

DEFINE THE RELATIONSHIP

*Growing a Parent Ministry that Brings
Families and Churches Together*



CHAD HIGGINS & ZAC WORKUN

WITH LIFEWAY RESEARCH

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CHAD HIGGINS

Chad Higgins resides in Stillwater, Oklahoma with his wife of sixteen years, Martha, and their daughter, Malia. With over two decades of ministry experience, Chad has served the church in Oklahoma as a youth pastor, small group pastor, and campus pastor. He is the co-founder of Youth Ministry Booster and now leads as the Senior Manager of Church Equipping at Lifeway. Chad is passionate about empowering healthy ministers to thrive in their calling and to strengthening the church for generations to come. When he's not equipping leaders, he enjoys savoring a good cup of coffee, hitting the golf course, or strategizing his next chess move.



ZAC WORKUN

Zac Workun serves as the Student Ministry Specialist for Lifeway Students and is the co-founder of Youth Ministry Booster, where he connects, equips, and encourages youth pastors around the country. He's a book-devouring, game-loving, car-camping, folk-music-strumming, black-coffee-drinking beard enthusiast who brings big energy and big laughs wherever he goes. Zac thrives on new adventures, especially if they involve breakfast food with his wife, Karen, and their two wild and wonderful boys, Isaiah and Gideon.

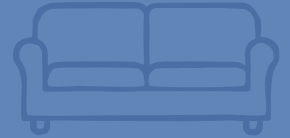


CHAD WOULD LIKE TO THANK . . .

my incredible wife, Martha. Thank you for your unwavering love, encouragement, and belief in me. Your patience and strength have been my constant source of inspiration. To my daughter, Malia: you bring such joy and meaning to my life. To my parents: your steadfast support and guidance have shaped me into who I am today.

ZAC WOULD LIKE TO THANK . . .

his middle-school dance partner Karen for hours of edits, years of support, and the willingness to make any weeknight a family dance party. He would also would like to thank his parents for the piano lessons, Sunday table debates, countless car ride conversations to church, and deep appreciation for church as community. Finally, Zac would like to thank his boys for giving this youth pastor a chance to learn how to father.





01

DIAGNOSE

CHAPTER 01

MIDDLE-SCHOOL DANCE

“Hey Chad! See you at the church!” Clayton’s voice carried through the air as he leaned from the passenger side window of his mom’s Honda Civic. This wasn’t an invitation to come meet Jesus; it was an invitation to an entirely different kind of gathering. I’ll explain what I mean soon. By the way, I’m Chad, and I’ll be one of your guides through this book.

I grew up in southwest Oklahoma, in a town with deep roots in the oil industry. Here, high-school football transcends sport, becoming a seasonal religion each fall. This religion has its fervent followers—dads screaming from the bleachers, moms adorned with oversized buttons featuring their children’s faces, and then there was us: the middle schoolers. Our participation at these games wasn’t fueled by enthusiasm for the sport; we were there for completely different reasons. The origin of our tradition is lost to time, but by the early 2000s, on any given Friday night in southwest Oklahoma, you’d find swarms of middle schoolers orbiting the football stadium, walking laps from the first quarter to the last. Girls in their finest Abercrombie attire, bathed in potent Bath and Body Works scents, and eighth-grade boys in their jerseys, sleeves hoisted up, puka-shell necklaces in place, exuding a scent all their own. Watching the game was the last thing on our minds. We moved from one group to another, weaving a tapestry of hormones around the stadium. Amid the energy of the games, many of us mustered up the courage to ask someone out, only to realize by the third quarter that not all relationships were meant to last. Nonetheless, we kept moving, our conversations as fluid and aimless as our footsteps, until we arrived at our ultimate destination: the middle-school dance.

My friend Clayton’s shout was a call to this very dance, held at the local church next door to our school after every home game. It was an event marked by two of my greatest loves at thirteen: girls and cheap pizza.



The dance would always start the same way: boys on one side, girls on the other, with a no-man's land in between. Nervous laughter and tentative glances filled the air between songs while I savored my third slice of dollar pizza. Both sides ached to dance, but the pain of past rejection and the sting of insecurity held us back. Who would be the first to cross the divide? Sometimes a hero emerged early; other times, we found ourselves glued to the wall all night. Looking back, two things were certain: we all wanted to dance, and that cheap pizza was undeniably delicious.

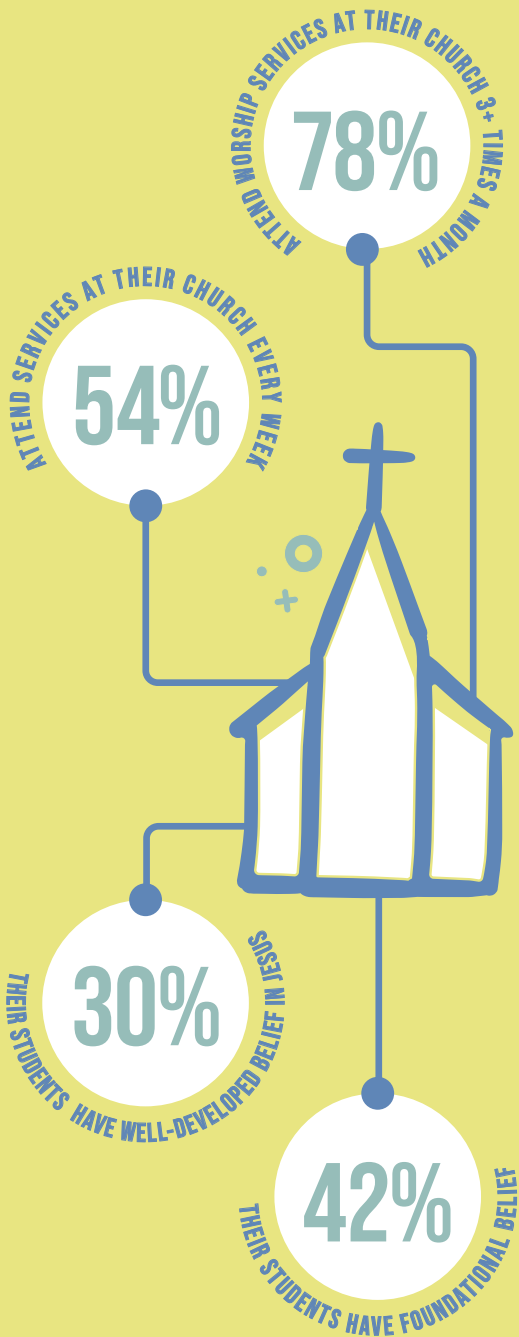
SIMPLY SENDING A FEW EMAILS OR HOSTING AN ANNUAL PARENT MEETING WON'T SUFFICE. A CLEAR STRATEGY AND VISION ARE ESSENTIAL FOR A SUCCESSFUL PARENT MINISTRY.

THE STANDOFF

I share this story because this standoff is similar to the tension between the parents of students and the partnership that we, as church leaders, want to have with them. We find ourselves caught in a familiar deadlock, hesitant to try either new *or* old strategies for fear they won't work. We preach about how important parents are as the primary spiritual guides for their students, yet we sense a disconnect in the way this is executed. Parents, in turn, grapple with their own doubts, feeling they aren't living up to the expectations set by church leaders, frustrated by the gap between their aspirations and their reality with their students. So we stand against the wall staring at each other, wanting to dance, just not sure how to or who will be brave enough to take the first step.

In this book, Zac and I aim to shed light on the findings from Lifeway Research, which surveyed over a thousand parents and church leaders to explore the potential of churches effectively partnering with parents. The comprehensive details of our study, including the demographic breakdown and all the intriguing sociological data, are laid out in the appendix.

Our goal is to offer a HOPE-ful strategy (more on this in chapter five) for developing and maintaining a robust parent ministry within your church. There is a much needed shift from programs to partnership.



The new game plan for youth ministry leaders must involve rethinking how Habits, Opportunities, Partnerships, and Expectations (HOPE) can weave together to create a strong, healthy relational web that supports student spiritual growth and sets students up for success. Simply sending a few emails or hosting an annual, sparsely attended parent meeting won't suffice. As you'll discover, a clear strategy and vision are essential for youth ministry effectiveness and success.

Let's begin by understanding who's in the room and who's truly eager to dance.

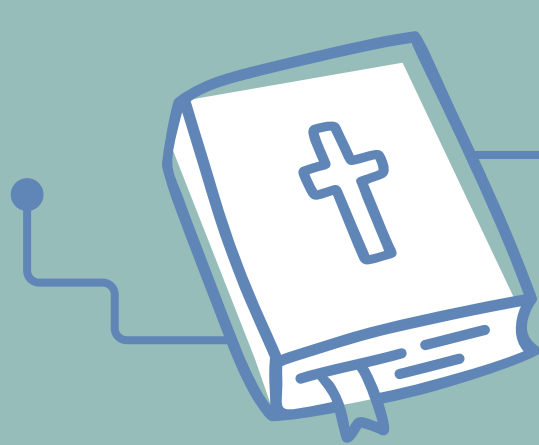
PARENTS

The online survey this research is built upon targeted 1,001 parents involved in student ministry. Participants were all Protestant or non-denominational Christians, attended religious services at least once in a typical month, and had at least one student in grades 6–12.

A key takeaway from this group is their higher-than-average church attendance. While 78% attended worship services three or more times a month, it's essential to note that these figures represent only the surveyed group, not a broader national trend. Among them, 54% reported attending services four or more times a month, highlighting their deep commitment.

Not only are these parents active in church, but their students also show a consistent belief in Jesus—a belief lived out in their daily lives. About 30% of church-going

69%
Church-going parents engaged in reading and studying the Bible several times a week



27%
Church-going parents reading the bible every day

parents said their students have a well-developed belief in Jesus that he or she consistently lives out, and 42% reported their students have a foundational belief that they often live out.

This level of engagement among students isn't surprising when you consider the spiritual habits of their parents. Our research found that 69% of the church-going parents surveyed engage in Bible reading and study a few times a week, with 27% diving into God's Word every day. This practice of parental devotion not only strengthens their faith but also sets a profound example for their students. It lays a solid groundwork for other faith-based practices at home, benefiting both parents and the students. The survey also revealed robust figures in relation to prayer, showing even higher engagement.

I can't help but think about the caring and thoughtful words written by Paul to Timothy: "I recall your sincere faith that first lived in your grandmother Lois and in your mother Eunice and now, I am convinced, is in you also" (2 Tim. 1:5). When parents demonstrate a high level of faithfulness to spiritual disciplines, their children often walk similar paths.

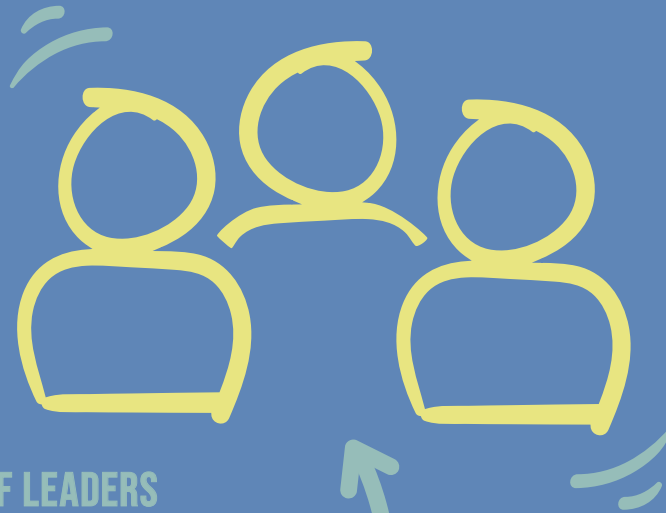
But we know that this is not always the case. In our churches, we have parents who have spiritually orphaned their children, and I know that this is where some of our levels of frustration can come from.

CHURCH SIZE DISTRIBUTION

- Under 100 attendees: **19%**
- 100-249 attendees: **33%**
- 250-499 attendees: **23%**
- 500+ attendees: **25%**

AGE RANGE OF LEADERS

- 18-29 years: **24%**
- 30-49 years: **62%**
- 50+ years: **14%**



REGIONAL REPRESENTATION

- Northeast: **2%**
- Midwest: **13%**
- South: **78%**
- West: **8%**

GENDER OF LEADERS

- Male: **83%**
- Female: **17%**

RACE OF LEADERS

- White: **90%**
- African-American: **2%**
- Hispanic: **4%**
- Other: **5%**

The group we studied included a vast array of student ministers, reflecting diverse student bodies and leadership styles. On average, here is what these student ministries look like:

- Number of Students Participating Weekly: **48**
- Adult Leaders Participating Weekly: **13**
- Parents Participating Weekly: **14**
- Students Attending Any Student Ministry Activity in the Last 3 Months: **83**

We see parents who drop their children off on a Wednesday night with an attitude of “Fix them!” as they drive off. But, brothers and sisters, we cannot allow a few parents to hold us back from doing what is right: partnering with these parents so that they would raise their children as Scripture would call them to. Because we have many parents looking for help from us.

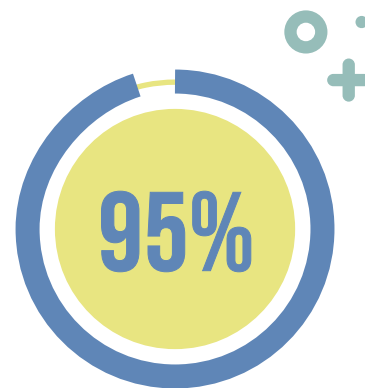
CHURCH LEADERS

On the opposite side of the proverbial dance floor stand we, the church leaders—the cool ones, the fun ones, the providers of plentiful, delicious, and often free pizza!

Our researchers surveyed 1,056 student ministry leaders. Although the data has been weighted to better represent student ministry leaders nationwide, the graphic on the left gives a preliminary look at this diverse group before applying these adjustments.

These figures might differ from your experience or context, and that’s understandable. Context is crucial in any ministry. As we explore parent ministry throughout this book, our hope is that your understanding of your unique congregation will deepen. At the end of each chapter, you’ll find questions intended to foster deeper connections within your ministry context.

Moving away from a “copy and paste” approach is essential, because although general principles may apply, ministry is ultimately about engaging with real people in specific contexts. Each community is unique, and God has placed you precisely where He wants you. This book, while grounded in extensive research, aims to prompt questions that lead to a deeper understanding of your ministry’s specific needs and challenges.



of student leaders want to become more equipped to help parents in their student’s spiritual development.



of church-going parents want to be more equipped to assist in their students’ spiritual growth.

LET'S DANCE

One thing is certain for both parents and church leaders: they wanted to dance. When asked, an overwhelming 95% of student leaders expressed a desire to become more equipped to help parents invest in their students' spiritual development. Similarly, 94% of church-going parents indicated a desire to be more equipped to assist in their students' spiritual growth. For those unfamiliar with research, these numbers are extraordinarily high!

As church leaders, we recognize the vital role that parents play in fulfilling God's mandate to lead students toward a fulfilling relationship with God. Perhaps you've tried strategies in the past that only a handful of parents adopted. Maybe you've even thought that parents don't care or aren't seeking ways to spiritually influence their children. You might doubt your own abilities or be unsure where to start.

Imagine this scene: It's Friday night in the gym. Parents on one side, church leaders on the other—both groups filled with a mix of fear and excitement about the potential connections. Who will break the ice?

Let me go back in time to my middle-school dance illustration. Thankfully for us, my friend Clayton already had a girlfriend, Rhyan. Earlier that year, the two of them had the all-important "define the relationship" talk. They came to the dance knowing who they were there for. This clarity not only eased their own nerves but also set a precedent for everyone else in the room. As they walked to the center of the gym, everyone else followed, each person feeling permission to take a risk.

Perhaps, as church leaders, it's time we stopped making assumptions about those on the other side of the room. Let's put aside our frustrations that sports or other activities seem more important and start talking again. We need to work together with parents and ask each other what we really need to succeed. Defining relationships is hard; it involves some risk, but it can make all the difference in truly partnering together. We must move beyond simply throwing resources at people and hoping they work. As parents, we need to stop just dropping our kids off at church and hoping for the best when they turn eighteen. Instead, let's listen to each other, ask the right questions, and learn to dance together.

Thank you, Clayton and Rhyan, for showing us how to dance in middle school. May the Lord continue to bless your marriage and wonderful children. Will you be Clayton and Rhyan at your church and break the ice? Will you walk across the dance floor and brave defining the relationship?

“

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DEFINING CONVERSATION: YOU AND YOURSELF

Well-defined relationships begin with honest conversations. The first conversation we want you, youth ministry leader, to have about ministering to parents is first with you, yourself. Grab your favorite cup of coffee and settle in with these questions. Let this be an honest check-in—not just for where your ministry is, but where it needs to go. Take your time. Be real. This is about clarity, not perfection.

01 **How well do I understand the unique challenges and spiritual needs of the parents in my congregation and context?** *(Reflect on the assumptions you've made about parents and whether you've engaged with them to truly understand their context.)*

02 **Do we currently offer clear and practical ways for parents to partner with us in their students' spiritual development?** *(Consider how effective your church's resources and strategies are in equipping parents to lead at home.)*

03 **How can we better bridge the gap between church leaders and parents?** *(Think about ways to break the "dance floor" standoff and move toward open conversations with parents.)*

04 How intentional are we in fostering a relational—not just programmatic—approach to parent ministry? *(Consider if your strategies focus more on offering programs or on truly building a partnership with parents.)*

05 How can we better equip parents to model spiritual habits like Bible reading and prayer, given their own struggles and limitations? *(Reflect on practical ways to help parents build these habits in their own lives so they can pass them on to their children.)*

06 What steps can we take to define the relationship between our church and parents, moving from frustration to fruitful partnership? *(Consider ways to redefine your approach to parent ministry so that both parents and leaders feel supported and engaged in the spiritual development of their children.)*