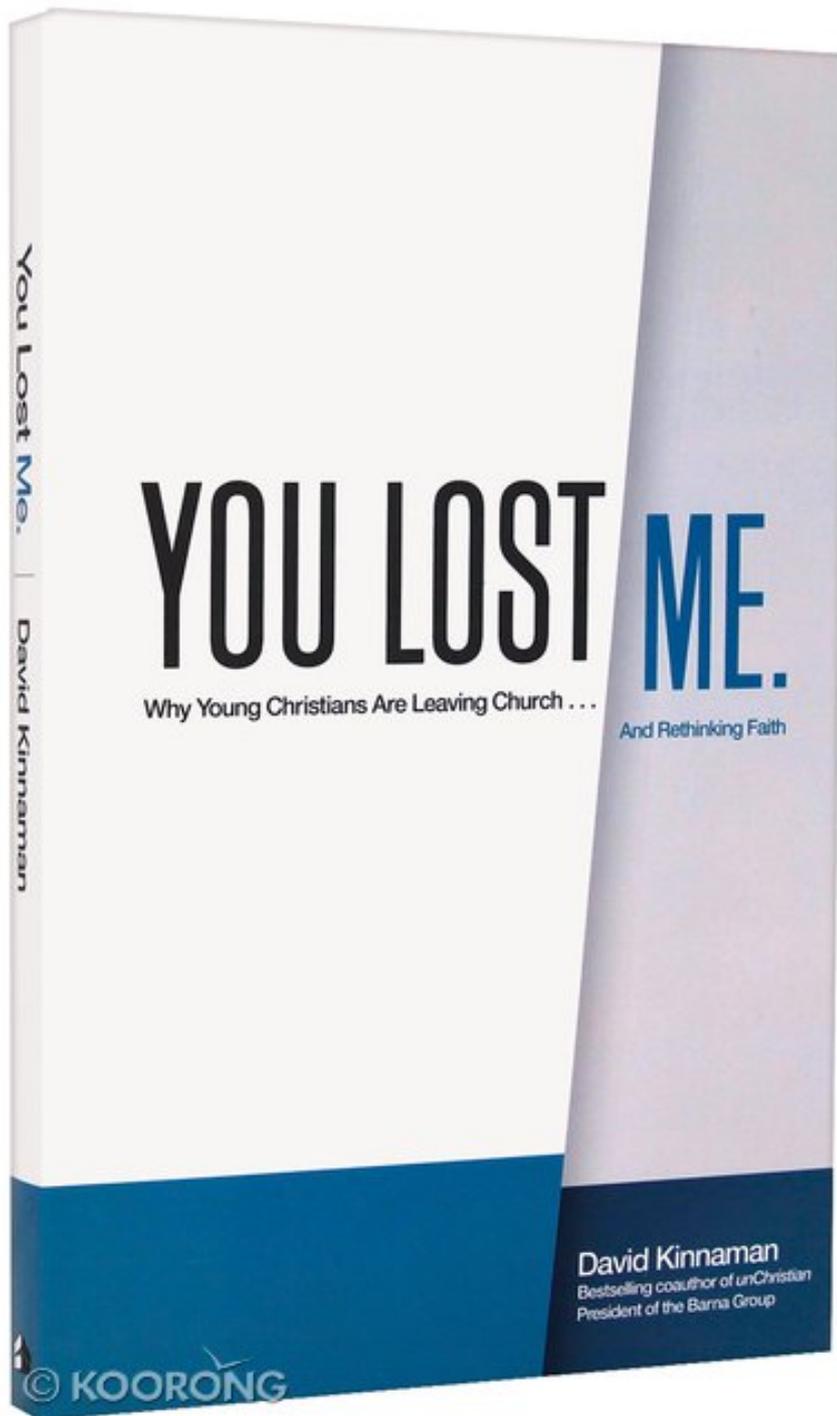


Dropping Out: Why Young People Leave the Church



20-Somethings Cite Many Reasons

for Disconnect

ROME, NOV. 25, 2011 (Zenit.org).- It's well-known that many young people stop being active Church-goers. A recent book examined extensive research carried out by the Barna Group to find out why so many drop out as they move into adulthood.

In "You Lost Me: Why Young Christians are Leaving the Church ... and Rethinking Faith," (Baker Books), David Kinnaman, along with Aly Hawkins, analyzed a wide range of statistical data.

As a preliminary, the book outlined three realities to keep in mind when looking at the situation of

young people.

1. Churches do have an active engagement with teens, but many of the young people do not grow up to be faithful adult followers of Christ.
2. There are a variety of reasons people drop out, so it is important not to generalize about an entire generation.
3. Churches are not adequately preparing the next generation to follow Christ in the context of a rapidly changing culture.

The problem, Kinnaman explained, is not that teens are any less active in church than in previous times. In fact, around four out of five teens in America will spend a part of their childhood or teen years going to a Christian congregation or parish. What happens is that this activity fades away during their 20s.

For both Catholics and Protestants the age group of those in their 20s is the least likely to say that they are committed to Christ, in spite of their previous religious experience.

An even greater problem is the disconnect with the church. Even more than a struggle with their faith in Christ, young people cease their institutional participation.

Different

An important factor influencing young people today is the cultural context in which they live. No other generation of Christians, he affirmed, has lived through so many profound and rapid cultural changes, Kinnaman argued.

During the last few decades there have been massive changes in the media, technology, sexuality and the economy. This has led to a much greater degree of complexity, fluidity and uncertainty in society.

Summing up these changes, Kinnaman used three concepts to describe them: access, alienation and authority.

Regarding access he pointed out that the emergence of the digital world has revolutionized the way in which young adults communicate with each other and obtain information. This has led to significant changes in the way in which the current generation relates, works and thinks.

This has a positive side, in that the Internet and digital tools have opened up immense opportunities to spread the Christian message. However, it also means there is more access to other cultural views and values and it invites people to question more their beliefs. There is also less emphasis on linear and logical thought.

Alienation, Kinnaman observed, means that many teens and young adults feel isolated from their families, communities and institutions. High levels of divorce and childbirth outside marriage mean many have grown up in non-traditional family structures.

Moreover, the transition to adulthood has stretched out, with marriage and parenthood being put off to a later age. Many churches do not have the pastoral solutions in place to effectively help those who are not following the traditional path to adulthood, according to Kinnaman.

In addition, many young adults today are skeptical about the institutions that in the past have shaped society. Grassroots networks and collaborative efforts are prized over hierarchical institutions.

This skepticism becomes then a distrust of authority, the third concept used by Kinnaman. A tendency to pluralism, and even holding conflicting ideas, takes precedence over acceptance of Scripture and moral norms.

A culture of questions can lead people to the truth, and tension between faith and culture can also have a positive outcome, but, Kinnaman noted, it requires new approaches by churches.

Disconnection

Kinnaman admitted that he expected to find one or two big reasons why young adults disconnect from their church. Instead, it turned out that there is a wide variety of frustrations that leads to people dropping out.

Some consider their church to be an obstacle to creativity and self-expression. Others become bored with superficial teachings and platitudes. A perceived incompatibility between faith and science leads others to drop out.

What some consider to be repressive rules, particularly regarding sexual morality, is another reason young people leave their church. The current cultural trends that emphasize tolerance and acceptance of other values and opinions clash with Christianity's claim to possess universal truths and is an obstacle to some.

Other young Christians say that their church does not allow them to express doubts and say that the church's response to the expression of doubts is not adequate.

Kinnaman also found that in many cases churches fail to instruct young people in a sufficiently profound manner. A shallow faith in teens and young adults leaves them with a list of vague beliefs and a disconnect between their faith and their daily lives. Consequently many young people consider Christianity as boring and irrelevant.

At the end of the book Kinnaman has some recommendations on how to stem the loss of so many young people. There needs to be a change in the way the older generations in churches relate to younger generations.

He also urged the rediscovery of the theological concept of vocation in order to encourage a deeper consideration by young people of what God is asking them to do with their lives.

Finally, we need to give wisdom priority over information. Wisdom, he explained, means the ability to relate rightly with God, to others, and to culture. Whatever the solutions might be, there is no doubting

the urgency of dealing with this vital issue.

Fr. John Flynn - Zenit