Why Young Christians Leave the Church

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Sources for Research

Churches Seem Overprotective

- Their experience of Christianity feels stifling, fear-based and risk averse.
- 25% “Christians demonize everything outside of the church.”
- 22% “Church ignoring the problems of the real world.”
- 18% “My church is too concerned that movies, music, and video games are harmful.”
Teens and “twenty-somethings” experience of Christianity is shallow

• 31% “Church is boring.”
• 24% “Faith is not relevant to my career or interests.”
• 23% “The bible is not taught clearly or often enough.”
• 20% of those who attended church as a teenager said that “God seems missing from my experience of the church.”
Churches come across as antagonist to science

- 35% “Christians are too confident they know all the answers.”
- 29% “Churches are out of step with the scientific world we live in.”
- 25% “Christianity is anti-science.”
- 23% are “turned off by the creation-versus-evolution debate.”
- Research shows that many science-minded young Christians are struggling to find ways to be faithful to their beliefs and to their professional calling in science-related industries.
Young Christians’ church experiences related to sexuality are often simplistic, judgmental

- Teens and twenty-somethings are struggling with how to live meaningful lives in terms of sex and sexuality, particularly with how to live up to the church’s expectations of chastity and sexual purity in this culture with the age of marriage delayed to late 20s.
- Most young Christians are as active as their non-Christian peers.
- 17% “have made mistakes and feel judged in church because of them.”
- 40% of Catholic youth said the church’s “teachings on sexuality and birth control are out of date.”
The wrestle with the exclusive nature of Christianity

- Young Americans have been shaped by a culture that values open-mindedness, tolerance and acceptance.
- Today’s youth and young adults are the most eclectic generation in history in terms of race, ethnicity, sexuality, religion, technology tools, and sources of authority.
- Most want to find common ground even if it means glossing over real differences.
- 29% “churches are afraid of the beliefs of other faiths” and felt they are “forced to choose between my faith and my friends.”
- 22% “the church is like a country club, only for insiders.”
The church feels unfriendly to those who doubt

• Young adults do not feel safe admitting that sometimes Christianity does not make sense. Many feel that the church’s response to doubt is to trivialize it.
• 36% are not able “to ask my most pressing life questions in church.”
• 23% have “significant intellectual doubts about my faith.”
• 18% of those who feel marginalized said that their faith “does not help with depression or other emotional problems” they face.
Don’t be fooled by many who stay

- Many live dual lives.
- Adults have provided less social capital to kids over the past several decades.
- Youth carry a deep sense of isolation or aloneness whether they are aware of it or not.
- Kids today have a different moral code.
- Expectations for youth have gotten so restrictive that they are left with two choices: adapt or rebel. Many have learned how to look good in church.
- The church and even parents have resorted to discipleship and parenting methods that force behavioral compliance through the use of manipulation, coercion and shame.
Churches are not prepared to handle the new normal

• “Church leaders are most comfortable working with young, married adults, especially those with children. However, the world for young adults is changing in significant ways, such as their remarkable access to the world and worldviews via technology, their alienation from various institutions, and their skepticism toward external sources of authority, including Christianity and the Bible.” David Kinnaman
Dangerous responses of church leaders and parents

• One extreme is either to cater to or minimize the concerns of the next generation because they feel that the disconnection with end when young adults are older and have their own children. This response misses the changes that have occurred over the past 25 years and the significant challenges they are now facing.

• The opposite corrective action is using all possible means to make their congregation appeal to teens and young adults. This causes the church to ignore older believers and builds the church on the preferences of young people and not on the pursuit of God.
Recommendations

• “Cultivate intergenerational relationships so that the church will become a community of faith, across the entire lifespan, working together to fulfill God’s purposes.” Kinnaman

• Intentionally help them feel welcome. Get to know their names.

• Teach them about spirituality: that they are loved by God and Christians, and teach them to love God and people.

• Get young people involved in church including in leadership and decision-making positions.

• Get them involved in mission and evangelism.