

A black and white photograph of a person wearing a dark hoodie, holding a smartphone in their hands. The person's face is obscured by the hood. The background is dark and textured.

ALMOST CHRISTIAN

WHAT THE FAITH
OF OUR TEENAGERS
IS TELLING THE
AMERICAN CHURCH

KENDA
CREASY
DEAN

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE AUTHORITATIVE COMMUNITY

1. It is a social institution that includes children and youth.
2. It treats children as ends in themselves.
3. It is warm and nurturing.
4. It establishes clear limits and expectations.
5. The core of its work is performed largely by nonspecialists.
6. It is multigenerational.
7. It has a long-term focus.
8. It reflects and transmits a shared understanding of what it means to be a good person.
9. It encourages spiritual and religious development.
10. It is philosophically oriented to the equal dignity of all persons and to the principle of love of neighbor.

Congregations are important sources of both interpersonal and spiritual support for highly devoted Christian teenagers. Peer relationships matter. Religious teenagers' closest friends tend to be other religious teenagers (nonreligious teenagers' closest friends are usually other nonreligious teenagers, suggesting that peers reinforce religious identity in both directions).²² Yet equally important are adults who befriend teenagers. Compared to their peers, young church-attenders are far more likely to have adults in their lives with whom they enjoy talking, and who give them lots of encouragement (79% versus 53% of nonattending teens).²³ Darla, a seventeen-year-old conservative Protestant from South Carolina praised her congregation's "range of age," commenting: "I know if I couldn't talk to my parents about something, I'm pretty comfortable with [other adults in the congregation]." In Indiana, fourteen-year-old Jenni, also a conservative Protestant, agreed: "Since I don't have any grandparents, [older people in our church] are kind of like [that]."

Highly devoted Christian teenagers mentioned pastoral friendships with special affection. While most teenagers in the NSYR (81%) told us they had never talked to a pastor or youth pastor about a personal issue or problem, most highly devoted teenagers did so frequently.²⁴ Teresa,