



BRIDGING THE CHURCH GAP

BETWEEN HIGH
SCHOOL **AND**
COLLEGE

AN INTERVIEW WITH CARL GULLEY



After 10 years as a youth pastor, Carl Gulley became college pastor at Antioch Community Church in Waco, Texas. With a college ministry of 600 — almost a quarter of the church — Carl has a unique perspective on how to successfully transition students out of high school and into an active faith in college and beyond.

Q: Youth pastors are getting ready to send out their seniors. As a college pastor, what do you wish youth pastors would do to prepare students before they come into your college ministry?

Spend time with Jesus every day. Value life-on-life discipleship relationships so that they go into college looking to receive and give that immediately. I wish they would give them a love for the local church and tell them that church hopping is not an option. If they are not going to an area where they have godly relationships, then they need to go to a church, walk straight up to the college pastor or leader of young people and say, "My name is _____ and I am here to serve you and I want to know what I can do because I am going to be a part of this fellowship and I want you to challenge me to go further in my walk with God." **The key is to put some ownership on these students as they go off to college.**

Q: The transition to college can be rough with large numbers of students leaving the Church after high school. How can youth pas-

tors encourage their students in the search for a new church home?

Finding a new church home is difficult. I have lots of compassion for students who struggle to find a new church in a new city. They are often looking for something that resembles their home church and that is often very difficult to find. **I would encourage them to find a place where they can be challenged by the weekly messages and find a small group to plug in to.** I would suggest that if after two months of searching they do not find the place they're looking for, they should just make a decision and plop down. Church hopping leads to not-church-going.

Q: What should youth pastors and parents encourage their students to look for in a new church at college?

They should be looking for a church that teaches people to love Jesus, a church that does discipleship and a church that lives missionally in its city and in the world.

Q: What are some good ways youth pastors can continue to support their former students throughout college?

When high school seniors are graduating, youth pastors need to put on a massive banquet/party for them. This needs to be a time to remember and to laugh, eat and pray over them. Someone needs to stand up and challenge these stu-

dents that they expect them to do what Jesus said, "to go and bear much fruit." They need to put identity on them and let them know that their door is always open for them to call, text, email or drop by as they go forward.

Q: Do you feel it's important for a youth pastor to remain connected to former students?

I think it's important for a youth pastor to keep his door open at all times to former students but I don't think it's necessary for a youth pastor to track down those students. **The youth pastor's goal is to create hunger for God within his students and then to teach them how to use that hunger.**

Q: Research shows parents are still the biggest influences in teens' spiritual formation. How can parents continue to spiritually guide their teens in a healthy way once they leave home?

Honestly, I would not let them go far if their spiritual base is not deep. If they are flirting with the edge while they are close to you, they will dive off the deep end once they are away. I would encourage parents who are in this situation to either send their student to a college town where they have relationships already set up that could be a spiritual base of accountability or encourage a one-year discipleship program to deepen their base before they head off to college (Antioch's Elevate, YWAM, etc.)

But once they are on the ground in college, parents cannot encourage their child enough. **Sending consistent encouraging texts or emails without a demand for a response will keep your child's heart soft to you during their time away.** Show up at big events during their college career (i.e., sports, awards banquets, talent shows, parents weekend, etc.) These are the kind of things students don't thank their parents for, because they assume their attendance is normal. If you miss those times, they will then realize how much they wanted you there and that could cause frustration if there isn't good communication along the way.

Another way parents can provide guidance is to stay close to their children's dating process. Obviously, I don't need to know every single time my child goes to a function with another person, but if my daughters were going to be pursued by someone towards a relationship, I would want the young man who is pursuing them to connect with me first. It brings honor to the father and accountability and blessing to the couple as they go forward. When my son goes off to college, I want to know if there are girls he is interested in as he pursues them in a godly and honoring way.

Q: Is there anything you see parents do that hurts their teen's spiritual walk as they begin college life?

Please don't misunderstand me here, because I believe that academics are obviously a huge part of a college student's life and if a parent is paying big bucks for a big education, students have an obligation to carry their end of the bargain by giving their class work 100 percent. That being said, **an over-emphasis on grades can absolutely drain out the juice in a relationship between a parent and a child.** If that's

what you're talking about in every conversation from home, your child will stop answering your phone calls and emails and will start to be crushed under the performance trap you're putting them in. Parents need to realize that college is a time where students are taking big risks and are trying things for the first time on their own. During this time, they'll take some hits. Criticizing them during this time can be very difficult. Obviously, if your child is hitting some moral ditches, they might need a swift kick in the pants. But when I see parents nagging, I see a strain on that child's relationship with their parents and often with God.

Q: What can churches in college towns do to help incoming students connect?

Every year around the middle of August, our church makes an all-out attempt to open the doors wide for incoming college students. When college students return to Waco, our first two to three services are dedicated to them. Our worship leader picks songs that they'll know, videos are run to introduce them to the college ministry as well as the opportunities we have to be involved and our sermons are picked to hit a college student right where they're at. We get very little push back from our church about this, because they know that the future of our church depends on the passion of young people who are involved. If you continue on with sermon #6 of your current series and do nothing to pull in students, don't wonder when they choose not to come back.

It is also pivotal during this time to have a special service for college students, either on Sunday evenings or on Wednesday nights, that focuses on issues like dating, purity, reaching their campus for Jesus, and can be

a platform to plug them into small-group communities that are make-or-break for college students.

Q: Looking back to your years as a youth pastor, is there anything you wish you would have known to tell seniors then that you know now as a college pastor?

Honestly, not really. I've always felt that teenagers should be given to small-group community and discipleship so it will keep going in college. We shouldn't be raising teenagers to just go to church on Sunday mornings and church camp in the summer. **Small groups and discipleship is the methodology Jesus used when walking with young people and should be ours as well.** If we are simply event-driven, we will miss the mark and often young people will miss the depth of what Christianity has to offer them during their college years.



Carl Gulley currently serves as college pastor at Antioch Community Church in Waco, Texas. He and his wife Blair are the proud parents of four kids. Carl, born and raised in Waco, spends most of his time discipling leaders and planning events for the college group (and the church as a whole).

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