVIVING

by John Heaton

I am deeply invested in the success of your children as they move through the regimen that is New Covenant Schools. About this time each year I think about the seniors who just left us, hoping and praying that, wherever they are, they are making the transition to young adulthood successfully. For most, they have just gone off to their first year of college, one of the most significant adjustments they will make in their lives. A bevy of responsibilities that require a degree of maturity now faces them. Sure, mom and dad are there, but only available by text or phone. Together, we have done all we could to prepare them for this stage of life.

Surely I want our alumni to succeed academically at the next level, and to acquire the knowledge and skills they need to begin their vocations. One of my highest goals, however, is that they will continue to grow in their faith over the next four years. Let's face it, unless a student enrolls in a Christian college or university, he or she must be intentional about keeping faith as a part of life. The statistics are grim: 73% of Christian students quit faith in college, and many leave their churches for good. Some will marry and have children soon enough, at which time they might return, if only

because it's good for the kids. College can be a brutal place for a student who is serious about faith.

So what can be done? First, parents should begin talking to their students throughout the high school years about the challenges of being on their own, and what responsible adulthood looks like. That includes growing in faith. Parents of students in their senior year should make finding a church home part of the process in considering schools to which they might apply. My advice? Pick a church *before* you go to college. Student schedules and activities will leave little time and no encouragement to get up on a Sunday morning to start trying out a church.

Second, find a campus ministry that will encourage faith, but do not substitute that for church. A Thursday night college youth group is fine – much better than a frat party – but make a point to stay connected to the larger church. Moreover, find a church that doesn't simply cater to college kids. Students who attend church usually go with their friends, and that is fine and good. Young people, however, need older people (and younger people) in their lives, but the college experience is dominated by huge numbers of peers. (Note: if you're an "older person" consider reaching out to college youth in your church by inviting them into your home with their friends. They like to eat, and they need "parents" away from home). Students at college are in an artificial social environment that can dislocate them from their need for family.

Third, parents and their students should consider letting the pastor of the new church know of your presence. Don't be anonymous at church. The pastor should know your name and should expect to see you on Sunday morning. If you don't show up for a week or two, there can be higher accountability from the pastor than you will ever get from friends. Be intentional and don't just settle for an attitude of "at least he's attending *somewhere*." That's like saying, "Well, at least he's dating *someone*."

Finally, don't expect your child to keep practicing a faith that is not part of your life now. The senior year is not the time to begin a new habit; it should be part of your family today. It is my observation that the pandemic knocked many people out of the habit of church attendance, and they have been slow to recover their attachments. Others are not rigorously inclined to make faith a part of their family life. If faith is more or less optional in your family now, it will likely be completely absent in the lives of your children. Your family can lose faith in one generation.

New Covenant is an educational community, but it is also a community of faith that seeks to nurture the whole person. We count it a privilege not only to teach, but to nurture them in God's grace, and encourage them to flourish in habits of faithfulness.