

A close-up photograph of a person's hands holding a dark-colored Bible. The person is wearing a light-colored, textured knit sweater. The Bible's cover has gold lettering that reads "HOLY BIBLE" and "THE KING JAMES VERSION". The background is a blurred, light-colored wooden surface. A white rectangular border is overlaid on the image, framing the text.

KEEPING THE FAITH:

*How Christian Higher Education
Makes a Difference for Young Adults*





HOW CAN WE HELP OUR KIDS KEEP THEIR FAITH?

If you are a parent, youth worker, pastor, or simply a Church member asking this question, you are not alone.

It is a question older than the Church itself. As long as there has been a people of God, we have been asking this question. Today, as our kids face new challenges, it remains close to the very heart of the Church: How can we help them keep their faith *now*?

In our culture today, the faith of Canadian young adults is under fire. We know that the transition from high school to the next stage of life—a defining part of growing up—introduces “exit points” from Church and faith that many Canadian young adults are taking.

In a time of weakened connections to faith communities and increased ambivalence towards Christianity, we believe that we have a role to play in helping young adults stay connected and faithful. In fact, we believe that Christian higher education can offer young adults the things they need to keep the faith.

HOW DID WE GET HERE?

In 2011, the *Hemorrhaging Faith* study broke new ground for Canadian youth and young adult ministry. The study reported that two out of three young adults were leaving the Church as they transitioned out of high school. In response, the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada (EFC) and 5 other partners launched the Renegotiating Faith project to investigate this pressing question: **How can we help young adults stay connected to Church and faith?**

2016

The Renegotiating Faith group begins gathering data from over **1,500 ministry workers** and nearly **2,000 young adults** across Canada.

2018

Renegotiating Faith, an **in-depth study of young adult transitions** from high school to the next stage in life, is published. Although this study reported trends similar to *Hemorrhaging Faith*, it also noted **key experiences** that kept young adults connected and faithful.

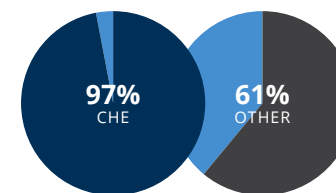
2019

Competition for Character Education uses this data to zero in on **the role of Christian education in young adult spiritual formation**. This study alerted us to the power of Christian education not only to help young adults connect with Christian mentorship and community, but ultimately to **keep their faith** with them and leave emerging adulthood behind.

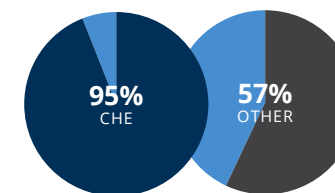
Measures of Faith

When compared to the other young adults surveyed, those in Christian higher education (CHE) were far more likely to agree with the following core statements of the Christian faith:

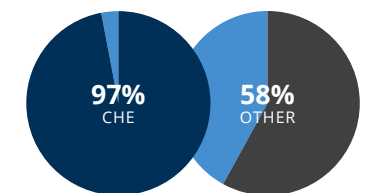
[I BELIEVE...]



"Jesus' life, death, and resurrection provided the forgiveness of sins."



"Jesus Christ is the divine Son of God."



"The Bible is the Word of God and is reliable and trustworthy."

WHAT CAN WE DO?

THE STATISTICS ON YOUNG ADULT TRANSITIONS ARE GRIM.

Today, it seems more difficult than ever to help our kids and their friends stay connected to the Church and to their faith. And it's not just one youth group, or a few college students—it seems like everywhere we look, our young people are struggling.

This generation, like any before it, is growing up in a world unlike any we've seen and encountering new challenges to their faith. In a time of life transition, of career decisions, and of spiritual formation—positive or negative—the spiritual lives of Christian young adults are at stake.

In a survey of young adults who had been engaged in the Church as children, the Renegotiating Faith group set out to understand the obstacles we are facing today. Research was guided by one question: How can we help our young adults stay connected to Church and faith as they transition into adulthood?

Their report focused on *emerging adulthood*, the period between ages 18-28 marked by life transition, identity exploration, and commitment renegotiation.

This means that as young adults leave high school and move on to new life experiences, they begin to try on new identities and

to re-examine the beliefs they took for granted as children. The result is a delay in adult commitments—identity, career, and most significantly, faith.

The danger is that life transition can disrupt a young person's access to Christian communities. This makes it difficult for them to locate their identity within the Church and negotiate meaningful roles that keep them coming back. Young adults who

no longer identify within the Church will inevitably find an identity outside of it, as so many are already doing.

Thankfully, the report also found success stories. Young adults who stayed engaged with their faith reported experiencing consistent godly mentorship and a sense of belonging within a Christian community. Experiences like these made all the difference.

“As young adults leave high school and move on to new life experiences, they begin to try on new identities and to re-examine the beliefs they took for granted as children.”



THE POWER OF CHRISTIAN HIGHER EDUCATION

Researchers also noticed a group of young adults that acted differently than their peers.

The life transition that would normally cause a break with the Christian faith didn't seem to have the same effect on them. This group showed signs of overwhelming success: They were more likely to share the religious views of their Christian parents, to keep their orthodox beliefs, and to attend church regularly.

The difference? Attending a Christian college or university.

Students that attended Christian

Students who studied at Christian institutions fared better spiritually than those that didn't. They were more likely to remain connected with Church and faith than any other group.

higher education were a group with distinctly positive outcomes. When they moved out of their parents' homes, they did so to pursue Christian education. They connected with forms of mentorship on campus and found new churches to serve in while they were at school. They persisted in their faith.

In fact, their behaviour was so unique among their peers that the Renegotiating Faith group

concluded that they were no longer emerging adults—they had forged commitments to the Church and their faith that they were not likely to leave behind.

The bottom line is this: Students who studied at Christian institutions after high school fared better spiritually than those that didn't. They were more likely to remain connected with Church and faith than any other group from the study.

CHANGING THE OUTCOME

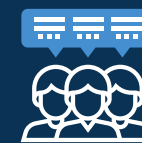
Students who chose Christian higher education had distinctly positive spiritual outcomes when compared to students who didn't, including being...



More likely to maintain or increase their church attendance



Three times more likely to attend church services at least weekly



More likely to share the beliefs of their parents



More likely to hold Christian orthodox religious views



More likely to get connected with a Christian campus group



More involved with Christian groups on and off campus



More likely to be enrolled full time in their studies



Less likely to say they would be isolated without social media



WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR US?

These results are a powerful reminder of the value of Christian education.

Researchers discovered that participation in Christian higher education was a much better indicator that a young adult would continue in their faith. While Christian camps, campus groups, and gap-year discipleship programs all played a role, Christian education was uniquely positioned to change the spiritual outcome for an emerging adult.

For us at Briercrest, the data is clear: We have a strategic role to play in discipling this generation of students.

We believe in the power and necessity of Christian higher

education. We believe it is positioned to embrace the needs of emerging adulthood and call students to follow Christ through it.

In spite of its present challenges, our hope is that this generation enter adulthood with a faith that stands as a witness to their peers and beyond. We believe that emerging adulthood is the right time for students to form hard-fought identities and convictions that influence the world—and lead the Church forward.

We asked Briercrest students to share the ways their faith grew as they studied at our college. Their stories stand as examples of the difference that Christian higher education can make in the lives of students.

MEET ETHAN,

a second-year Social Sciences student. Trusted people from Ethan's home church, like his youth pastor, attended Briercrest and encouraged him to do the same.

He says that the community he found on campus brought him back for a second year. "Encouraging and building into people in community are what brought me to the faith, and then it brought me here... and then it brought me back here. I wanted to be building into people, having people build into me, and growing more."

We asked Ethan what was really important to him. With a laugh, he said, "Actually, I was just talking about this with someone close to me.

"We were talking about the mission of the Church, but also about having a personal mission, whether your personal mission is ministry, or missions, or whatever. And I realized that the same way community brought me to the faith, to school, and back to school, I think being a community and building into a community is important to me.

"I know that it can bring people from tough situations to the light," he continued. "I think being able to help a community grow is important to me—being open, loving, and encouraging, whether sometimes love is tough and being hard on someone, but just showing the love of Christ to people."



Encouraging and building into people in community are what brought me to the faith, and then it brought me here. I wanted to be building into people, having people build into me, and growing more.

— ETHAN, 2ND YEAR STUDENT



CHRIST-CENTRED COMMUNITY

WHAT WE DO: CHRIST-CENTRED COMMUNITY

In Renegotiating Faith terms, Ethan's story is a success story.

Rather than disconnecting from the church when he graduated high school, Ethan left home to begin his education in a Christian community. With the support of godly people at home and at school, he has been able to prioritize his spiritual growth and develop a sense of identity and mission within the Church.

Ethan is passionate about building biblical community. At Briercrest, he has experienced an atmosphere that pushes him towards Christ in both encouragement and correction. Now, he has a calling to help

build this community wherever he goes.

Ethan's regular life on campus has been shaped by experiences that call him into Christ-centred community:

1. Daily chapels where our student body gathers to study Scripture, worship, and pray
2. Dorms where students can live in close, daily community with one another
3. Small class sizes that allow students to engage with their course content, their peers, and their professors
4. Mentorship structures like student leadership, student development staff, and sports team chaplains

5. Weekly church involvement where students can connect, serve, and complete internships
6. Small groups where students get together on a weekly basis for intentional spiritual community and Bible study
7. Student-led worship nights where students join together weekly in prayer and worship

There is a pressing need for consistent godly community during emerging adulthood. That's why everyday life at Briercrest is built on these seven practices that gather us around Christ. Not only do students benefit from this lifestyle, they also contribute to it. We have found that our close-knit campus is an ideal place to see this happen year after year.

**WHY IT'S IMPORTANT:
PRACTICING COMMUNITY**

One of *Renegotiating Faith's* most prominent indicators of spiritual health was church attendance. Students in Christian higher education connected more readily with church communities, while students who made other postsecondary plans were more likely to be drawn away from the Church.

Where emerging adulthood can erode connections to godly community, it's essential that we make it easy for our students to get—and stay—connected to the Church. Active encouragement towards the Church is a vital part of our community life.

By calling students to participate in biblical community, both through church attendance

and daily life on campus, we invite them to identify roles in the Church and live them out together. As our students do this, they gain the experience they need to become community builders themselves.

Ethan's story is also a reminder of the value the Church instills in its emerging adults and the difference this can make.

On average, students in Christian higher education were more likely to be encouraged in their gifts and talents than other young adults. Their connections to the Church and to Christian mentors meant that they received frequent, godly affirmation—and it showed. As Ethan's story displays, this encouragement can play a major role in helping young adults understand their calling, gifts,

and place in the Church.

Receiving encouragement led Ethan to study in a community of Christian peers, and then return to that same community to continue growing. His life priorities have been shaped by these experiences: Ethan has developed a passion for following Christ and encouraging those around him to do the same.

Students like Ethan are church builders. At Briercrest, he found a place to grow, to have conversations about what matters to him, and to build up the community around him. Not only has Ethan solidified his connections to the Church and his faith, he's also grown as a leader. Ethan will be able to contribute meaningfully to future Christian communities wherever he goes next.

PRACTICING COMMUNITY





For me, I was a speck in the universe floating around and if I landed in a good job that paid me well, I would be lucky. Now, I understand that that's not relevant at all.

— GRACE, 5TH YEAR STUDENT

MEET GRACE,

a 5th year Theology student. She completed a year of study through Kaléo, a leadership program of Briercrest and Camp Qwanoes, and continued her degree on campus at Briercrest.

Before this, Grace studied for two years at a secular university. Taking courses surrounded by hundreds of other students, she remembers one predominant feeling: “I felt exiled,” she remembered. “When I look back, I would venture to guess that everyone feels that way. If you don’t know your true home in the tapestry of God’s people, you’re going to feel exiled.

“For me, I was a speck in the universe who was just kind of floating around and if I landed in a good job that paid me well, I would be lucky. Now, I understand that that’s not relevant at all.”

Studying at Briercrest has changed Grace’s outlook. She shared one story where a professor and his wife prayed over her after she had sustained a significant injury. “[They] had the eyes to see that I was in need,” she said. “That was probably the first experience I had where I was like, ‘Oh, I’m not a number here. I’m not even just a face, actually. I’m a human.’

“The interpersonal communication here is really, really different. I think I feel that on a subliminal level every day,” she said. “This institution has created structures like community chapels, small groups, the various events we put on—they’re centralized for the community.”

“Character cultivation is a very different purpose,” Grace concluded.

WHAT WE DO: CHARACTER EDUCATION

Grace's story captures the power of education that calls students to follow Christ in every aspect of their lives—in her words, a 'character' education.

One of the major markers of emerging adulthood is a search for identity. At Briercrest, Grace has been encouraged to grow not only as a student, but as a disciple. She has been called to find her identity in Christ and His Church.

While we help our students prepare for their future careers, our highest priority is seeing them develop as followers of Jesus. Their minds, hearts, and souls matter. That's why we invest deeply in the academic,

social, and spiritual lives of emerging adult students.

On our campus, **this happens:**

Academically in classes that allow for meaningful interaction. Smaller class sizes mean our students get more opportunities to build relationships with one another and with godly professors who teach, pray for, and mentor them regularly.

Socially in rich, community-focused campus life. Students study Scripture in class and practice it in community. From studying and serving to faithfully gathering and having fun, our campus is a place to work out Christian life together.

Spiritually in uncompromising discipleship to Jesus Christ. This

affects every aspect of life on campus. At the heart of it all is our passion to call one another to seek the Kingdom—not only to help students stay connected to the Church, but also to see them grow in their faith and be shaped for lives of service.

Who our students will be is of greater eternal value than the job they will get. That's why our life on campus is structured so that students can have identity-shaping encounters with Christ and His Church. A combination of personal education, rich relationship building, and a shared pursuit of Christ means opportunities for growth and transformation every day.

The result is an environment where students like Grace can form lasting identities in Christ.





ENVIRONMENT MATTERS

WHY IT'S IMPORTANT: ENVIRONMENT MATTERS

At her first school, Grace's experience was more isolating than affirming. Instead of being pulled into the Church and her identity with Christ, she felt disconnected and insignificant.

One trend stands out: Where Christian higher education helped young adults forge deep connections to Church and faith, secular education often did the opposite. In fact, one of the strongest indicators of whether or not a student would keep their faith was the kind of campus they chose.

Higher education is a normative experience for Canadian young adults. More than 90% of young

adults graduate from high school and 75% go on to postsecondary education of some kind. This means all across the country, emerging adult students are investing formative years into college and university campuses.

For better or for worse, educational environments shape their students. We know that studying in a Christ-centred environment helped positively shape Grace's view of God and herself, while studying at her first school had the opposite effect. For emerging adults seeking identity and belonging, environments that draw students towards community and discipleship have enormous impact.

When Grace found herself in a

setting that drew her into the purpose, mission, and calling of the Church, she began to thrive. She has grown in her faith, learned more about God, and found her place in His people. Studying theology and the Bible deeply, along with courses in the arts and sciences, has prepared her to think carefully about the world and to see her role in it.

In this kind of environment, through the care of professors and peers, Grace has been drawn into vibrant community—an experience that has awakened her to her identity and role among God's people. Her education has helped shape her knowledge of God, solidify her identity in His Church, and prepare her wholeheartedly for Kingdom work.

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

The conclusions drawn by the Renegotiating Faith group are where our work begins.

It is clear that students like Ethan and Grace are part of an extraordinary movement of young people who have held onto the Church and their faith, even when their peers across the country were disconnecting. It is also clear that their education had a profoundly positive impact on their life trajectories.

In an era of declining enrolment, Christian higher education continues to be deeply relevant.

Although over two million Canadian students enrolled in postsecondary in 2015, total enrolment in Christian schools was 16,100—less than one percent of all enrolment in

In an era of declining enrolment, Christian higher education continues to be deeply relevant.

Canadian higher education. As the data reflects, dwindling enrolment numbers speak to

a greater shift away from the Christian faith among students.

Schools like Briercrest foster the things emerging adults need for lasting faith. We invite them into communities that encourage them in their pursuit of Christ. We provide environments that shape them for lives of Christian discipleship. We care for them as they discover who they're called to be. And with all the resources available to us, we invite them to follow Jesus.

You can take part in this important work in three ways:



1. Pray for Christian higher education. Pray for the fruitful ministry and increased influence of Christian higher education. Keep Christian colleges, Bible schools, and other institutions across Canada in your prayers.

2. Support Christian higher education. Share its benefits with your church. Support it as an option for high school students. Pray about financially supporting Christian higher education and scholarships.

3. Encourage young adults to attend Christian higher education. For parents, youth workers, and churches asking how they can help youth and young adults keep the faith, this way forward is clear.

Briercrest is a partnership of three Christ-centred, Bible-anchored, and ministry-focused schools that exist to equip the Church and engage the world through accredited, holistic education. We are committed to training students to seek the kingdom of God, to be shaped profoundly by the Scriptures, and to be formed spiritually and intellectually for lives of service.

Briercrest Christian Academy is a high school committed to discipling students from grades 9-12. We do this through a program that includes Christian Ethics classes for every grade and an intensive chapel program. BCA is closely connected with Briercrest College and its students, meaning more academic, discipleship, and mentorship resources are always available for our high school students.

Briercrest College prioritizes the whole-person formation of young adults through dorm-based schooling. Our students come for certificates and degrees in a variety of programs and partnership options and stay for the blend of high-level academics, daily Christian discipleship, and student life in a community rooted in Scripture and oriented towards Jesus.

Briercrest Seminary offers biblical, relevant, and practical training for graduate students. We offer accessible education to equip and enhance our students' ministries in the Church and in the world. This ministry work directly affects the future of the Canadian Church, and, by extension, our emerging adults. Briercrest College students often study with our seminary after they graduate.



Coming to BCA has been life-changing for me. I've learned so much about Christ and experienced the love of fantastic teachers and people that genuinely care about us. I am amazed by the dynamics of this community as a school.

— **CINDY**, CHRISTIAN ACADEMY



*I kept to myself a lot in my first year, but through residence assistants and fellow students, I was drawn out of myself. Through dorm life, I've experienced what true community is and I think that it is sort of an accurate depiction of Briercrest: it's a small piece of the Kingdom. — **NATHAN**, COLLEGE*

*Kaléo teaches you how to be more open with others, to depend on God constantly, and to live a more healthy, structured Christian life. It has been a foundational year for me as I step into my next stage in life. — **SAMUEL**, KALÉO*



Each class met me exactly where I was in my journey. God has used this time to deeply instill within me a sense of security in Him. My relationships with others are richer, more meaningful, genuine, authentic, and real. I am thankful for all I have learned, but most of all growing in my walk with Jesus!

— **ERIN**, SEMINARY





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