



# “LIKE, WHATEVER”

THE INSIDER'S GUIDE  
TO RAISING TEENS

Edited by Rebecca Kahlenberg





CHAPTER 6

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## ***Teens & Faith***

*by Ann Cochran*

It was always important to me that my two sons, now ages twenty and thirty-three, had a strong faith. From their toddler to teen years, I felt that if I kept them going to church regularly, I did my job. The rest was between them and God. I knew faith would give them a perspective on the big picture. They would know that every day has a purpose and every action a consequence, but mercy was always available. Faith deals with what matters most: life and death, agony and ecstasy, individual development and selflessness.

I came to have a vibrant faith life well into adulthood and regret it didn't happen sooner. I would have saved myself a lot of heartache. It wasn't until my soul joined my brain that I developed "standards and practices" for my life. They made a huge difference, even at thirty. I discovered it wasn't too late to have self-esteem.

When my younger son became a convert to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, I became passionate about the subject of teens and faith.

The following is a slightly adapted essay about his conversion, published September 2006 in *Washingtonian Magazine*.

I always wanted faith to be an important part of my sons' lives, but I had no idea how far the younger one would take the spirit and run with it. As it turned out, he ran all the way to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Harry has always had something golden about him. When he was two and relaxing by rolling from side to side on his back

one day, his fourteen-year-old brother Clayton gazed at him on the living room couch and then turned to me and wondered out loud, “Mom, what do you think Harry thinks about?”

“Harry, what are you thinking about?” I asked.

“Hollywood,” he replied.

His golden glow did not come from a smooth, prosperous childhood. His endearing yet volatile dad, Michael, was an alcoholic. Thankfully, he quit drinking but recovery was an agitated road through Harry’s childhood. After the divorce proceedings that erupted when Harry was three, I was on my own and did not shine in the workplace. My salary always fell far short of adequate for a homeowner in the wealthy Maryland suburbs of Washington, DC. Intent on keeping the boys in the well-regarded Walt Whitman high school district, I refused to consider moving.

Despite the broken-home childhood in which the mother suffers a six-month clinical depression, parents who continued to rage long after divorce papers were signed, and his own brain disorder diagnosis at age thirteen, Harry makes life look like an easy ride. A photo taken at camp in Nantucket prompted several people to say Harry looks like a young Jack Kennedy. He laughs joyfully, deep from the gut. His limbs are long, his stride carefree. Slender fingers wrap around a basketball and swoop it in the basket. Plentiful friends of both sexes have always snaked in and out of the house, the phone, and the computer. He wasn’t always the best student, but every teacher loved having him in class.

As his mother, I’ve been an aggressive champion. To treat his brain condition, we traveled to the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota, for a single, powerful radiation treatment. I got him invited to a reception at the White House, backstage before a Britney Spears concert, and into the only golf caddie camp in the country.

His dad and I both came from Roman Catholic backgrounds, but had each drifted away as adults and did not attend church much together. When Harry was two, I experienced a dramatic physical and psychological healing through prayer that resulted in my becoming a born-again Christian.

As a result of my new faith, Harry’s first church was charismatic Christian, full of committed people who embraced us and prayed like I have never seen people pray, before or since. Unfortunately, some of them saw a devil behind every tree; others

noticed demons lurking in a Peter Max watercolor at my house. The intensity was too much.

Michael took Harry to a more mainstream Episcopalian church on Capitol Hill. I sampled a variety of churches before settling in at Bethesda's Fourth Presbyterian Church, in part because of its well-known youth group. It was a great church home: Bible messages that were right on target, without the hysteria. The atmosphere was born again without speaking in tongues. No one yelled "amen" from the pews. Although prayer was sincere at 4<sup>th</sup>, it wasn't as fervent as it was in my former church. There was belief in prayer for healing, and there was anointing with oil for that purpose. It was done in dignified privacy, in a pastor's office, rather than in the sanctuary, with twenty or thirty people's hands laying on you. There is no perfect church, but 4<sup>th</sup> came close.

Harry became involved with two youth groups. At his dad's church, he was an acolyte and went on some weekend trips. At 4<sup>th</sup>, much closer to his home base with me, there were mid-week meetings, ski trips, and summer camp in addition to Sunday school.

Kids who go to church take their friends with them, and this happened on a regular basis with Harry and his buddies. During the early part of his junior year of high school, I gradually noticed he wasn't participating in many activities at 4<sup>th</sup> and he was skipping Sunday school. I didn't nag; I was confident his spiritual base was strong and he would return to church sooner rather than later.

During the same period of time, Harry was visiting his friend Curt's Mormon church with increasing frequency. Chuck and I didn't sit up and take notice until he asked if he could go to a weekend youth retreat.

"You're going to so many Mormon activities, you're going to become a Mormon, Harry," I said.

"Maybe I will," he smiled.

Chuck and I swung toward each other, our eyes wide.

Now that Harry had broken the ice, the cubes tumbled out in quick succession. One evening soon after the retreat, he told us he was serious about his interest in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints—LDS, the more commonly used acronym by Mormons for their church.

"Is it okay if a bishop comes to talk to you?" Harry asked. "They need your permission—if you'll give it—for me to study with missionaries."

My calm reaction took me—and my husband—by surprise, since I react strongly to just about everything. I put an internal guard up against any negative reactions. I had some odd experiences being a born-again Christian who must not have fit the stereotype in our liberal DC circles. Plenty of people feel free to openly insult right-wing Christians, often at my own Methodist church that I joined after marrying Chuck when Harris was seven.

“But we aren’t like those people,” was a comment I heard when our Methodist church was considering using some faith-sharing materials from Willow Creek, a large nondenominational Christian church in Chicago. In social settings, it was not unusual for me to jump at the pro-choice trumpet that “everyone with any education, sophistication or intelligence” surely applauded. Sometimes I was silent; sometimes I said, “that’s me you’re talking about.”

The open prejudice I encountered was one rein holding back any negative reaction. The other was my deep love for my son. I regularly remind my boys that they are my flesh and blood. It is my best argument when I need to know something they are reluctant to tell.

Harry is the boy I worried about after I handed him over to his dad every other weekend for so many years, the boy they wheeled away from me at the Mayo Clinic before they screwed a head frame into his skull prior to the intense radiation treatment that would cure the arteriovenous malformation in his brain. This is a boy who has selected jewelry to give me for almost every occasion since he was about eight. If Harry was pro-Mormon, I could not be anti.

Chuck and I asked Harry to sit down and tell us what sparked this desire.

“I don’t feel at home at 4<sup>th</sup> or St. Mark’s,” he said. “A lot of the kids at those churches claim to be serious about their faith, but on Saturday night they act like every other kid, drinking and stuff. Sunday morning, they’re sorry. The next Saturday it’s the same thing. What’s the point?”

I was relieved that instead of turning away from church altogether, he wanted to plug in somewhere else. I knew almost nothing about the Mormon faith, and decided I would let the bishop come and explain it before I jumped on the Internet or called my pastor. I wanted to hear the story straight from a church member first.

The vague negative association lurking in my brain was emanating from when I was a member of that small charismatic church and skimmed a popular book that explained how to evangelize non-Christians. I was turned off by the thought of pulling someone away from a faith they were practicing. If they practiced no faith or had a weak tie to their childhood faith; or if they were ill, in trouble, and asking questions, then I can share how my faith has given me a solid sense of self, compassion, and direction.

I couldn't resist sending out one e-mail message about Harry's new religious interest. I wrote to a Messianic Jewish missionary that I have been friends with for fifteen years. The Jew who found Jesus five years before shot back a reply that burned like a lick of hellfire through cyberspace.

"When I received and read your note re: Harry exploring Mormonism, I immediately began weeping, my spirit was so grieved." He pleaded with me to try to stop Harry, and listed all the reasons Mormons were not real Christians. Scripture verses were fired at me, rat-a-tat-tat. I always hated a canned formula, but I promised to talk to our pastor or some other born-again Christian missionaries Bruce and I knew in common. It would be good for Harry to talk to someone more theologically educated than I was.

Early on in this process, I learned from Harris that his dad was reacting the same way I was: calm and open. Again, surprising for someone else who tends to be dramatic.

As Chuck and I started to tell friends about Harry's spiritual exploration, reaction was mixed. Many people know one fact about the LDS church, and it is usually a weird one, or a half-truth, or something taken out of context.

"Did you know the young missionaries can't be in contact with their families except for twice a year, on Mother's Day and Christmas?"

"I knew a Mormon once and he was so nice, but did you know Mormons hand over 10 percent of their salaries to the church?"

"You know it's all run by men. The women don't even work because they have such big families."

"Watch out, Harry will probably marry really young, and often." Ha, ha. The polygamy jokes never stop coming. I started to feel defensive before I even dipped a toe into Mormon waters.

At our Methodist church, people were supportive in a back-

handed compliment manner. “Well, there are a lot of worse things he could get into at his age,” said one woman. She was not the first or last to say those same exact words.

When I called the bishop to schedule a visit, I had to ask, “If Harry becomes a Mormon, will it separate him from me—from us—in any way? Will he feel he is a better Christian?”

Bishop Colton explained, “Becoming a Mormon should only make Harry a better son, closer to his family. The only thing that you might not like is that if he gets married in the Temple, non-Mormons cannot attend. Many families in this situation have some kind of ring ceremony at the reception.”

“And what about going on a mission,” I asked, “Is it true that kids can’t talk to their parents while they are on a mission?”

“Forty percent of Mormon youth do a mission; it’s not mandatory,” he said. “When I was on my mission, my dad was an attorney who traveled a lot, and we met up six times over two years.”

“All right, I feel better,” I breathed. My separation anxiety was calmed.

The organizational style of LDS is volunteer lay leadership, volunteer teaching, and volunteer-run church services. The bishop was also an area manager for the Marriott Corporation.

At our meeting, Chuck and I asked Bishop Colton to start at the beginning and give us a full overview of the Mormon faith. He began with the story of Joseph Smith, a fourteen-year-old boy who lived in Palmyra, New York, during the early 1800s. Many preachers came to town, and Joseph knew he wanted to be part of a congregation but was confused about which to join. As instructed in the Bible (James 1:5), he prayed for God’s wisdom. God and Jesus appeared to Joseph in a grove of trees and told him that all the denominations had gone astray from Christ’s teachings. People talk a good talk, in other words, but their lives are not lived in a way that represents the love of God and teachings of Christ. They told Joseph he would form a new church, a church in which people worshiped and lived the way God intended from the beginning.

Christ had twelve disciples; the LDS church is structured the same way. God is the father; Mormons call each other brother and sister, and treat each other like family. Mormons believe God did not stop speaking to his people all of a sudden when Christ died. They believe he spoke to Joseph Smith, and prophets will hear God’s instructions until our last days on earth. Christ



told people to go out into the world and spread the good news; the LDS Church maintains approximately 50,000 young missionaries around the globe.

As soon as Smith began sharing the message of his vision, he was persecuted. In 1823 he wrote, “I had actually seen a light, and in the midst of that light I saw two personages, and they did in reality speak to me; and though I was hated and persecuted for saying that I had seen a vision, it was true; and while they were persecuting me, reviling me, and speaking all manner of evil against me . . . I could not deny it, neither dared I do it.”

Three years later, Smith was praying in his room and the angel Moroni appeared to him. Smith wrote, “He said there was a book deposited, written upon gold plates, giving an account of the former inhabitants of this continent.” Joseph was directed by Moroni to the plates, buried nearby. The Book of Mormon is the translation by Joseph Smith of what is called Reformed Egyptian text. Smith was not an educated youth; he spent a few years in elementary school before being pulled out to work on the farm to help support the family.

The bishop explained many things that I did not understand, but I was not of a mind to argue. Who was I to say that Jesus had not visited the continent of North America to teach here just as he had in Israel?

The bishop stressed that the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is Christ-centered, not Smith-centered. That became evident in everything I heard in the months to come in private conversations, the missionary lessons, a trip to Salt Lake City that was part of our pre-college tour, and several church services.

The LDS strict moral code is one that most high school juniors wouldn't be attracted to: no smoking, no alcohol, and no sex before marriage. It sounded positive to me. Another positive sound was the music coming from Harry's room. Obscenity-laced rap had been replaced with melodies and lyrics that made sense.

Harry told us that when he read the Book of Mormon, it clicked in his soul. “When I read about Joseph Smith's questions and his search, that was me.”

With the double-header of his observation of inconsistent behavior and his spiritual connection to this faith, Chuck and I gave our permission for missionaries to teach Harry.

The bishop said the discussions did not have to be at our

home, but they could be. I said that was fine with me. “We don’t want you to feel that anything is hidden or secret from you. You can sit in or not. You can be in the kitchen while they’re in the dining room or out of earshot completely,” Colton said.

Of the two clean-cut twenty-year-olds, the Canadian Elder Noble was especially endearing. He had converted at Harry’s age. His parents objected to his interest and asked him to wait a year in the hope it would pass. He agreed to postpone baptism but wanted to attend church and activities. They told him if his grades suffered, he’d have to stop. He went from B’s and C’s to straight A’s.

As the mother of a boy who was on the fast track to conversion, I was fascinated. Noble offered his parents’ phone number to me. My call left me with a feeling of sadness. It was clear they loved their son, but were cautious about and bewildered by the path he had chosen. I could feel their pain over the phone.

Although the lessons had an outline and format, nothing seemed formulaic and no topic was uncomfortable. Most of the basics of any Christian faith were covered: grace, salvation, and living a righteous (not self-righteous) life. If I had to guess, I’d say only about 15 percent was Mormon-specific. After I sat in on one lesson, I realized I was asking so many questions that the session was meeting more of my needs than Harry’s.

During subsequent sessions I spent the hour in my home office or in the kitchen where I could hear without interfering. When curiosity got the better of me, I popped into the dining room, but withdrew as soon as my question was answered.

Once, Elder Noble responded to me, “Hey, we’re just twenty-year-old kids; we don’t know everything.” You could have fooled me. They knew their faith inside out and upside down. Missionaries have a strict schedule of daily prayer and study of the Bible (King James version), the Book of Mormon, the Doctrine and Covenants (revelations by early prophets that include how the church was organized), and A Pearl of Great Price (early inspired writings).

Harry’s baptism was on a Sunday in April soon after Easter. The church overflowed. In addition to immediate family, Harry had invited some 4<sup>th</sup> Presbyterian teenagers, school friends, and my brother and his family. During the service, three boys gave short talks about Harry’s character and how he showed interest in their faith. They said he was “just like us” and “had the same values.” He had seen a clear difference in the way they lived out

their beliefs, and had so many questions they took him to one of their dads, Bryant Foulger, who spent an evening teaching and explaining. After that, Harry asked one of the boys if they had a Book of Mormon he could borrow. “I was shocked that he actually read it!” said Scott Foulger.

Each of the boys, at different points in their talk, said of Harry, “I love him.” Several adults spoke, all movingly, all male. One was the teenage boys’ teacher, Randy Cone, who had converted in his early twenties. He spoke of how difficult it was, “I was doing something so positive, and yet I hurt my Catholic mother.” He complimented Michael, Chuck, and me on our support for Harry’s exploration and decision. Then the bishop praised Michael, Chuck, and me for raising a fine young man who cared so much about matters of the soul.

The actual submersion baptism was performed by Curt, Harry’s best friend. They used to play on the same soccer team, and have attended the same schools since kindergarten. Both were in white cotton jumpsuits. When Curt’s mother, Liz, entered the room, I motioned her over. As the sacrament began, she grabbed my hand. When I looked at her, we both had tears in our eyes. Our loud, messy, teenagers, our wild soccer boys—who would have guessed they would end up in a baptismal font together?

We three non-Mormon parents were greeted warmly after the ceremony and service. Church members hosted a beautiful reception with an abundant spread of fruit and homemade baked goods that included cookies in the shape of Mormon Temples.

Since Harry’s baptism, Chuck and I have been included in church barbeques and other social events. Michael has also been invited, and drawn back on his own to a church service or two. The people of the Bethesda and Potomac wards that my son worships with seem like in-laws or extended family members. Wards are geographically based congregations, each ideally kept to about 300 people, no more than 600, so that the community’s members know each other well.

The more I see these people, the more I respect them, admire them, and enjoy their company. In fact, I love them. If one theme runs through Mormon services and speeches, it is finding the truth for yourself through prayer.

*The Mormon faith is controversial, no doubt about it.  
But I’m happy about Harry’s choice and the after-effects.*

*I believe that if he lives the values of his new church he will have a marriage that lasts, a good work ethic, and a spirit of service to the world. With the LDS emphasis on family, I will surely have grandchildren from at least one of our four kids. Right now, I'm content to watch my son with pride and relief as he serves a mission (in Northern Italy, the jackpot of mission assignments) and finishes college without alcohol fueling his fun, with fabulous friends, and with Christ in his heart.*

As the author of that essay and this chapter, I am no expert on religion and spirituality, only one flawed individual who believes that faith makes life rich, significant, and purposeful. Yet my belief is backed up by research studies that show that teenagers who are devout or consistently involved in—dare I utter the phrase—organized religion—do better in many areas of life than those with little or no interest in faith.

Faith answers life's significant questions, the ones we all ponder: Do I have value? If I believe God made me, then did he make me for some purpose? Can I believe he has a plan for my life?

Where do your values come from, and how do we raise our children with those values? Like me, many parents hope—and pray—that faith will be a part of their children's lives. No one enjoys dragging their offspring to church. Is that the reality for many families? Actually, no, it's not. If you don't go to church, you aren't dragging anyone along. On the other hand, if weekly worship is part of your routine, chances are your children have always gone with you and will continue to do so. Yes, even after they get their driver's license. They may go in their own car, and to a different service, but they will show up.

### **Teens Are Interested: Make No Mistake About It**

The most comprehensive recent research on teens and faith, sponsored by the University of North Carolina and conducted between 2001 and 2005, is the National Study of Youth and Religion. According to their data, 84 percent of teens say they believe in God. Most say they pray and believe prayer has the power to change things. Four out of five teenagers say religious belief is important in their lives. Two out of three say it is important to be members of a church, and 60 percent attend religious

services at least once a month. The study concludes that U.S. teens are more conventional than the media would have us believe.

Other survey and study data are compatible. Barna Research Group, which published the book *Real Teens* in 2001, reports that 96 percent of teenagers believe in God, although they see a higher power in a variety of ways. Eight out of ten pray during the week, and 84 percent believe that prayer can change what happens in life. They are very open with their peers regarding their personal faith beliefs.

The American Academy of Religion surveyed 1,156 colleges and found from the 1996-1997 to the 1999-2000 school year, the number of U.S. students taking a religion class increased 15 percent and the number of religion majors rose 25 percent. Kyle Cole, the director of college programs at the Academy, says that all indications show their more recent (2005) research is tracking the same trends, a continuing increase in religion majors and enrollment in religion classes.

Since the teen years are a passionate, inquiring time, and 43 percent of teens report that they have shared their faith with someone of a different faith, it is not surprising to learn that religious exploration, and conversions, are not unusual among this age group. However, the vast majority of teens in this country are Christian (75 percent according to the 2002-2003 National Study of Youth and Religion), and teens are not flocking to alternative religions and spiritualities.

### **How Do You Encourage Your Teenager's Spiritual Growth?**

Don't underestimate your influence. It is huge. Teens acknowledge it, and they surprisingly dismiss the sway of mass media despite how much time they spend in front of TV and computer screens. Mom is especially revered and influential. In *Real Teens*, the Barna Research Group reports that six out of ten teens say they are emotionally very close to their mothers; four out of ten feel the same way about their fathers.

In the book *Soul Searching*, which reports the findings of the National Study of Youth and Religion, "The positive association is clear: parents for whom religious faith is quite important are likely to be raising teenagers for whom religious faith is quite important (67 percent); only 8 percent of the teenage offspring of parents with a faith priority say that faith is not very or at all important."

## Have an Open Mind

Rukmini Walker, of Rockville, Maryland, became Hindu in her teens. She had a comfortable upbringing in the Chicago suburbs, raised by an agnostic mother and a spiritual father who nonetheless did not find comfort or answers in the wake of all the suffering he saw as a soldier in World War II.

“I always felt like a stranger in a strange land,” says Walker. “As a young teen, I would look out the window of our house and wonder what life was all about. Why do people do what they do?”

“My story is extreme. I left home at fifteen to find my spiritual path, which I did in a Hindu ashram in Montreal. In ancient cultures, this would not have been unusual. My parents were upset, naturally, but honored my quest and eventually accepted my choices. I always kept in touch, and visited. My mother saw that I was happy and to her my life has made sense.”

Walker’s son is a filmmaker who works for the federal government. When he was a teenager he wanted to test other waters. In Hollywood, he landed several roles in feature films.

“He did things that horrified me, but he came back and saw the value of this family’s beliefs. It is not a bad thing to see your traditions from the outside in. That helps you decide what you believe and why,” says Walker.

For Bonny Palmer of Bethesda, Maryland, now a mother of two young adults, parental religious influence was pragmatic throughout her childhood. With a Marine Corps dad whose career had them moving fairly frequently, her mother took the children to the nearest church.

“High school in the late ’60s was a time of great exploration, finding meaning in life. My friends and I loved to explore religions. Four of us went from one church to another—Unitarian, Spiritualist, and a small group that met at a shopping mall. Of course, the ‘establishment’ churches were not as interesting! I also read about the paranormal, and read *The Power of Positive Thinking* by Norman Vincent Peale. His references to various scriptures in the New Testament sent me back to the white Bible that my grandmother purchased for me when I was a girl. All of Jesus’ words were in red ink—and those words began to seem peaceful and powerful. Still, joining a church seemed so stuffy and limiting when there was so much to explore!”

Meanwhile, a good friend’s family joined a peculiar church that Bonny had never heard of—the Mormon Church. That friend,

Laurie, asked her to come to an activity because she was new.

“I went to keep her company and painted some pottery and had a good time. Soon I was invited to attend an open house to learn about the LDS church. Why not? I would go to any church. I was baptized into the Mormon Church shortly after my seventeenth birthday. My parents were tolerant, although not thrilled.”

Walker’s and Palmer’s parents accepted their teenagers’ choices, making it easier to forge ahead. For other teens, it is not so easy. Parents who discourage one spiritual spark of spiritual curiosity may snuff out that interest completely. A Christian woman in Washington, DC, who wished to remain anonymous, had initially agreed with her Jewish husband to let the children make their own faith decisions later on. They did not introduce their children to either faith. As a young teenager, their daughter began to be influenced by her paternal grandmother. Now the mom laments, “If Grandma keeps taking her to synagogue, that’s the end of my influence.”

“Later on” is not a reliable plan. If you introduce faith early on, even two different faiths, long-lasting habits and connections form. It is tough to interest an adolescent in spirituality if it has been completely absent for the first twelve years. Introducing faith is always worth a try, but you will have a better chance of succeeding if you make worship, study, and service a part of your life from your child’s early years.

### Start Young

Dana Templeman, a mother of two in Salt Lake City, Utah, explained the Latter-day Saint strategies for keeping teenagers involved in church and youth activities. It helps if you start when your children are young.

“We start young and keep them active with age-appropriate teaching and projects. At home we have family scripture study regularly, and Monday night is family home evening that includes a discussion of family business, a meaningful lesson, and a fun activity.

“Families are encouraged to do service projects in our church. Even younger children have both leadership and team positions where they learn to prepare their work, show up on time, and perform,” says Dana.

Bonny Palmer, the young woman who became a Mormon when she was a teenager, says, “My mother read Bible stories to

me when I was in about second grade. Amazing, years later when I had a greater interest in Bible studies, I dug out that same book and revisited the stories of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph from the Old Testament. All those simple stories from the time of Jesus and the artist's renditions shown to children in Sunday school really did stick in my mind and were very real to me."

### Model Your Faith

Church of the Resurrection in Leawood, Kansas, is one of the largest churches in the Methodist denomination with more than 13,000 members; it is also one of the fastest-growing churches in the United States.

Pastor Dave McGee, their high school program director, says, "Parents are one of the most important factors in teens having faith, but parents will have a hard time keeping teens involved in church if their parents are not involved. I advise parents to have faith be a dialogue, sharing their own experience of Christ."

Sabra Bhat, from Hackettstown, New Jersey, is part of the Muslim Student Association at Bryn Mawr College and has long been involved in Muslim youth leadership organizations. She says, "Once families have constructed a foundation, which teens can trust will not collapse beneath them, they too can pursue a life of spirituality. What I mean is, a family must be true to their beliefs, sincere in their actions, and strong in character. In this way, teens can define spirituality by observing their family environment. Then they can build off of what they see and make it into their own."

Bhat adds, "Many times I have seen that the most critical part of developing a spiritual life for teens is that the parents practice what they preach. I feel that parents are caught up in achieving what they believe is best for their children, yet tend to disregard their own spiritual state in the process. For many teenagers, this can be discouraging particularly when they are also struggling with peer pressure to party and have sex, use alcohol or drugs. Those things can so easily stamp out the possibility of leading a spiritual life."

Rukmini Walker models her Hindu faith through her business, As Kindred Spirits, three award-winning galleries of jewelry, wearable art, and American craft. Profits from the Washington, DC, area galleries support sustainable development, vegetarian food relief, and environmental and interfaith initiatives both locally and internationally.



## Show Up

There are many ways to demonstrate that faith is a priority in your life. The most important thing you can do if you want your teenager to go to church, temple, synagogue, or mosque is attend.

Jim Byrne is the student ministries director at the Falls Church, a large Episcopal church in Northern Virginia. He says, “It helps if parents attend church services and speak positively about church. They shouldn’t get into critiques of the pastor in front of the kids. Teenagers are idealistic. When parents are encouraging, and teenagers know they care and the youth staff cares about them, it usually works well.”

## Serve

Dean Carson of Seattle, Washington, is president of the North American Federation of Temple Youth (NFTY, a Reform Judaism organization). His dad led the way, and did so by example.

“My dad is currently finishing up his term as Temple president, and he had been on the board for many years before then. When I was Temple Youth Group president, he was first vice president of the Temple board. We went to meetings together. Often after Dad introduced an idea, I’d present my idea, and everyone would say, ‘let’s go with your son’s idea.’ It was a lot of fun.”

Carson says he couldn’t have been as comfortable and happy in his leadership role, or before that in his participation in a national organization, without the support of his parents. “As I got more involved in leadership, they continued to give me all the support that I needed. Without their help, I would’ve had to struggle to do what I wanted. But because they supported me, in a sense they pushed me further. They were okay with driving me places and letting me miss school when I had to travel across the country for a meeting.”

## Bring Faith into Your Home

Rukmini Walker says, “I believe we need to speak to our children about the unseen world, the world of prayer, the world of the spirit. It’s so heartbreaking to hear about teenage suicide, anorexia, and all the hopelessness in today’s culture. We all have the capacity to experience a higher taste, to know and love God, if we can just learn to tune out the static and focus in to what’s beyond all of these pinpricks of our mundane life.”

Zaki Barzinji, president of Muslim Youth of North America, says, “Growing up, spirituality and religion were never truly distinct, compartmentalized things. My family rarely set aside a particular time of day where we would stop what we were doing and talk about religion. Rather, the subject was broached in a holistic manner, where everyday activities provided the impetus for reflection and the opportunity for casual discussion. With these types of organically occurring life-lessons, coupled with daily routines of prayer and supplication, religion became much more than just a component of my life, but rather the way I lived it. Islam was not simply beaten into my head, though I did benefit greatly from the practical knowledge of my faith, but at the same time a genuine love for my religion was instilled in my heart. That healthy combination, the joining of the mind and soul through faith, is the key to a sincere, meaningful connection to spirituality.”

### **Have House Rules**

It is not a sin to say to your teen, “This is what our family does—we worship together.” Too many parents throw in the towel when met with the least resistance. Everyone is tired from their busy lives. When teenagers have sports every Saturday, it is tempting to let them sleep in on Sunday.

Youth director Jim Byrne says, “I regret that in youth ministry a lot of our time is spent trying to attract kids to church and activities. That should be the parents’ job—to get them here. Our job should be to engage and care for them once they are in the door. We need to be in partnership. There’s nothing wrong with parents insisting that their teenagers go to church, but I have seen it backfire. You have to know your own kids and make that call.”

Even in the best of circumstances, teenagers will put up a wall from time to time. Ellen Guarente of Gaithersburg, Maryland, has a sixteen-year-old son who usually enjoys and benefits from a Catholic youth leadership program.

“When I’ve met with resistance about attending an activity or church, my husband and I tell our sons that there are some things in life they are too young to decide for themselves,” she says. “We, their parents, know the benefits.”

### **Engage in Some Talk and Some Action**

We have all heard about the importance of eating dinner as

a family. Those statistics may be representative of a certain type of family and not simply an evening habit, but it is important to set aside time to communicate in some fashion on a regular basis. Faith should be part of that conversation.

In a framework of faith, encourage your teens to think about what makes them upset versus what makes them calm or happy. Talk about who and what is important in their lives. Let them know how to go after experiences that give them satisfaction, joy, and serenity as opposed to anxiety, jealousy, or pain.

Go to the movies together, and talk afterward. There are plenty of films with themes that revolve around morality, even if they do not showcase the high road.

Volunteer together, whether through your place of worship or a community organization. Your teen may be preoccupied with AIDS in Africa, the war, the aftermath of September 11<sup>th</sup>, or Hurricane Katrina. Faith is hope, but faith also prompts action.

Dana Templeman, the Salt Lake City mom, says, “Even if you have an impressive career, chances are your children will never see you actually doing your job. It’s good for them to see their parents in action during a service project.”

Even recycling is a sign of respect for the world God created and can come into the conversation and your way of life.

### **Give Them Time Alone**

It’s important to carve out some down time for your teenager. They need to think, dream, and read, but on their own, teens tend to run until they crash, and then sleep—a little—until they have to start all over the next day.

Youth director Jim Byrne says, “Teenagers should read the Bible and other books on their own, and ask questions. I encourage them to have quiet time to read and think and pray for even fifteen to twenty minutes a day. One church meeting a week isn’t going to cut it for significant spiritual development.”

### **Know When to Step Back**

Imagine being the spiritually disengaged teenager of two Christian powerhouses. Peter J. Marshall is the son of Dr. Peter Marshall and Catherine Marshall. Dr. Peter Marshall, a pastor who came from Scotland to America penniless and rose to the position of chaplain of the U.S. Senate, died of a heart attack when his son, Peter, was only nine.

After her husband’s death, Catherine Marshall edited his

sermons and then authored more than twenty inspirational books that sold over sixteen million copies. *A Man Called Peter* was a major motion picture in 1955; Christy was made into a TV series four decades later. When son Peter was in his first year of college, Catherine married another prominent Christian, Leonard LeSourd, the editor of *Guideposts Magazine*.

“My famous parents handed me a natural excuse to rebel. In my mother’s wisdom, she did not ram the Lord down my throat despite her worries,” says Marshall. “We were alone during my teenage years, and I wasn’t interested in reading her books. I went to church with her, but I was quiet and sullen. Not that I didn’t know what the deal was, and certainly their Christian beliefs were ingrained in me, but I didn’t relate.”

He knew she prayed for him, and that others did, too. “Mother knew I loved cars, and one of the few direct comments she made to me about faith was ‘becoming a Christian is like giving God the keys to your car—he drives, and you ride.’”

The summer after college Catherine and Leonard were speaking at a conference for Christian athletes. Peter came along because he loved sports. “I believe she primed the pump with one coach who spoke, and we ended up talking.” Peter prayed and committed his life to Christ. Three weeks later he entered Princeton Seminary.

Rev. Marshall, of Cape Cod, Massachusetts, served as a Presbyterian minister for twelve years and then founded his own ministry. He devoted his life to preaching, teaching, and writing. In the family tradition, he co-authored three best-selling books about God’s call on America. Not a bad outcome for a disengaged teenager.

When teenagers lose interest in church, many parents take comfort in the fact that they have laid a good foundation and trust that the child will return to the fold. Others prod and push. There is no one right strategy. You know your child best, so watch for signals and use your instincts. Keep inviting them to accompany you to worship services. Let them know you are praying for them, but be wise and don’t force-feed faith.

### **Encourage Faith-Based Friendships**

Teenagers are influenced by their friends in many areas, faith among them. They talk about spiritual matters, and they invite each other to worship services and youth activities. If it is important to you that your faith tradition is the one your teen

chooses, encourage relationships with teens of that same faith.

Just as you may have noticed that your teen was reluctant to go to the “teen club” on a cruise ship or sit at a table of unfamiliar teens at a party, it’s the same principle with church. Teens like to be with their friends, their particular tribe, and not merely with people their own age.

Teenagers listen to friends who share their beliefs, but are just as willing to try different faith experiences. Americans value multiculturalism. Many teens believe that all faiths have validity, not just their own.

What if they don’t have friends of their own faith, and that is important to you? Find a program or a camp, even if it’s not in your backyard. Dean Carson’s parents made the effort and it paid off.

“In middle and elementary school where I’m from, there weren’t many other Jews,” says Carson a native of Seattle, Washington. “In the summer after sixth grade, my parents sent me to my first overnight camp. The closest one for Reform Jewish kids was in Northern California. I loved it and went every year after that. Through camp, I met other teenagers who lived near me but didn’t attend the same school. We ended up doing things together through the North American Federation of Temple Youth on weekends back at home during the year. Camp was great for connections and leadership opportunities. Plus, I felt like these relationships and activities were my decisions, independent of my parents.”

### **Why Does Faith Matter?**

The Understanding Islam website, [www.understanding-islam.com](http://www.understanding-islam.com), proposes, “Man is not merely a physical being. On the contrary, man has a strong moral aspect to his existence. It is in fact the acceptance, appreciation and realization of mutual rights and responsibilities, which has resulted in the strong bonds of family, friendship, tribe and society.”

If you believe human beings possess a soul, then attending to that soul is an important part of life. There are practical reasons as well, specifically, the American Academy of Religion found that religious twelfth graders have significantly higher self-esteem and hold more positive attitudes about life than their less religious peers.

Contrary to stereotypes about teens, the National Study of Youth and Religion established that most teenagers find their

congregations welcoming and warm, and have positive feelings about the place and the people therein. Seventy percent believe their congregation would be a good place for them to go to talk about serious issues. In fellowships of faith, teenagers develop positive relationships with adults other than their parents.

### So Many Benefits

When adolescents perceive religion as important in their lives, it may lower rates of cigarette smoking, heavy drinking, and marijuana use, according to a study conducted by the Albert Einstein College of Medicine that tracked urban adolescents from middle school through high school. Researchers found that the importance of religion was particularly important for teens facing life stressors. Those adolescents who viewed religion as a meaningful part of their life and a way to cope with problems were half as likely to use drugs as adolescents who didn't view religion as important. And this held most true while facing hardships, like an illness or having an unemployed parent.

The National Study of Youth and Religion compared teens that have sporadic faith involvement to those who are disengaged. Teens who are devoted to their faith or regularly engaged in it:

- exhibit greater moral reasoning and honesty
- have leadership skills
- have higher quality family and adult relationships
- are more involved in their communities as well as their places of worship
- are more compassionate and concerned about justice
- exhibit fewer risk behaviors related to sex, alcohol, cigarettes, and drugs
- spend less time on video games
- watch less television
- get better grades.

These findings are statistically significant even when the researchers controlled for demographic variables such as family income, race, parental marital status, and other factors that could affect the outcomes.

Why might faith have such a profound influence on teens? Faith can overcome apathy and cynicism, and it often brings peace through belief itself, boosted by prayer and meditation. Faith brings hope: God will forgive, life will get better, and you

can change. On your worst day, you have a champion. Since we all make mistakes, forgiveness is another important component of faith. It gives us the knowledge that we can start fresh, that God loves us no matter what, as we see in the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32).

*The spiritual state for youth helps filter what is important in their lives,” says Sabra Bhat, the young woman who is active in Muslim youth leadership organizations. “They can make wiser decisions in terms of morality and what is healthier for them in the long run.*

### **Organized Religion: An Opportunity for Positive Maturation**

Sermons and inspirational talks make faith come to life. Everyone wants to matter, to be heard: communities of faith are places where we know we can be vulnerable and open. It’s tough to mature in a vacuum; therefore we need to hear others’ thoughts and opinions. Conflict can sharpen our own positions. Others include spiritual leaders, members of our own peer group as well as people from different generations.

Lynn Schofield Clark, PhD, is the author of *From Angels to Aliens: Teenagers, the Media, and the Supernatural* and a sociologist specializing in media and young people. “Teenagers present themselves as more knowing and sophisticated than they really are. In communities of faith they have the opportunity to form key relationships with other adults. That doesn’t happen anywhere else as naturally,” she says.

There is value in the structure, dependability, and ritual that a community of faith provides, and to hear the stories that a religion values. Knowledge is passed down from generation to generation.

Corey Gray, pastor of youth at Fourth Presbyterian Church in Bethesda, Maryland, wrote to the large teen membership in a 2007 newsletter, “We encourage you to consider living within the greater life of the whole church, not just associating with those of your same age. There is much you can learn from the rest of the church—and much they can learn from you.”

If your house of worship doesn’t have a great youth ministry, look to your denomination or for something nondenominational. Zaki Barzinji, president of Muslim Youth of North America, says, “Teens become involved and active in that which

allows them the most freedom to express themselves, whether it be through art, music, athletics, academics, or otherwise. They become interested in spirituality when they view it as an opportunity for expression.”

Many faith-based youth programs, like the following two Catholic examples, are open to all.

Leaders forming leaders is the mission of the Leadership Training Program where Catholic boys through senior high are guided by mentors through a six-week session of prayer, creative problem solving, discussions, and presentations. This program emphasizes teamwork and a spirit of initiative. From its beginnings in Maryland in 1997, it has spread to fourteen other states.

For girls, the six-city Pure Fashion program is an antidote to the trend of sexualized attire for girls. Participants are young women between twelve and eighteen who believe that undergarments should not be used as outer-garments, clothing should not reveal what should be concealed, and it's possible to be pretty without being provocative. The first Pure Fashion show was held seven years ago in the basement of a Catholic church in Atlanta, and now the program is in Dallas, Louisiana, Washington, DC, Seattle, and Chicago.

No matter what kind of program or activity teenagers are in, a big picture view helps. “We don't want teenagers to graduate out of church when they are too old for the youth group. If they are part of the fabric of parish life, then faith is lifelong,” says Bruce Baumgarten, director of technology at Washington Theological Seminary, in Washington, DC.

### **If You Are Spiritual but Not Religious**

What if you consider yourself spiritual but are not a member of a particular denomination? If it is important to you that your children follow a spiritual path of their choosing, there are many things you can do to encourage them.

Journalist Pythia Peay, who raised three teenage sons, has written for newspapers and magazines on a wide range of spiritual topics. The author of *Soul Sisters: The Five Sacred Qualities of a Woman's Soul* shares her practices for raising a spiritual child:

- Ø To stimulate an interest in learning wisdom from the world's religious traditions, read books with spiritual themes that are age appropriate: a children's Bible,



fairy tales, the lives of saints and prophets, such as Buddha, Krishna, or Abraham, and Greek, Roman, Chinese, and Hindu myths. For both boys and girls, don't forget to bring in stories of women saints and mystics, such as Kuan Yin or White Buffalo Woman. These stories and myths are good starters for conversations around moral and ethical issues children are faced with at school and in activities with friends. They are also inspiring examples of the way faith sustains us through life's hardships.

- Visit a variety of places of worship with your children and teens. Back at home, discuss your understanding of each faith and reaction to the worship experience. Observing different belief systems and the way various religions worship and pray is a powerful way to cultivate religious tolerance in your children and in your family.
- Teach them to meditate and explain the origins of meditation. Teaching children simple techniques of deep breathing, contemplative reflection on a phrase from a prayer, or how to sit in silence has a wide range of benefits: it is a way for children to relax and ease stress; it helps teach them how to turn within for strength and guidance, and it enables them to develop a personal relationship to the Divine. Children and teens of all ages can develop a strong core and an inner refuge—a place where they can turn for courage at any time and wherever they are.
- Model an interest and belief in faith, mysticism, and spirituality. Make your personal journey a part of the conversation at home. Sharing life lessons you have learned from a book you've read, a church service you've attended, or a lecture by a meditation teacher will inspire your children and impart to them an enthusiasm for spiritual knowledge.
- Say grace or a prayer at mealtime and bedtime. Blessing food by saying grace as a family, tucking a child in with a prayer as they are falling asleep, or lighting a candle in memory of grandparents or friends who have moved away or when frightening things happen are lovely ways to weave spirituality into busy everyday lives.

- For teenagers, look for retreats, conferences, and workshops they can attend, or you can attend together. This will help deepen their education in the ideas and philosophies of the world's religious traditions, such as yoga, meditation, prayer, mythology, or T'ai Chi. It can also provide them with a community of like-minded friends, whose parents are just as different as you are!

### A Final Challenge: Don't Give Up

"It takes blood, sweat, and tears to raise teenagers," says the Rev. Peter J. Marshall. "You have to be willing to endure the conflicts. When they leave home, it is still not over. You pray and continue to model for them the way God wants us to live."

#### Ten Take-Away Tips

- ✓ **Show up.** It is important to model your faith if you want your children to follow. Don't just drop them off at the majestic front doors and expect them to soar into spiritual skies. Attend services together.
- ✓ **Be involved.** If you are involved in faith activities, you are on second base of modeling. In addition to knowing about the place, leaders, and programs, there will be other parents who have battle scars and medals to prove they raised teenagers and lived—to share their pain and their wisdom.
- ✓ **Pray.** Of course you pray, but since teens spend a lot of time being concerned about themselves, remind them that you pray specifically for them. Even if it seems they don't care, who wouldn't be pleased to know that one who loves us mightily is praying for us regularly?
- ✓ **Have rules and responsibilities.** Do not cave when your teenager pushes back against worship or activity attendance. Repeat after me: we are parents, not buddies, as long as we are still paying the bills and providing food and shelter.

- ✓ **Bring faith into the conversation.** At home or in the car, talk about your beliefs. It can be as complex as, “I wonder where God was on 9-11?” or as simple as seeing God in the details of our lives: the daily paper and on the news, in school-assigned novels and family relationships, in recycling and the space program.
- ✓ **Communicate.** You may have to ask your teen for time together. Tell them how much you treasure time with them. Remind them of your love for them, and be specific about their best traits. Whether it’s at the dinner table or driving out of town and back for a weekend, listen to them and resist the urge to give advice.
- ✓ **Volunteer together.** Maybe your teenager isn’t crazy about going to church but he or she is distressed about a national or international crisis, from AIDS in Africa to hurricane cleanup here at home. If an on-target opportunity does not exist in your community of faith, try to find a faith-based group doing something to help.
- ✓ **Examine your lifestyle.** Do you wear designer duds but reluctantly throw \$20 in the collection plate on an irregular basis? Do you criticize any talk of supporting your place of worship? Are you a workaholic who sighs when asked to participate in a service project? Where you choose to put your time and money speaks volumes.
- ✓ **Give them space.** You know your teenager best so pay attention to clues that tell you when to talk and when to be back off. If your angel turns into a sullen monster, still pray and offer very occasional invitations to join you in a worship service or activity. Definitely keep the lines of communication open.
- ✓ **Encourage friendships with other faith-minded teens.** Teens love to be with their friends, so do what you can to encourage friendships with faith-minded peers. Make your home a place they all want to come, with plenty of soda and chips and a reputation for a high level of noise tolerance.

**Resources**

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