

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

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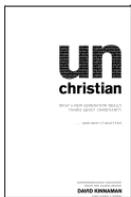
Concerns from young and old

In *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians Are Leaving Church ... and Re-thinking Faith* (Baker Books, 2011), author David Kinnaman explains why the church is losing many 16-to-29-year-olds. Kinnaman is president of The Barna Group, which does church-related research. In an earlier book, *unChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks About Christianity* (Baker Books, 2007), he and co-author Gabe Lyons reported Barna's findings about why young non-Christians—outsiders in relation to the church—reject the Christian faith. But *You Lost Me* is about young insiders—young adults who once thought of themselves as Christians but have left the church or even left the Christian faith.



Churches need a different response

When I read in these books about the church features that are keeping young generations away, I recognized one of those as a feature that also turns off many older churchgoers. It's that churches don't seem like safe or hospitable places to express doubts, ask questions, get reliable information, or have real dialogue. Many young adults feel, David Kinnaman finds, that the churches in which they were raised have offered them only dogmatic, unconvincing answers to their serious questions. These young adults want to work with others to find answers that are more credible.



So do many older churchgoers. They have not left the church in numbers as large as younger churchgoers, but many have left and others have become minimal, reluctant participants instead of the full and enthusiastic participants they previously were. To me, this means that churches need to change their way of responding to honest questions and to the desire for reliable information and real dialogue.

Lost by versions that misrepresent Christianity

Another author who writes about what is causing the church to lose young people and some older people is United Methodist pastor Roger Wolsey. Wolsey, a member of Generation X, sees a discouraging number of his peers who were raised in the church shifting away from Christianity to other religions or to no religion. And in his view, what often drives them off is not real Christianity but rather a misrepresentation of it.



He is concerned, as I am, about the need to present an understanding of Christianity that differs from conservative evangelicalism and fundamentalism. He sees these as the versions most prominently presented in the American news media, all but monopolizing the Christian faith yet misrepresenting it.

What's conservative and what's not?

In Roger Wolsey's view, conservative evangelicalism and fundamentalism have largely and mistakenly reduced sin to what happens in people's bedrooms. They seek to influence our political process with agendas that bolster our march toward wars and corporate imperialism. They shun the insights of contemporary science, and many show little concern for protecting our natural environment.



Wolsey's book *Kissing Fish: Christianity for People Who Don't Like Christianity* (XLibris, 2011) presents what he and others call progressive Christianity and consider a more faithful interpretation. His book, written in a conversational style that combines personal memoir with theology, is free from the Internet at www.progressivechristianitybook.com.

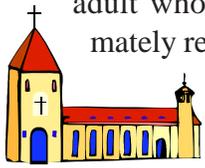
"In many ways," he says of progressive Christianity, "it's a reformation of the church to its earlier pre-modernist and pre-Constantinian roots." And ironically, he points out, this means that in reality, progressive Christianity is conservative and what goes by the name of "conservative Christianity" isn't.

Whatever generation you're part of, I think you'll find *Kissing Fish* entertaining and thought-provoking.

Pointing the finger at the establishment

David Kinnaman is especially struck by the fact that so many young adults describe their faith journeys in startlingly similar language. He emphasizes that every person goes on a unique journey related to his or her faith and spirituality, and that every story matters. Yet he sees patterns in what Barna interviewers have heard from hundreds of thousands of young adults. They feel that the institutional church has failed them.

“I hung in for a long while, thinking that fighting from within was the way to go,” says one young adult whom Kinnaman quotes, “but I ultimately realized that it was damaging my relationship with God and my relationship with myself and I felt no choice but to leave.”



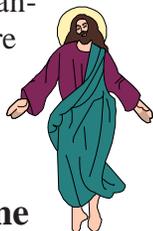
“It’s not just dropping out that [young adults] have in common,” Kinnaman emphasizes. “They point the finger, fairly or not, at the establishment: *you lost me.*” They see the church as having *caused* them to leave it.



Older churchgoers with similar feelings

Despite being a lot older than the Christians Kinnaman is writing about, I have some of the same feelings that he has found young adults describing, and I hear from many other longtime churchgoers who also have such feelings.

Here’s what I heard just last week from a pastor who throughout his life has taught many adult Sunday School classes and other adult church groups and still does that now, in his nineties. “I find many seniors—elders—who are *seekers*,” he wrote. “Progressives, asking questions, still hooked on Jesus, but wondering ‘Did the corpse get up and walk?’ ‘What *reality* does Christological language rest on?’ ‘In the Ascension, where did Jesus go? Up? What’s up there?’ ‘Pre-existing Christ? Gonna return when? Where?’ And so on and on.”



Discouraging many, losing some

Some of us have dared to ask such questions openly in our congregations. Some have risked expressing doubts and unorthodox views. Some have

tried to stir up real dialogue or have taken the initiative to get up-to-date information and to hear a wider range of views on our own, outside of our home congregations. Sometimes we get shocked looks in response. Occasionally we’ve even been shunned. But the overwhelming response from many congregations has been apathetic silence, rather than the appreciation and help that we’ve felt our efforts deserved. Such responses give us the impression that the church actually wants to keep people from learning, thinking, and maturing in faith.



Mosaics, Busters, Boomers, Elders

When a church discourages inquiry and dialogue, young adults quickly conclude that staying in it is pointless. Yet Kinnaman also finds other characteristics of their generation influencing their decision.

He writes mainly about the generation that he calls Mosaics and other writers call Millennials or Generation Y. Members of this generation were born from 1984 through 2002. He distinguishes the Mosaics from three older generations: Busters, born between 1965 and 1983 and often called Generation X; Boomers, the Baby Boom generation that followed World War II, born from 1946 through 1964; and Elders, born before 1946.



The Barna Group’s research shows that Busters and Mosaics share some characteristics. For both, friendships with peers are the driving force, and loyalty to friends has high value. Also, both groups want to discuss, debate, and question everything, and are therefore turned off by Christians’ unwillingness to engage in genuine dialogue.

An eclectic group

Kinnaman calls today’s youngest generation of adults Mosaics, he says, because a mosaic is made up of many different pieces and to him this reflects the eclectic relationships, thinking styles, and learning formats of these young adults. He observes that they feel disdain for the passive, one-sided communication they see as characteristic of churches and individual Christians. Mosaics also feel disconnected from what they see as the formulaic faith that the



church presents. To many Mosaics, its apologetics—the reasons it claims for its official beliefs—seem disconnected from the real world.



Research from The Barna Group has shown that the Mosaics see individual Christians and the church as hypocritical—saying one thing and doing another. They see us as having a morally superior attitude that our behavior doesn't justify. They see the church as too focused on getting converts, making outsiders feel like targets instead of people that Christians really care about. They see the church as antihomosexual for no valid reason, as sheltered and out of touch with reality, as too political (especially conservative Christians), and as too quick to



judge others. Many describe the church as boring. But the reaction of many Mosaics, The Barna Group has found, is simply indifference, “blowing us off.”

Living in a new reality

Feelings about the church, however, are far from the only cause of the big gap that exists between Mosaics and adults of older generations. The Mosaics, David Kinnaman emphasizes, are immersed in a new technological, social, and spiritual reality that is very different from where most older churchgoers see themselves living. Science, especially recent years' findings in physics and astronomy, is familiar ground for the Mosaics, but not for many adults who finished school in earlier years. In addition, Mosaics have regular contact with a much wider variety of people than older generations typically have or ever have had. Mosaics are likely to go to school every day with people of varied races, religions, sexual orientations, and family arrangements, or to work with a similar variety of



people. Their work and leisure travel are likely to take them outside the U.S. It's no wonder that to this generation, rejecting people because of such differences seems ridiculous, even cruel, and that working for social justice is very important.

Above all, digital technology is a huge part of Mosaics' life. Easy and immediate access to gigantic amounts of information and contacts with other people through digital technologies is a constant, taken-for-granted part of Mosaics' lives. And unlike older Christians, they want their information and conversation only in quick, short bits, not in articles, books, or speeches.



I was reminded of this by a recent TV interview of Nick D'Aloisio, the 17-year-old whose mobile-phone app (created when he was 15!) has been bought by Yahoo for just under thirty million dollars. “Do you ever read newspapers?” the interviewer asked. “No,” said D'Aloisio. “Magazines? Books?” “No.” “Watch television?” “No.” He got news only from digital media, he said, thus he got it mostly in two-sentence packages.

Time for change

Older Christians may see this way of getting information as having undesirable results, but merely criticizing it won't help. Kinnaman reminds us that young adults want to take action rather than to read or listen to “talking heads,” and they want to act in ways they can see as helping others or leading to visible change, so we need to offer more of that.

To older generations, Mosaics and Busters often seem irreverent, too candid, or even brazen, but they're making observations that we need to pay attention to. “The way we have been teaching [the Mosaics] to engage the world as disciples of Christ,”

This issue, many back issues, a list of books I've written about, and more *Connections* information are available free from my web site, www.connectionsonline.org. To get *Connections* monthly by e-mail, let me know at BCWendland@aol.com. Please include your name, city, and state or country. To start getting *Connections* monthly by U.S. Mail, send me your name, address, and \$5 for the coming year's issues. For paper copies of any of the 20 years' back issues, send me \$5 for each year or any 12 issues.



I'm a lay United Methodist and neither a church employee nor a clergyman's wife. *Connections* is a one-person ministry that I do on my own initiative, speaking only for myself. Many readers make monetary contributions but I pay most of the cost myself. *Connections* goes to several thousand people in all U.S. states and some other countries—laity and clergy in more than a dozen denominations, and some nonchurchgoers. *Connections* is my effort to stimulate fresh thought and new insight about topics I feel Christians need to consider and churches need to address.

Kinnaman observes, “is inadequate for the issues, concerns, and sensibilities of the world we ask them to change for God.”



In fact, much of what the church has presented and continues to present to people of all ages—not just to young adults—is being revealed as inadequate for today’s world. From our churches, too many of us have never even gotten the message that we’re called to change the world, much less gotten information about what specific aspects of it might need changing, or gotten support for our efforts to change it. Instead, from too many churches we’ve gotten only the doctrines that the Mosaics recognize as “formu-

laic faith,” based on long-outdated understandings of the universe and communicated in outdated words and styles. As a result, the church has lost not just most of the Mosaics but also many older Christians.

Change is therefore urgently needed now. It includes getting to know members of other generations personally, and hearing each others’ stories. And it includes openly addressing real questions and tough issues, not just pussyfooting around them.

“Whatever our age or spiritual state,” David Kinnaman warns, “we must all respond to our new and uncertain cultural context.”

Barbara

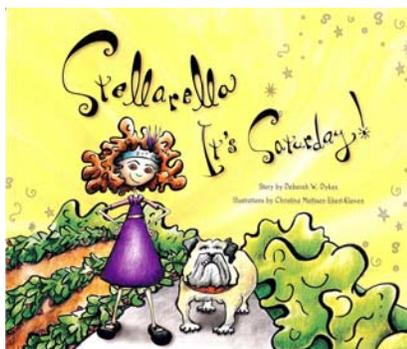


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Concerns from young and old

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If you have small children or grandchildren, here’s a book you might like to give them for the next birthday or for no particular occasion. It’s not only fun and beautiful but is also recommended by noted progressive Christian authors John Dominic Crossan and Joan Chittister.

Written by Deborah W. Dykes and illustrated by Christina Mattison Ebert-Klaven, *Stellarella! It’s Saturday!* presents the adventures of feisty, frizzy-headed, five-year-old Stellarella and her herculean bulldog pal Tank.

Crossan calls *Stellarella! It’s Saturday!* “a beautifully subtle and profoundly intuitive vision in which a young girl’s earliest imagination moves instinctively from a mother who runs the kitchen to a God who runs the world.”

For related fun activities online, for ordering information, and for news about the next Stellarella book, *Stellarella on the Seashore*, due this fall, see www.stellarellaandtank.com. You can also order from your favorite bookseller.

