

KARA POWELL | BRAD M. GRIFFIN



**3 BIG  
QUESTIONS  
THAT CHANGE EVERY  
TEENAGER**

**MAKING THE MOST OF YOUR  
CONVERSATIONS AND CONNECTIONS**

“In *3 Big Questions*, Kara Powell and Brad Griffin cut through so much of the guesswork and misguided conversations that have made it so much harder to connect with today’s teens. This powerful combination of research, practicality, and intellectual integrity is exactly what church leaders need right now.”

Carey Nieuwhof, author, speaker, and podcaster

“Kara and Brad help us understand the unique challenges teenagers are confronting today, identify their greatest longings, and give us practical ways to proactively initiate conversations and connections that will ultimately lead them closer to Jesus. If you love and care about teenagers, read this book.”

Christine Caine, founder of A21 and Propel Women

“As a parent of two teenagers, I am always looking for resources that will help me better understand my children. As a professor of evangelism, I am also looking for resources that develop our ability to witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ. This work by Kara Powell and Brad Griffin offers a valuable resource that engages the full story of the gospel message to speak to the specific context of the teenager. I am grateful for this resource that will effectively serve the church.”

Soong-Chan Rah, Robert Munger Professor of Evangelism  
at Fuller Theological Seminary and author of *The Next Evangelicalism* and *Prophetic Lament*

“For years I’ve relied on the research and wisdom of Kara Powell and Brad Griffin. No team has done more to understand the spiritual lives of teens. They deftly unpack the unique dilemmas young people are facing in a time and culture of rapid change and upheaval. They also help us avoid the common, well-intentioned mistakes we often make when trying to guide them. Given Kara’s and Brad’s track record, none of that surprised me. Here’s what did: any adult who reads this book will have their faith strengthened as well. While incredibly relevant for teenagers in this moment, there is eternal truth here that transcends all ages.”

Skye Jethani, award-winning author of *WithGodDaily.com*  
and cohost of the *Holy Post* podcast

“*3 Big Questions* will help you reengage a generation with a bolder, brighter, and braver version of faith. Kara Powell and Brad Griffin will launch your team into discussions that will forever change the conversations you have with this generation.”

Reggie Joiner, founder and CEO of Orange

“As a pastor, I regularly reflect on ways to establish deeper connections with the teenagers who are part of our congregation. As a

father of two children, this is always on my heart. This book offers a powerful pathway to make these connections a reality. Kara Powell and Brad Griffin have given us a wonderful gift. Our churches and homes will be profoundly impacted if we begin to intentionally wrestle with the three big questions they present.”

**Rich Villodas**, lead pastor of New Life Fellowship Church,  
New York City

“Every youth worker and parent wonders if they really know what’s happening with the teenagers they care about most. *3 Big Questions* empowers you to understand young people and, more importantly, equips you with countless practical ideas for what to say and do so they experience Jesus more fully. This is exactly what’s needed to help parents and leaders win with teenagers!”

**Doug Fields**, cofounder of [DownloadYouthMinistry.com](http://DownloadYouthMinistry.com)

“One of the keys to reaching the most unreached generation today, Gen Z, is knowing the right questions to ask. Fortunately, my friends Kara and Brad—and the entire Fuller Youth Institute team—have created a resource based upon research that explores the three questions most important to today’s teenagers. I invite you to join them on this quest of not only understanding these questions but also exploring how the church can be equipped to answer them in Christ-centered ways. My prayer is that this resource will be an essential tool for both connecting with and reaching Gen Z.”

**Ed Stetzer**, Wheaton College

“Kara and Brad take those of us who care for young people on an insightful journey into the influences that are shaping their world today. Along the way, we learn what Jesus has to say about these life-changing topics, and also how to walk alongside our young friends by listening to the questions they are asking while pointing them to the God who lovingly invites them into his bigger story.”

**Newt Crenshaw**, president of Young Life

“*3 Big Questions* combines the wisdom of years of working with teenagers with fresh insights from listening carefully and critically to them—and a willingness to be challenged both by what young people have to say and by what God is saying to and through them. This is not just another youth ministry book. The questions of teenagers in this book will at times bring you to tears while simultaneously inspiring you to press on and to have better conversations with the beloved young people in your life.”

**Almeda M. Wright**, Yale Divinity School, author  
of *The Spiritual Lives of Young African Americans*

“Having worked with teenagers for many years as a youth pastor and then taught others to do the same while parenting my own, I hear these three such succinct questions (and answers from Jesus) as balm to my soul. Kara Powell and Brad Griffin offer proven insights into how teenagers can not only take on identity, belonging, and purpose but do so in the safety of the name, embrace, and true calling as people in Christ.”

Daniel Harrell, editor in chief, *Christianity Today*

“Kara Powell and Brad Griffin offer wisdom and insight that parents, educators, and ministers will benefit from for years to come, as well as offer practical ideas—that can actually be implemented right away—for helping the teens we love navigate the challenging years of adolescence at one of the most difficult points of human history. This book is a gem, a real gift, and essential reading for those in the trenches of helping teens meet Jesus.”

Katie Prejean McGrady, speaker, author, and host of *The Katie McGrady Show* on Sirius XM and *Ave Explores* from Ave Maria Press

“*3 Big Questions* captures the tension of our time. Kara and Brad have revealed the core struggles of young people and their relationship with the church and Christ and have given practical ways to help them live out the gospel. Not only is this a guide to reach young people but, if you are open to it, it will also shape your own journey with Christ. This is a must-read for anyone serious about the kingdom work of discipling the next generation.”

Tommy Nixon, CEO of Urban Youth Workers Institute

“This book uncomplicates the most complicated part of my relationship with my teens: helping them figure out WHO THEY ARE. Kara and Brad give us a guide to help teenagers unlock their superpowers. I’m forever grateful.”

Carlos Whittaker, author of *Enter Wild, Kill the Spider,* and *Moment Maker*

“Kara has long been a thought leader in the next gen space, and FYI has always designed solution-based research to help ministry move forward. Here she and Brad go again, inspiring us through transformational questions that matter.”

Sam Collier, lead pastor of Hillsong Atlanta and founder of A Greater Story

“*3 Big Questions* is a very exciting book, because with depth and sensitivity it wades into the most central and mysterious of our

human questions. And more importantly, it beckons churches to observe and learn from how young people answer them. But the book does more. It also invites parents, youth workers, pastors, and anyone who cares about young people to see these questions as an invitation into a pilgrimage with them.”

**Andrew Root**, Luther Seminary, author of *The End of Youth Ministry?* and *The Congregation in a Secular Age*

“If you are a parent, youth worker, or church leader who has desired to reach youth, this is a must-read. Our question is usually, How can we reach teenagers? The better question is, How can teenagers reach us? Kara and Brad tell us it starts with listening. This book will inspire you to talk to every young person you come in contact with and give you tools to make you feel like a youth conversationalist.”

**Gabriel Zamora**, pastor, speaker, and CEO  
of Kingdom Global Ministries

“Kara and Brad’s thoughtful, wise, and research-backed book will help those who seek to serve and walk alongside young people not necessarily provide easy answers but help them process their big questions. Packed with practical guidance and opportunities to reflect and apply, it will make you a better listener, provide you with rich insight into the inner lives of real young people, and invite you to draw more impactful connections between the stories of the teenagers in your care and the transformational story of the greatest answer of all.”

**Martin Saunders**, head of innovation at Youthscape, UK,  
and director of Satellites

“Kara Powell and Brad Griffin are once again paving the road toward better youth discipleship. *3 Big Questions* provides a comprehensive handbook for any context. The stories gathered by the research team create a mosaic that reflects a diverse community. Countless recipes full of tools for adults are grounded in Scripture, are easy to understand, and will give depth to any conversation with teenagers. Destined to be another classic from the Fuller Youth Institute, this is a welcome addition for youth leaders everywhere.”

**Virginia Ward**, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary

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**QUESTIONS**  
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# 3 BIG QUESTIONS THAT CHANGE EVERY TEENAGER

MAKING THE MOST OF YOUR  
CONVERSATIONS AND CONNECTIONS

KARA POWELL and  
BRAD M. GRIFFIN



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To teenagers everywhere  
who long for better answers

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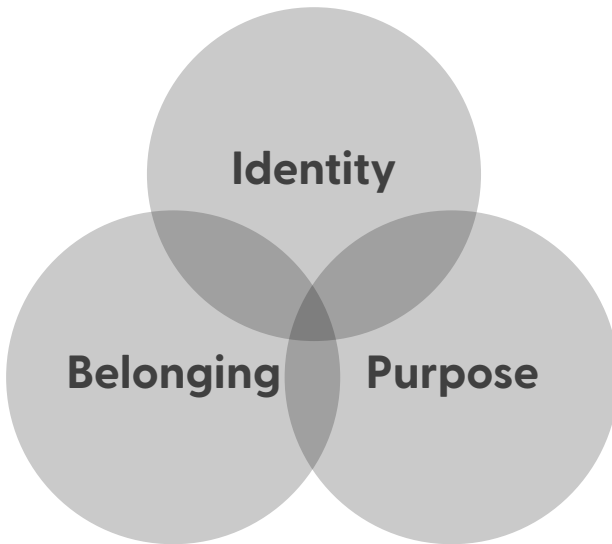
Finally, our families have inspired and challenged us and offered countless insights to this work. It's daunting to write a book about teenagers while raising three each with

our respective spouses. Our kids have put up with not only our writing schedules but also dozens of “Hey, can I try an idea out with you?” and dinner-table conversations about research. They do an incredible job of keeping us real. And humble. Our spouses, Dave and Missy, deserve a special reward in heaven for making it possible for us to finish this book during months of unexpected (and seemingly unending) quarantine life. We are forever grateful.

PART I



**QUESTIONS  
BEGGING  
FOR BETTER  
ANSWERS**





# The Big Questions Every Teenager Is Asking

I've been slowly reflecting more on what it means to be a Christian, and I feel like I still don't know where exactly I fit into everything.

In middle school, I used to see everything as right and wrong because I was just learning the foundations. But as I eventually moved to high school and started learning critical thinking and that kind of thing, I've been slowly exploring the in-between areas. So I feel like I'm still trying to figure out my faith.

Lilly

**A**s a twelfth grader, one student took a big risk and faced some big questions.

In ninth grade, she had been driven by one singular question: How can I successfully navigate my new twenty-five-hundred-student high school? Other than a few junior varsity swim meets when her fairly desperate coach dubbed her temporary (and last-minute) cocaptain, leadership wasn't in the

picture. Surviving her growing homework load and shifting friendships were accomplishments enough.

As a tenth grader, with a year of classes and friendship under her belt, she started wondering, *How can I be a leader on campus without risking an election loss?* She found failure (public or not) unnerving. Gratefully, that question was answered when she applied for and was selected by teachers to serve as class secretary.

The next year she interviewed and was chosen by the student senate to be secretary of the school's student body. Then her English teacher asked her to be coeditor of the school paper. Between the newspaper and student government, she viewed herself—and was known to others—as a visible and active leader on campus.

Few eleventh graders had climbed so high up the school's student leadership ladder without winning a single election.

That streak ended senior year when she decided to run—in an *election*—for student body president. She and her campaign team gave away handfuls of candy, all plastered with creative slogans. While she still feared the humiliation of an election loss, underclassmen's widespread promises to vote for her made her optimistic she would triumph.

That hope disintegrated as soon as results were posted. Not only did she not win—she came in third. Out of three candidates.

This was no flubbed interview behind closed doors. This felt like public shaming. As adrenaline rushed through her body and she felt her face growing warm, one question flooded her mind: *Where can I hide?*

She drove home, ran upstairs to her bedroom, slammed the door, and curled under the covers. She had never tried this

hard and failed this big. Half a dozen friends reached out to console her, but she was too embarrassed to talk.

Her bedspread was no shield against the core questions about herself, her relationships, and her future racing through her mind.

Who was she if she wasn't a student leader?

How could she face her friends, let alone the entire school?

And after this disgrace, could she ever lead anything again?

### **Every Teenager Is a Walking Bundle of Questions**

Every teenager is a walking bundle of questions. For this student huddled in her bed, the questions were largely about leadership and risk. For students you know, the questions in their driver's seat may be about friends, race, money, grades, abuse, justice, sports, future, family, social media, or mental health.

Sometimes kids' questions leak out and are muttered aloud. More commonly, they remain bottled inside a teenager's curious mind and conflicted soul. Either way, we'll never activate this generation if we don't understand their most pressing questions.

You're likely reading this book because you want to understand teenagers and have better connections and conversations with them. You are a mentor, teacher, youth worker, small group leader, parent, stepparent, grandparent, pastor, church member, neighbor, aunt, or boss who wants to help address the questions of young people in general—and likely a few young people specifically.

At the Fuller Youth Institute, we love listening to teenagers' tough questions, as well as the (equally tough) questions

*about* teenagers asked by churches, ministries, and families. Over the last couple of years, we've conducted surveys and focus groups with over twenty-two hundred teenagers, as well as in-depth multi-session interviews with twenty-seven youth group high school students nationwide (whom we will describe further in chapter 2). Among the questions tumbling through any teenager's mind at any time, the following questions often float to the top.

### *How Do I Manage Anxiety and Stress Better?*

The two of us rarely go a day without a leader or parent asking us about young people's stress, anxiety, and depression.

That prevalence makes sense given that anxiety is the most common psychological disorder in the US, affecting nearly one-third of adolescents and adults in their lifetime.<sup>1</sup> So if you are a leader of twenty students, somewhere in the neighborhood of seven of them may suffer from a diagnosable anxiety disorder.

We'll further explore the causes, symptoms, and your best response to anxiety in chapters 4 and 5.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, mental health challenges skyrocketed in the US. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, anxiety tripled (from 8.1 percent to 25.5 percent) and depression almost quadrupled (from 6.5 percent to 24.3 percent). Approximately half of young adults ages eighteen to twenty-four during the pandemic were wrestling with anxiety or depression.<sup>2</sup>

Suicide is currently the second leading cause of death for US young people ages ten to twenty-four. What's more, approximately two out of every three young people who have suicidal thoughts never get help.<sup>3</sup>



---

*I try not to think about it, but my life is very stressful. I changed schools to be in a better music program. Fear of not doing well in my new school is making me stressed out. It's also making my parents stressed out, and everybody who's rooting for me is stressed out. So that's a lot of pressure on me, because I have to do well to stay in this program. And it's just a lot. —Simone*

---

A few of the twenty-seven students we interviewed had contemplated or even taken specific steps toward killing themselves. One eleventh grader who's active in his church remembered feeling emotionally swallowed up by academic and social pressures: "On school days, I couldn't even make it until 10 or 11 a.m. My anxiety was crazy. It got to the point that I wanted to kill myself. I called a suicide hotline and was put in a hospital with security guards around my bed to make sure I wasn't going to harm myself. That was my lowest point."

Poignantly, the help he received during that hospitalization helped him peer behind the curtain of his emotions and discover what he ultimately longed for: "I finally realized in that hospital bed that I really didn't want to hurt myself. I just needed someone to be there for me."

*Technology? We Don't Have Many Questions.  
We Kinda Get It.*

If you're like us, whenever you have tech problems, you hand your device to the young person nearest you (resisting the impulse to throw it out the window instead). Today's teenagers have mastered—and are now pioneering—new paths forward in technology.

According to the latest research, nearly all (95 percent) of US teens have access to a smartphone, and about half say they are “almost constantly” on the internet.<sup>4</sup>

Almost three-fourths report often or sometimes checking for messages or notifications as soon as they wake up, and approximately four out of ten feel anxious when they do not have their cell phone with them.<sup>5</sup>

Roughly half of thirteen- to seventeen-year-olds are worried they spend too much time on their smartphones.<sup>6</sup>

Sixty-eight percent of young people who are active on social media have received support in tough times through those channels.<sup>7</sup>

With ubiquitous technology comes new temptations and conflict. In one survey of teenagers, 32 percent admitted to intentionally accessing online pornography; of these, 43 percent did so on a weekly basis.<sup>8</sup> During the course of our interviews, an upperclassman revealed his struggle with online pornography from sixth to ninth grade: “I was inundated with social media and introduced to all sorts of heinous stuff,

you know, like porn. There was a whole bunch of mess that I got sucked into. No one knew what I was doing. I just deleted my online history. I was watching things I shouldn’t have been watching. It was horrible for me.”

Turning to another downside of technology, a junior we interviewed was one of the 15 percent of US high school students victimized by electronic bullying.<sup>9</sup> She was an African American minority at her school, and other students used her race as a weapon against her. No fists were thrown, but

In chapters 4 and 6, we'll further explore the opportunities and challenges that technology introduces into young people's conversations and connections with you and our world.

because she was different, insults were tossed her way both at school and in the digital world.

While this eleventh grader shared in specific detail about other aspects of her life, she didn't seem to want to give many details about this painful part of her history. I (Kara) asked her to tell me more about the bullying she had experienced. She paused and then gave a vague answer, "You know, name-calling. And people not wanting to be with me." She lowered her gaze, stared at the coffeehouse table in between us, sighed, and added one final, softly spoken, "Yeah . . ."

*Our Generation Is Diverse, but How Do We Navigate All the Racial Pain in Our Country?*

US Census statistics help us understand why this generation is so aware of ethnic and cultural diversity and why many are actively seeking racial justice and reconciliation. Today in the US, approximately half of those under eighteen are White and half are people of color;<sup>10</sup> one-fourth of that same age group are first- or second-generation immigrants.<sup>11</sup>

We might conclude from this data that if you're a leader, teacher, or mentor, about 50 percent of the children and teenagers you love and serve are likely to be White and 50 percent are likely to be from another ethnicity or two (or sometimes three or more). And if you're a parent, about half of your teenager's friends are White and half are likely young people of color.

However, America's racial reality is that our neighborhoods, schools, and churches remain relatively segregated. In some cases, students experience diverse classmates but go home to monocultural neighborhoods. For other teenagers, church is the most segregated environment of their

## Social Location Matters

No matter our cultural background, we're all impacted by our social location.

By “social location,” we mean the way we are shaped by our gender, race, ethnicity, social class, age, ability, religion, sexual orientation, and geography. While Brad is male and Kara is female, and we grew up in different parts of the country (Kara in suburban Southern California and Brad in rural Kentucky), our social locations today are fairly similar: we are both White, highly educated, middle to upper-middle class, straight, Protestant Christians who live in Los Angeles.

The way we lead our team, conduct research, and write this book are all influenced by social location. We can become more aware of those influences and at times compensate for them, but we can never fully distance ourselves from how our particular locations skew our perception. As practical theologians Juan Martinez and Mark Lau Branson warn, “Without self-awareness we are more prone to misunderstanding others and to underestimating the impact that our own heritage has on how we perceive and think and act.”<sup>a</sup>

As we attempted to name how students' cultural experiences shape their quest for answers to their biggest questions, we didn't do this work alone. Our diverse and thoughtful team of researchers (whom you'll hear from throughout this book) helped us be more attentive to intersections of culture, race, gender, and other realities of social location.

Talking about race and culture is never simple. We often include the racial/ethnic background of interview participants when we attempt to capture their unique vantage points, but not every mention of a student will include this descriptor in order to avoid labeling. This may inevitably lead to assumptions and stereotypes both when we mention race and when we don't. If it's helpful to look up a particular young person's demographic background, please refer to the complete chart in appendix A.

<sup>a</sup> Juan Martinez and Mark Lau Branson. *Churches, Cultures, and Leadership* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2011), 19.

week. And for still others, most every context in their lives is populated with people who look like them and share similar backgrounds. Often with fresh eyes, teenagers see the racial segregation and injustice surrounding them and are eager to work toward unity and healing.

In the midst of young people's varied ethnic and racial experiences, many have the opportunities to cross boundaries and build cultural bridges. Claudia is a seventeen-year-old Latina who loves traditional Mexican dishes but also enjoys Korean drinks and treats. She intentionally introduces her Latino friends to Korean cuisine and invites her Korean friends to enjoy Mexican food in her home and neighborhood. While this cultural exchange can at times create tension for Claudia and many students we interviewed, Claudia also enjoys watching both sets of friends try new foods. Claudia summarized: "Although I got some of their culture, I also got to share some of mine, and they actually love it. It's so fun."

### *How Do I Best Handle Gender Identity and Sexual Orientation?*

In 2016, about ten million people, or 4.1 percent of the US adult population, identified as LGBTQ, which is a modest,

## **Half of Teenagers Struggle with Poverty**

One in two US teenagers today are living in poverty or low-income households.<sup>a</sup> This income inequality creates a disparity that colors their search for answers to their pressing questions and hinders access to resources they need to navigate today's world.

a. Fifty-two percent of young people ages ten to nineteen: 16 percent below the poverty level and 36 percent in low-income households. United States Census Bureau, "Current Population Survey, Annual Social and Economic Supplement," 2018, <http://www.census.gov/cps/data/cpstablescreator.html>.

but noteworthy, increase from the 8.3 million (or 3.5 percent of adults) who said they were LGBTQ in 2012.<sup>12</sup> In one national study across generations, the youngest cohort surveyed (young adults ages eighteen to thirty-six) was by far the most likely to identify as LGBTQ (7.3 percent).<sup>13</sup> In addition, it's estimated that somewhere between 0.7 percent and 1.8 percent of US high school students identify as transgender.<sup>14</sup>

Gabriel is a recent graduate who describes himself as pansexual because “I will date someone for who they are.” Taylor is a high school junior who prefers the pronoun *they*. Taylor describes themselves as “nonbinary, Christian, vegan, loving and empathetic, really gay, and quiet.” When Taylor came out in middle school, many of Taylor’s friends and family grew distant and seemed afraid of them. “My brother and I did not talk for like six months because he did not accept me. And that was really hard. But now he accepts me and stuff like that. I hear from other friends that he corrects people when they call me his sister because he knows how I feel about gender identity.”

Today’s young people who identify as straight and non-transgender are also navigating new questions with their

We'll further explore LGBTQ young people's identity journey in chapter 4 and their search for belonging in chapter 6.

gay, transgender, and nonbinary peers—including which terms to use and what they mean. As Steve, a high school senior from North Carolina, noted about one of his closer friends, “His girlfriend identifies as male, so he is pansexual. I respect what they both believe so I use the pronouns

they want me to. I am not going to judge him, I'm not going to put him down. I am going to realize that his situation is different and respect that.”

*When It Comes to Sex, How Do I Figure Out What's Best for Me?*

The percentage of teenagers who report “ever having sex” has steadily dropped over the last decade—from 48 to 40—as has the percentage of those who are currently sexually active (from 35 to 29 percent).<sup>15</sup>

While these trends are promising, sexual temptations, hazards, and missteps remain part of young people’s journeys. For today’s tech-savvy students, sharing nude digital photos and videos is often an expected part of high school relationships.

During our interviews, one of our team members asked a sixteen-year-old who had dated one serious boyfriend in high school, “What is something you have learned about yourself because of that dating relationship?”

She responded, “I learned I have to be more self-confident.”

The interviewer followed up, “How did that come up in your dating relationship?”

“Well, a lot of times, if you say no to something, the person you’re dating kind of makes you feel bad about it. So you do it anyway. I wish I had been more confident so I could have stuck with my no instead of giving in.”

*How Can I Stay Safe at School? And Why Isn't More Being Done by Adults to Change Things?*

Remember crouching under your school desk in elementary or high school during your annual earthquake or tornado drill (depending on which part of the country you grew up in)? Today’s teenagers still do this drill, but campuses nationwide have added a second drill to their safety protocol.

Active-shooter drills.

The Sandy Hook Elementary school shooting was in 2012. The Parkland, Florida, shooting was in 2018. No wonder only 59 percent of fifth through twelfth graders report feeling safe at school.<sup>16</sup> A similar proportion (57 percent) of teenagers are worried about the possibility of a shooting happening at their school, with one out of four saying they are “very worried.” This fear is higher among students of color.<sup>17</sup>

In chapter 10, we offer a conversation guide for processing local violence with teenagers.

Teenagers’ underlying concern isn’t just about school being dangerous but also that adults can’t—or won’t—protect them from violence. No longer waiting for adults, young people have been on the forefront of recent movements for legislative change addressing gun regulation across the country.

### *When It Comes to Drugs, Alcohol, and Vaping, What’s Okay for Me to Try?*

Experimentation is a hallmark of adolescence, and it’s no surprise that drugs and alcohol are often in the mix among high schoolers. But the trends in this area are shifting. Overall, substance abuse is (wonderfully) declining among teenagers. The percentage of young people who report using illegal drugs has fallen (from 23 percent in 2007 to 14 percent in 2017), as has the percentage of those who have injected illegal drugs (from 2 to 1.5 percent over that same decade).

The percentage of tenth and twelfth graders who have consumed alcohol in the past year has seen a significant five-year drop—down to 38 percent and 52 percent, respectively.<sup>18</sup>

The glaring and alarming exception to these encouraging downturns is vaping, or the use of electronic cigarettes. Over

one-third (35 percent) of twelfth graders have vaped nicotine in the last year, along with a distressing 17 percent of eighth graders.<sup>19</sup> Around 20 percent of tenth and twelfth graders have vaped marijuana in the past twelve months, which is more than double two years ago.<sup>20</sup>

In our interviews, we didn't ask directly about drugs, alcohol, or vaping, and few students voluntarily disclosed their own encounters. We were buoyed up when one senior who leads his school's Christian club noted that "a lot of students openly mock me for my faith in classes or refer to me as 'a dumb priest with his dumb Jesus.' I know these students are actively cutting and depressed. They are addicted to vaping. When they are in their most broken-down moments, at least three of them have come to me and asked, 'What makes you so happy?' That alone is like, wow."

#### *How Is God Relevant to Me?*

While the senior who leads his school's Christian club is known for his faith on campus, many church-ed young people, when asked how God is relevant to them, answer "not much at all."

For over fifteen years, we have been trying to answer questions about young people's faith through our research at the Fuller Youth Institute. Many of those questions come from leaders, parents, and mentors—people like you—who worry about the young people around them. Multiple studies indicate that 40 to 50 percent of young people—including those you know—who have been involved in a church or youth ministry will drift from God and the church after they graduate from high school.<sup>21</sup> So visualize the children and teenagers you care about most, and then imagine half of them leaving their faith behind in adulthood.

It's not just teenagers and young adults who are experiencing a spiritual decline. The proportion of US adults who describe themselves as Christians has dropped 12 percent in the past decade—down to 65 percent.

While that's disheartening, the data about young people is even more revealing. In those same surveys, only 49 percent of millennials, the youngest age group polled, described themselves as Christians, making them the least likely generation to do so.<sup>22</sup>

In a similar vein, the religious “Nones,” or those who describe themselves as atheist, agnostic, or nothing in particular, now stand at 26 percent, up from 17 percent in 2009.

These statistics are daunting, but we wanted to hear more from young people themselves. Though the twenty-seven high school students we interviewed for this study were all involved in church youth groups, the centrality of their faith was certainly up for question. Some were exploring faith in creative and thoughtful ways, while others seemed to keep God compartmentalized.

In one of these interviews, our team member Tyler Greenway asked a midwestern high schooler, “How would you say your faith has shaped your sense of identity?”

We are privileged to lead the Fuller Youth Institute (FYI) alongside Jake Mulder, Yulee Lee, and one of the finest teams in the country. Every day our dedicated staff brings research to life as we work together to fulfill our mission to equip diverse leaders and parents so faithful young people can change our world.

To find out more about our work, resources, and training opportunities, please visit [fulleryouthinstitute.org](http://fulleryouthinstitute.org) and subscribe to our email list today. There you'll also discover a host of resources accompanying this book.

There was a long pause before the student answered, “Not like a huge amount, but my faith like shapes part of who I am, I guess.”

Tyler nudged him to offer specifics. “In what ways do you think it has shaped you?”

“Maybe it has made me more respectful.”

Pressing in further, Tyler asked, “So how important would you say your faith is to you?”

“I would say it’s pretty important.”

Finally, Tyler offered, “So on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being not at all important and 5 being extremely important, how would you describe your faith?”

“Maybe like a 3. It’s a big part of my life, but it’s not my whole life, I guess.”

### *Will Adults Please Stop Giving Me Answers to Questions I’m Not Asking?*

Today’s teenagers can access almost any information. They can instantaneously receive scores of possible answers to just about any question—plus a list of new ones. But they’re also growing up in families and churches that shy away from some of their deepest questions about faith and meaning.

One of the reasons young people are drifting from faith is that churches aren’t focused on the questions they care about most. Instead, we’re pitching answers to questions that aren’t anywhere near their strike zone.

We’re too often stuck in questions that reflect what happened in the past.

Or we are missing what’s unfolding in the present.

And we are afraid of what’s to come in the future.

During a recent Fuller Youth Institute summit, the executive director from a national training organization shared about

one high school student who yearned, “I wish the church would stop giving me answers to questions I’m not asking.”

The specific questions that he and other teenagers most value might be unique to our time, but questions aren’t new to God. By one count of the four Gospels, Jesus was asked 183 questions.<sup>23</sup>

That’s remarkable, but what’s even more remarkable is that Jesus himself asked 307 questions.

The question isn’t whether faith is big enough to hold young people’s questions. We know it is. The question is whether we will take the time to hear and honor them.

### What’s More Toxic Than Tough Questions?

One of our most counterintuitive findings over the years has been the role of doubt in teenagers’ spiritual formation. In our research for *Sticky Faith*, 70 percent of former youth group students admitted to having significant questions about faith in high school.

Any temptation to panic can be calmed by this interesting research twist: those teenagers with doubts who felt the freedom and had the opportunity to express their questions actually showed *greater faith maturity*.<sup>24</sup>

Put more simply, it’s not doubt that is toxic to faith—it’s silence. Tough questions are most likely to sabotage faith when adults stifle them.

### The 3 Big Questions Driving the Rest

While many questions are on the minds of today’s teenagers, we’ve unearthed the three primary questions we believe undergird all the rest. These queries may not live right on the

As young people grapple with these deep internal questions, we see symptoms in their external attitudes and actions. No young person, let alone an entire generation, can be summarized with a few adjectives. Yet we've found these three descriptors helpful in understanding the teenagers around us. Maybe you'll likewise see that the teenagers in your life can often be

- *anxious* because of external stressors, which easily become internal pressure,
- *adaptive* as they adjust with creativity and agility to the new needs and opportunities they face, and
- *diverse* in their ethnicity, culture, socioeconomic status, gender identity, values, and worldview.

surface, but when we dig deep enough, we can trace their longings at the roots.

Almost every question young people are asking ultimately finds its genesis in these 3 big questions:

**Who am I?**

**Where do I fit?**

**What difference can I make?**

We've created shorthand phrasing to think about and explore these questions:

First, *identity*, which means *our view of ourselves*.

Then *belonging*, defined as *our connection with others*.

Finally, *purpose*, or *our contribution to the world*.

If it helps to see these organized in a table, the example below offers a start. We will continue to build on this table throughout the book.

Big Question	Focus	Description
Who am I?	Identity	Our view of ourselves
Where do I fit?	Belonging	Our connection with others
What difference can I make?	Purpose	Our contribution to the world

Throughout this book, you'll find images of three interlocking circles representing identity, belonging, and purpose. When we're focused on one of the three, that circle will be darker in the illustration. This is not only to orient you to where you are in the book but also to indicate that at any given time, one or another of the 3 big questions may take the lead in a young person's quest for answers. We've made the three circles overlapping because research with young people (others and our own) highlights that the three are interrelated and are best understood together.

