

YOU LOST ME

Why Young Christians Are Leaving Church . . . and Rethinking Faith

David Kinnaman

with Aly Hawkins



BakerBooks

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

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Published by Baker Books
a division of Baker Publishing Group
P.O. Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287
www.bakerbooks.com

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Kinnaman, David, 1973–

You lost me : why young Christians are leaving church, and rethinking faith /
David Kinnaman with Aly Hawkins.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-0-8010-1314-0 (cloth) — ISBN 978-0-8010-1408-6 (international
trade paper)

1. Christian youth—United States—Attitudes. 2. Ex-church members—United
States—Attitudes. 3. Religious institutions—United States—Public opinion.
4. Christianity—United States—Public opinion. 5. Public opinion—United States.
I. Hawkins, Aly. II. Title.

BV4531.3.K57 2011

277.3'0830842—dc23

2011022322

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To protect the privacy and confidentiality of those who have shared their stories with the author, some details and names have been changed.

11 12 13 14 15 16 17 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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To the previous generation

Donald Kinnaman (1921–1997) Esther Kinnaman (1925–2008)
Walter Rope (1917–1999) Irene Rope (1921–1991)

and to the next

Emily Kinnaman (1999) Annika Kinnaman (2001)
Zachary Kinnaman (2004)
Grant Culver (2003) Lauren Culver (2005)
Kaitlyn Culver (2007) Luke Culver (2009)
Baby Kinnaman (2011)
Grace Kinnaman (2009) Isaac Kinnaman (2011)
Ellie Kinnaman (2010)
Sydnee Michael (2010)
Josh Rope (1995) Abi Rope (1997) Sarah Rope (1999)

Psalm 100:5

For the LORD is good and his love endures forever;
his faithfulness continues through all generations.

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YOU LOST ME, EXPLAINED

It feels as if they are reading from a script.

Young adults describe their individual faith journeys in startlingly similar language. Most of their stories include significant disengagement from church—and sometimes from Christianity altogether. But it's not just dropping out that they have in common. Many young people who grew up in church and have since dropped out do not hesitate to place blame. They point the finger, fairly or not, at the establishment: *you lost me*.

Anna and Chris are two such young people. I met them on a recent trip to Minneapolis. Anna is a former Lutheran, now an agnostic. After years of feeling disconnected, she was pushed away, finally, by the “fire and brimstone” sermon the pastor preached at her wedding ceremony. Chris is a former Catholic who became an atheist for several years, in part because of how the church handled his parents’ divorce.

I met Graham on another business trip. A natural-born leader, he was attending a program for Christian students. Yet he confessed, “I’m not sure I really believe all this stuff anymore. When I pray I feel like I’m just talking to thin air.”

As I was finishing the final edits on this book, I ran into Liz, a twenty-something from my home church in Ventura, California. When she was in high school, I had been an adult volunteer in the youth group.

She said that, despite her upbringing in church and attendance at a Christian college, she had been struggling with feelings of isolation and judgment from her Christian peers. She had met a family from another religious faith and was impressed by them. “A few weeks ago I decided to convert and join them.”

Each story is unique, yet they have much in common with the unique stories of thousands of other young adults. The details differ, but the theme of disengagement pops up again and again, often accompanied by a sense that the decision to disconnect was out of their hands. A colleague of mine forwarded an article about Catholicism’s loss of so many young people. Among the online comments, these two stood out:

I wonder what percentage of . . . “Lost” Catholics feel like I do, that we did not leave the Church, but rather, the Church left us.

I hung in for a long while, thinking that fighting from within was the way to go, 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.¹

The familiar themes that emerge from such stories do not make them any easier for parents and church leaders, who have poured much effort and prayer into young lives, to hear. In fact parents’ descriptions of the you-lost-me phenomenon are also eerily similar. An earnest mom, Pam, stopped me after a conference. Her question: what should she do about her engineering-student son, who after being a committed Christ-follower for many years was now having significant doubts about the relevance and rationale of Christianity?

I had lunch with another Christian parent who was at the point of tears because his nineteen-year-old son had announced that he did not want anything to do with his parents’ faith. “David, I can’t explain the loss we feel about him. I am hopeful that he will return to faith because I see how good and generous he is. But it’s so difficult for his mother and me. And I can barely stand the way his negative choices are affecting our younger kids. It’s all I can do not to ask him to leave our home.”

THE STRUGGLES OF YOUNG CHRISTIANS

If you read my previous book, *unChristian*, written with Gabe Lyons, you may wonder where this new project fits with that research. *unChristian* looks at the reasons young non-Christians reject the Christian faith and explores the changing reputation of Christians, especially evangelicals, in our society. That book focuses on the perceptions and priorities of young non-Christians, or *outsiders*, as we called them.

You Lost Me, on the other hand, is about young *insiders*. At its heart are the irreverent, blunt, and often painful personal stories of young Christians—or young adults who once thought of themselves as Christians—who have left the church and sometimes the faith. The book’s title is inspired by their voice and mindset, and reflects their disdain for one-sided communication, disconnect from formulaic faith, and discomfort with apologetics that seem disconnected from the real world. *You Lost Me* is about their perceptions of churches, Christianity, and culture. It gives voice to their concerns, hopes, delusions, frustrations, and disappointments.

A generation of young Christians believes that the churches in which they were raised are not safe and hospitable places to express doubts. Many feel that they have been offered slick or half-baked answers to their thorny, honest questions, and they are rejecting the “talking heads” and “talking points” they see among the older generations. *You Lost Me* signals their judgment that the institutional church has failed them.

Whether or not that conclusion is fair, it *is* true that the Christian community does not well understand the new and not-so-new concerns, struggles, and mindsets of young dropouts, and I hope that *You Lost Me* will help to bridge this gap. Because of my age (thirty-seven) and my position as a researcher, I am often asked to explain young people to older generations and advocate for their concerns. I welcome the task because, whatever their shortcomings, I believe in the next generation. I think they are important, and not just because of the cliché “young people are the leaders of tomorrow.”

The story—the great struggle—of this emerging generation is learning how to live faithfully in a new context, to be in the world but not of the world. This phrase, “in but not of the world,” comes from Jesus’s prayer

for his followers, recorded in John 17. For the next generation, the lines between right and wrong, between truth and error, between Christian influence and cultural accommodation are increasingly blurred. While these are certainly challenges for every generation, this cultural moment is at once a singular opportunity and a unique threat to the spiritual formation of tomorrow's church. Many young adults are living out the tension of *in-but-not-of* in ways that ought to be corrected or applauded, yet instead are often criticized or rejected.

In the vibrant and volatile story of the next generation, a new spiritual narrative is bubbling up. Through the lens of this project, I have come to understand and agree with some, though not all, of their grievances. Yes, we should be concerned about some of the attitudes and behaviors we encounter in the next generation of Christians, yet I also find reasons to hope in the best of what they have to offer. Apparently they are a generation prepared to be not merely hearers of doctrine but doers of faith; they want to put their faith into action, not just to talk. Yes, many young dropouts are stalled in their spiritual pursuits, yet a significant number of them are reinvigorating their faith with new ideas and new energy.

From this generation, so intent on reimagining faith and practice, I believe the established church can learn new patterns of faithfulness. *You Lost Me* seeks to explain the next generation's cultural context and examine the question *How can we follow Jesus—and help young people faithfully follow Jesus—in a dramatically changing culture?*

A NEW MINDSET

This is a question every modern generation of believers must answer. I believe that, within the stories of young people wrestling with faith, the church as a whole can find fresh and revitalizing answers. Let's call it "reverse mentoring," because we, the established Christian generation, have a lot to learn from the emerging generation.²

We are at a critical point in the life of the North American church; the Christian community must rethink our efforts to make disciples. Many of the assumptions on which we have built our work with young

people are rooted in modern, mechanistic, and mass production paradigms. Some (though not all) ministries have taken cues from the assembly line, doing everything possible to streamline the manufacture of shiny new Jesus-followers, fresh from the factory floor. But disciples cannot be mass-produced.³ Disciples are handmade, one relationship at a time.

We need new architects to design interconnected approaches to faith transference. We need new ecosystems of spiritual and vocational apprenticeship that can support deeper relationships and more vibrant faith formation. We need to recognize the generational shifts from left-brain skills like logic, analysis, and structure to the right-brain aptitudes of creativity, synthesis, and empathy. We need to renew our catechisms and confirmations—not because we need new theology, but because their current forms too rarely produce young people of deep, abiding faith. We need to rethink our assumptions and we need the creativity, honesty, and vitality of the next generation to help us.

As we begin, recognize that we have both individual responsibility and institutional opportunity. Our interpersonal relationships matter. We need to allow the Holy Spirit to guide our parenting, our mentoring, and our friendships. Yet the next generation's faith cannot be addressed simply through better relationships. Institutions such as media, education, church, government, and others significantly influence the faith journeys of the next generation. Implication: we have to reexamine the substance of our relationships and the shape of our institutions.

Do you sense, as I do, that we are at a critical point for the substance and shape of the Christian community in the West? In Eric Metaxas's biography of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, he vividly describes the leadership and clarity the German pastor demonstrated in understanding the evils of the spirit of his age (the Nazis) and the tragic capitulation of the church to culture. Metaxas writes this about the toxic cultural atmosphere of Germany at that time: "The First War and the subsequent depression and turmoil had brought about a crisis in which the younger generation, especially, had lost all confidence in traditional authority and the church. The German notion of the Führer arose out of this generation and its search for meaning and guidance out of its troubles."⁴

Our research at Barna Group leads me to believe that the next generation of Christians has a similar crisis of confidence in institutions, including government, the workplace, education, and marriage, as well as the church. I am not saying that our times are ripe for the rise of a new führer—God forbid—but I do want to suggest that our cultural moment demands *of us* Bonhoeffer-like clarity and leadership. Where institutions failed the next generation, he stepped in as a mentor, confidant, and friend. Where culture demanded mindless conformity in exchange for a sense of belonging, he created deep, kingdom-centered, alternative community. Where the church accommodated Nazism's ungodly beliefs and practices, he spoke sternly and prophetically to its leaders and adherents, challenging them to repent and reform.

In coming chapters, we will explore the seismic shifts in our culture. We'll hear directly from young dropouts and situate their personal stories against the backdrop of profound cultural change, so that we can better understand their shifting worldview. If we begin to grasp their assumptions, values, and allegiances, I believe we will catch a fresh vision, as Bonhoeffer did, for how the Christian community can obey Jesus's command to make disciples in this and future generations.

Let me offer my thanks to the thousands of young Mosaics who shared their experiences for this project. (See p. 246 for generational definitions such as "Mosaic," "Buster," "Boomer," and so on.) If you are a young adult, perhaps you will see something like your story reflected in these pages. I hope this book provides you with a sense that you are not alone, that there are many Christians who are eager to listen to and reengage with you in the grand, yet often challenging, Way of following Jesus. I would like to think God could use this book to help you find your path back to Christ and his church.

If you are a parent, grandparent, educator, pastor, or young Christian leader, my goal for this book is that it serve as a resource, helping you consider how to transfer faith from one generation to the next. In addition to young people's views, *You Lost Me* includes contributions from experts and influencers of older generations. Given this multitude of viewpoints, I can almost guarantee that some of what we will discover together will make you feel threatened, overwhelmed, and perhaps even a little guilty. My aim is to provoke new thinking and new action in the

critical process of the spiritual development of the next generation. As a faith community, we need a whole new mind to see that the way we develop young people's faith—the way we have been teaching them to engage the world as disciples of Christ—is inadequate for the issues, concerns, and sensibilities of the world we ask them to change for God. Whether we come from a Catholic, evangelical, mainline, or Orthodox tradition, we need to help the next generation of Christ-followers deal well with cultural accommodation; we need to help them live *in-but-not-of* lives. And in the process, we will all be better prepared to serve Christ in a shifting cultural landscape.

But first, we need to understand the dropout problem.

For a summary of the Barna data presented in this book and discussion questions for each chapter, visit www.youlostmebook.org.

Part 1



DROPOUTS

FAITH, INTERRUPTED

Millions of young adults leave active involvement in church as they exit their teen years. Some never return, while others live indefinitely at the margins of the faith community, attempting to define their own spirituality. Some return to robust engagement with an established church, while some remain faithful through the transition from adolescence to adulthood and beyond.

In this chapter I want to accomplish two things: define the dropout problem and interpret its urgency. A clear understanding of the dropout phenomenon will set the stage for our exploration of young adults' faith journeys. *Does a dropout problem exist? If so, for what reasons do so many spiritually active teenagers put their faith—or at least their connection to a church—on the shelf as they reach adulthood? Why do young people raised in “good Christian homes” wander as young adults?*

In chapter 2 we'll address the second set of big questions: *Is this generation's dropout problem the same as that of previous generations? What is so different about Mosaic (what some call Millennial) dropouts? Is the culture really changing all that much for the emerging generation?*

Let me start by describing my job.

LOOKING FOR CLUES

Being a researcher means being one part listener and one part sleuth. The nearly thirty thousand interviews we conduct each year at Barna Group give our team ample opportunity to hear what is happening in people's lives. Our listening done, we then put on our sleuthing hats and piece together the trends that shape our collective lives and faith communities.

A big piece of the dropout puzzle fell into place for me back in 2003. One blustery autumn day while visiting Grand Rapids, Michigan, I wrote an article based on our findings that twentysomethings were struggling to find their place in Christian churches. When we released the piece online, it generated significant readership within just a few days. The article even sparked an *ABC News* segment featuring our research as well as an interview with Tim Keller, pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church, highlighting his efforts to communicate Christianity to young people in Manhattan.

A few years later, in 2007, Gabe Lyons and I released a book called *unChristian*, which explores how young *non-Christians* perceive Christianity. In addition to realizing the extraordinarily negative views of the Christian faith that young outsiders held, I was shocked that the data also revealed the frustrations of young Christians. Millions of young *Christians* were also describing Christianity as hypocritical, judgmental, too political, and out of touch with reality.

Those testimonies demanded further attention, so we focused our team on getting to know the next generation of Christians. We wanted to understand why they leave church. We wanted to hear about their difficulty with letting Christianity take long-term root. We wanted to discover how and why they are rethinking faith and whether this process is similar to or different from that of previous generations. We also wanted to identify areas of hope, growth, and spiritual vitality in the church's work with young adults.

Over the last four years, we have done all of the above. Our team at Barna Group has pored over hundreds of generational studies and related books, consulted experts and academics, and probed the perspectives of parents and pastors. We have compiled and analyzed the Barna

Group database of hundreds of thousands of interviews, conducted over a twenty-seven-year span, to understand the generational dynamics of faith formation. We have completed eight new scientific national studies, including nearly five thousand new interviews for this project alone. Our research has been tailored to understand eighteen- to twenty-nine-year-olds, asking them to describe their experience of church and faith, what has pushed them away, and what connective tissue remains between them and Christianity.

Based on all this, I invite you to meet the next generation. As we get to know them together, there are three realities we need to keep in mind:

1. Teen church engagement remains robust, but many of the enthusiastic teens so common in North American churches are not growing up to be faithful young adult disciples of Christ.
2. There are different kinds of dropouts, as well as faithful young adults who never drop out at all. We need to take care not to lump an entire generation together, because every story of disconnection requires a personal, tailor-made response.
3. The dropout problem is, at its core, a faith-development problem; to use religious language, it's a *disciple-making problem*. The church is not adequately preparing the next generation to follow Christ faithfully in a rapidly changing culture.

Let's explore these realities more deeply.

From Passionate Teens to MIA Twentysomethings

At a recent student conference in Florida, I was speaking to a large group of eighteen- to twenty-five-year-old Christians. I began my talk with a simple question: "How many of you personally know someone who has dropped out of the Christian community?" Every single person in the room raised a hand.

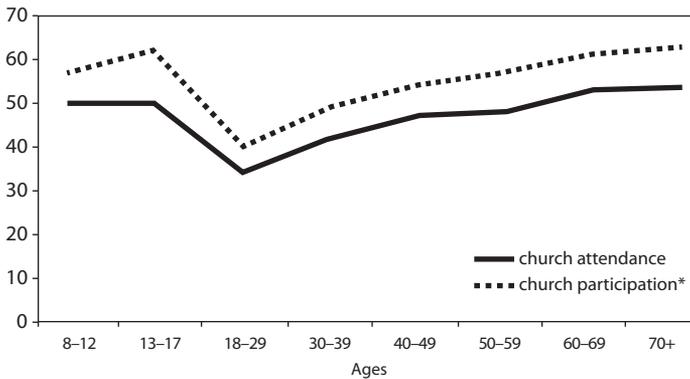
The dropout problem touches countless students, parents, and faith leaders, but many of these have only a vague grasp of what, exactly, the dropout phenomenon *is*. The first step in the discovery process is to understand two simple facts:

1. Teenagers are some of the most religiously active Americans.
2. American twentysomethings are the least religiously active.

The ages eighteen to twenty-nine are the black hole of church attendance; this age segment is “missing in action” from most congregations. As shown in the chart, the percentage of church attenders bottoms out during the beginning of adulthood. Overall, there is a 43 percent drop-off between the teen and early adult years in terms of church engagement. These numbers represent about eight million twentysomethings who were active churchgoers as teenagers but who will no longer be particularly engaged in a church by their thirtieth birthday.

The Dropout Problem

percent of Americans of each age who report monthly churchgoing and church participation



*Includes church worship service, youth group, small group, or Sunday school

Source: Barna Group, nationwide studies, conducted from 1997–2010, N = 52,496

The problem is not that this generation has been less churched than children and teens before them; the problem is that much spiritual energy fades away during a crucial decade of life—the twenties. Think of it: more than four out of five Americans under the age of eighteen will spend at least a part of their childhood, tween, or teenage years attending a Christian congregation or parish. More than eight out of every ten adults remember attending Sunday school or some other religious training consistently

before the age of twelve, though their participation during the teen years was less frequent. About seven out of ten Americans recall going to Sunday school or other religious programs for teens at least once a month.¹

In survey after survey, the majority of Americans describe themselves as Christians. Where—and *when*—do you think this allegiance begins? Early in life, before adulthood. Adults identify as Christians typically because they had formative experiences as a child or as a teenager that connected them to Christianity.

But that connection is often shallow and on the surface, having more to do with cultural identification than it does with deep faith. And our research shows that Mosaics do not share the cultural identification of previous generations.

In one of Barna Group's most recent studies, conducted in early 2011, we asked a nationwide random sample of young adults with a Christian background to describe their journey of faith. The interview population was made up of individuals who attended a Protestant or Catholic church or who identified at any time as a Christian before the age of eighteen. This included young people who were *currently* churched and those who were unchurched, as well as those who called themselves Christians and some who once did but no longer did so.

The research confirmed what we had already been piecing together from other data: 59 percent of young people with a Christian background report that they had or have “dropped out of attending church, after going regularly.” A majority (57 percent) say they are less active in church today compared to when they were age fifteen. Nearly two-fifths (38 percent) say they have gone through a period when they significantly doubted their faith. Another one-third (32 percent) describe a period when they felt like rejecting their parents' faith.

Many of the perceptions of young Catholics are similar to those of young Protestants, yet we also learned that Catholics struggle with particular aspects of their faith: One-fifth (21 percent) say, “the clergy abuse scandals have made me question my faith.” One-eighth (13 percent) of young Catholics say they “had a mostly negative experience in a Catholic school.” Two out of every five (40 percent) say, “the Catholic church's teachings on sexuality and birth control are out of date,” while one-quarter of young Catholics (28 percent) say, “it bothers me that the

church does not ordain women as priests.” When it comes to perceptions of their parish and the Mass, one-third (34 percent) indicate that “Mass is supposed to be meaningful but it feels like a boring obligation,” and one-fifth (22 percent) say that “older people seem more important than younger people in my parish.”

When it comes to young Catholics’ and Protestants’ perspectives about Jesus Christ, twentysomethings are the age group least likely to say they are personally committed to Christ. While they have generally favorable views of Jesus, they also harbor significant doubts about the central figure of Christianity. Young adults are more likely than any other age group to believe that Jesus sinned, to doubt the miracles Jesus performed, and to express skepticism about his resurrection. Despite their previous religious experiences, twentysomethings are the least likely to say they are confident that Jesus Christ speaks to them in a way that is personal and relevant to their circumstances.

In Their Own Words

***How Young People Describe Their Spiritual Journeys—
Away from Church and Faith***

Americans with a Christian background, ages 18–29*

	All Christians	Protestants	Catholics
Perceptions of Church and Faith			
Ever dropped out of attending church, after going regularly	59%	61%	56%
Ever personally been significantly frustrated about your faith	50%	51%	49%
Compared to age 15, less spiritual today	29%	31%	29%
Compared to age 15, less active in church today	57%	58%	65%
Went through period when you significantly doubted your faith	38%	41%	33%
Went through period when you felt like rejecting your parents' faith	32%	35%	25%

* Describe themselves as having attended a Christian or Catholic church or identifying as a Christian at one point in their life.

Barna Group | 2011 | N=1,296

The conclusion: after significant exposure to Christianity as teenagers and children, many young adults, whether raised Catholic or Protestant, are MIA from the pews and from active commitment to Christ during their twenties. Even where individual churches and parishes are effectively reaching young people, the number of twentysomething attenders is a mere drop in the bucket, considering the number of young people who reside in their local community. And for every congregation that is attracting a healthy proportion of Mosaic attenders, many more churches are struggling with how to connect to and remain relevant in the lives of young adults.

Every Story Matters

One of the things we learned from this research is that there is more than one way to drop out and more than one way to stay faithful. Every person goes on a unique journey related to his or her faith and spirituality, and *every story matters*. The reasons young people drop out, as similar to each other as they may seem, are very real and very personal to those who experience them. We in the Christian community need to bear this in mind.

At the same time, as much as every story is different and worthy of serious attention and care, there are patterns in the data that can help us make sense of the dropout problem. We discovered in our research that there are three broad ways of being lost:

- *Nomads* walk away from church engagement but still consider themselves Christians.
- *Prodigals* lose their faith, describing themselves as “no longer Christian.”
- *Exiles* are still invested in their Christian faith but feel stuck (or lost) between culture and the church.

Kelly is an example of a nomad. She grew up in an evangelical Protestant church. Her father, Jack, has worked for Christian organizations during Kelly’s entire life and regularly teaches Sunday school. Both her parents are committed churchgoers. Kelly describes struggling with an

anxiety disorder and never feeling that she fit in at church. “The first strike against the church was the youth group, where I didn’t fit in and no effort was made to help me. The second strike was in college when the campus ministry I attended started talking about their quotas for getting people saved. The third strike was the judgment my parents received from their church friends about me. They told my parents that they did a bad job raising me.” Despite these negative experiences, Kelly fits the profile of a nomad because she prays and reads her Bible often. She told me, “I never lost faith in Christ but I have lost faith in the church.”

Mike typifies a prodigal, an ex-Christian. He grew up in the Catholic church, but his love for science and his razor-sharp wit—which was sometimes perceived as disrespect—regularly put him at odds with the parish leaders. After a period of searching and wrestling with his faith, he says, “I just stopped believing in those Christian stories.” Time will tell if Mike will return to faith later in life. But usually the attitudes of prodigals seem closed to such outcomes.

Nathan, the lead singer of a successful band, exemplifies an exile. Nathan’s parents were, like Kelly’s, fixtures in an evangelical church during his childhood years. Then his parents split up. “I was really volatile toward church and faith for a long time, but way more so toward church than faith.” In an interview with *Relevant* magazine, this young musician described his “enormous cynicism toward all things institutional Christianity.” He and his bandmates were “all really embarrassed by and ashamed of a lot of the [Christian] subculture we came from, but not necessarily ashamed or embarrassed by the beliefs we had.” Nathan’s faith is still intact and was largely saved by his association with other young artists who were honest about their struggles and willing to help each other heal. The magazine describes Nathan and his band as “asking questions and resisting some aspects of their own conservative upbringings—yet still searching for something more from their faith.”²

Nathan, Mike, and Kelly represent three types of *you-lost-me* journeys. In chapters 3 (Nomads and Prodigals) and 4 (Exiles), we will delve into the research about these three groups, but there are three observations I want to make here at the beginning. First, a review. The faith journeys of the next generation are not monochromatic or one-size-fits-all. *Every*

story matters. And every *type* of story matters. Perhaps you see someone you know, or even yourself, in these three broad patterns.

Second, the majority of young dropouts are not walking away from faith, they are putting involvement in church on hold. In fact, as heart-rending as loss-of-faith stories are, prodigals are the rarest of the dropouts; most are either nomads or exiles—those who are dropping out of conventional forms of Christian community, not rejecting Christianity entirely. In other words, though I believe these issues are interconnected, *most young Christians are struggling less with their faith in Christ than with their experience of church.*

Third, there is a countertrend in the you-lost-me data—young Christ-followers who are passionate, committed, and bursting to engage the world for the sake of the gospel. (Some of these young believers have stayed deeply connected to a local parish or congregation, while others are better described as exiles.) We found, for instance, that two out of five (42 percent) eighteen- to twenty-nine-year-old Christians say they are “very concerned about my generation leaving the church.” A similar proportion (41 percent) describe their desire for “a more traditional faith, rather than a hip version of Christianity.” And three out of every ten (30 percent) young Christians say they are “more excited about church than at any time in my life.”

I am encouraged by new expressions of worship and community, such as the Passion worship movement and Hillsong United, and the emphasis among some leaders to raise the theological and practical expectations of young people. Josh and Alex Harris, teenage twin brothers who wrote the book *Do Hard Things*, are an example of this countertrend, as is pastor Kevin DeYoung, author of *Just Do Something*. These and other young leaders are responding to the “failure to launch” that often defines this generation.³ They realize that the pressure of increased expectations has paralyzed many of their peers and are doing all they can to help.

Yet there are also important questions raised by our research about the quality and vigor of faith among twentysomethings who do not drop out. Overall, knowledge of Scripture, doctrine, and church history is poor among most Christians, not just young adult believers. But the cultural pressures faced uniquely by Mosaics make holding on to Christian faith a difficult undertaking—if their faith is shallow, how

can it survive? Are their theological views and commitment to Christ deep enough? Will this be a generation to be reckoned with or one that pushes their convictions to the sidelines? How much will cultural accommodation and acclimation define their faith? Will they capitulate to faith-killing cultural norms?

The next generation is caught between two possible destinies—one moored by the power and depth of the Jesus-centered gospel and one anchored to a cheap, Americanized version of the historic faith that will snap at the slightest puff of wind. Without a clear path to pursue the true gospel, millions of young Christians will look back on their twentysomething years as a series of lost opportunities for Christ.

Disciple Making in a New Context

On the surface, this book is about dropouts—prodigals, nomads, and exiles—but on a deeper level, it is about new pressures facing the entire Christian community as we seek to pass on the faith. I want to examine, clarify, and help us consider our response to the intense pressures that are shaping our culture and the church. Whatever our age or spiritual state, we must all respond to our new and uncertain cultural context—but Mosaics most of all.

Like a Geiger counter under a mushroom cloud, the next generation is reacting to the radioactive intensity of social, technological, and religious changes. And for the most part, we are sending them into the world unprepared to withstand the fallout. Too many are incapable of reasoning clearly about their faith and unwilling to take real risks for Christ's sake. These shortcomings are indicators of gaps in disciple making. There are three central arenas where these gaps are in evidence—and where the church has God-given opportunities to rethink our approach to disciple making.

1. Relationships

The first arena where there is a disciple-making gap is relationships. As we'll see in later chapters, Mosaics are highly relational in many respects (especially when it comes to peers) and many have positive relationships with their families. At the same time, twentysomethings

frequently feel isolated from their parents and other older adults in the realm of faith and spirituality. Many young people feel that older adults don't understand their doubts and concerns, a prerequisite to rich mentoring friendships; in fact a majority of the young adults we interviewed reported never having an adult friend other than their parents. *Can the church rediscover the intergenerational power of the assembly of saints?*

The Mosaic generation epitomizes a me-and-we contradiction. To generalize, they are extraordinarily relational and, at the same time, remarkably self-centered. *We want to change the world! Look at me! Let's make a difference together! I want to be famous!* They want to be mentored and they want to make it on their own. They want to do everything with friends and they want to accomplish great things under their own steam. These selfish and others-oriented contradictions will certainly affect the shape of Christianity in the coming decade, but in what ways? *How can the Christian community speak prophetically to the relational-individual dissonance and help young people serve others for the sake of the gospel?*

The next generation are consummate collage artists, able to blend a diverse set of relationships, ideas, and aspirations. This includes awareness of global issues as well as maintaining relationships with people across generations, religions, sexual orientations, and ethnic backgrounds. They expect and relish diversity. (The eclectic nature of this generation's relationships and values inspired George Barna to name them "Mosaics.") *How can the Christian community understand and learn from the empathy and energy of the next generation, while also cultivating their quest for truth?*

2. Vocation

The second arena is vocation, that powerful, often ignored intersection of faith and calling. Millions of Christ-following teens and young adults are interested in serving in mainstream professions, such as science, law, media, technology, education, law enforcement, military, the arts, business, marketing and advertising, health care, accounting, psychology, and dozens of others. Yet most receive little guidance from their church communities for how to connect these vocational dreams deeply with their faith in Christ. This is especially true for the majority of students who are drawn to careers in the fields of science, including

health care, engineering, education, research, computer programming, and so on. These young Christians learn very little in their faith communities about how to live honestly and faithfully in a world dominated by science—much less how to excel in their chosen scientific vocation. *Can the Christian community summon the courage to prepare a new generation of professionals to be excellent in their calling and craft, yet humble and faithful where God has asked them to serve?*

A related gap is the church's loss of "creatives," musicians, visual and performance artists, filmmakers, poets, skaters and surfers, storytellers, writers, and so on. In the pages of *You Lost Me*, you will meet singers, comedians, writers, and filmmakers who have found it difficult to connect their creative gifts and impulses to church culture. Frequently the modern church struggles to know what to do with right-brained talent. What has traditionally been a fertile ground for the arts—the church—is now generally perceived as uncreative, overprotective, and stifling. *Can the Christian community relearn to esteem and make space for art, music, play, design, and (dare I say it) joy?*

3. *Wisdom*

The third arena where the church must rethink its approach to disciple making is helping the next generation learn to value wisdom over information. Mosaics have access to more knowledge content than any other generation in human history, but many lack discernment for how to wisely apply that knowledge to their lives and world. Young adults are digital natives immersed in a glossy pop culture that prefers speed over depth, sex over wholeness, and opinion over truth. But it is not enough for the faith community to run around with our hair on fire, warning about the hazards of cultural entrapment. God's children in the next generation need more and deserve better.

Making sense of and living faithfully in a rapidly changing cultural context require massive doses of wisdom. But what, exactly, is wisdom? In the ancient Hebrew understanding, it is the idea of skillful living. As such, wisdom entails the spiritual, mental, and emotional ability to relate rightly to God, to others, and to our culture. Proverb 9:10 says, "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom." Wisdom is rooted in knowing and revering the God who has revealed himself in Christ

through the Scriptures. We find wisdom in the Bible, in creation and the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit, in the practices and traditions of the church, and in our service to others.

But many in the next generation find it difficult to move beyond being consumers of information to become people of wisdom. For example, many young Christians admire the words and works of Jesus (information) but do not *know* him as Lord and God (wisdom). They read and respect the Bible (information) but they do not perceive that its words lay claim to their obedience (wisdom). Young Christians are the least likely generation to believe in and experience the presence of the Holy Spirit. In addition, the spiritual practices and historic traditions of the church, which serve to deepen believers' understanding and experience of God, often seem hopelessly old-fashioned to many of today's young adults.

Becoming wise does not happen by simply "saying the prayer," or by memorizing a list of dos and don'ts, or by signing a pledge, or by completing a six-week program. Instead, it is a lifetime process of deep transformation through faith in Christ, knowledge of God's Word, living by the power of the Holy Spirit, and engaging in rich community with other believers. *How can the Christian community help young Christians live wisely in a culture of mental, emotional, and spiritual distraction?*

WHY THE DROPOUT PROBLEM IS A *PROBLEM*

Why should we concern ourselves with the faith journeys of young adults? Why does all this matter?

First, it's a matter of heart. The spiritual lives of millions of young people are at stake. That fact, in and of itself, should be reason enough to care. A person sets his or her moral and spiritual foundations early in life, usually before age thirteen, yet the teen and young adult years are a significant period of experimentation, of testing the limits and reality of those foundations. In other words, even though the childhood and early adolescent years are the time during which spiritual and moral compasses are calibrated, the experimental and experiential decade from high school to the late twenties is the time when a young person's spiritual trajectory is confirmed and clarified.

Faith switching is most likely to occur between the ages of eighteen and twenty-nine. In one study we conducted, we asked a representative sample of Americans as old as those in their nineties to identify if and when they had changed faiths. The most common response was that they had done so during their twenties, and 71 percent of those who had significantly changed faith views did so before the age of thirty.⁴ This accords with a recent Pew Forum survey, which found that “most people who change their religion leave their childhood faith before age twenty-four.”⁵ The choices made in the first adult decade set the direction of life, as young adults make decisions about education, debt and finances, career, marriage, family, meaning, and many other critical matters. What influences will young adults choose to help them shape the lives they want to live? Will their faith—and faith communities—provide direction at these critical crossroads? It doesn’t have to be faith ending for a person to disengage for a time from church or to question his or her faith; this process can actually make a person (and his or her faith) stronger. But is it the ideal?

Some faith leaders simply say they will wait until young people get old enough to get married and have their own kids. Then they will be ready to return to church. But is that really a reasonable approach, especially when the ages of marriage and childbearing are getting pushed further back? Is that what we want for young people—to have years of religious education, experiences, and relationships, only to turn away once they can decide for themselves?

Of course not.

Second, awareness of young adults’ faith journeys is a matter of accuracy. Without accurate information, Christians have a choice to ignore or minimize the dropout problem or to sensationalize it. Neither approach is right or helpful. As we began our investigation on this project, one of the first things we noticed was the dispute over what is happening and what it means. There are many conflicting stories. In fact there are some who claim there is no story at all—the dropout problem is a myth, an alarmist’s way of selling books and programs that promise to resolve a manufactured crisis. What we’re actually seeing, according to the “dropout deniers,” is the natural ebb of faith related to young adulthood in every generation. The deniers either minimize the dropout problem or

explain that most twentysomethings who have lost interest in church or faith will return to the fold in later adulthood. *Move along*, they say. *Nothing to see here.*

Others clamor that not enough alarm has been raised over the dropout problem, that the crisis is deeper and more pervasive than any of us suspect. Just recently, someone called our offices to register an objection to our data, asserting that Barna Group's appraisal of the dropout numbers is off by a mile. The caller hoped we would revise our findings to reflect a *higher* number of dropouts, just to confirm his fears. *Red alert! Christianity will be gone in a generation*, proclaim the doomsayers.

I believe the dropout problem is real and even urgent but I also believe that signing the church's death warrant in the next generation is premature. I want to provide here a nuanced, data-driven assessment of young adults' faith journeys. In our evidence gathering, interviews, and data analysis, the Barna team's goal is to construct the most accurate picture we can of cultural reality, because the church is called to be the church in the real world. In this research, we have done our best to uncover the facts and the truth of the dropout problem, and this book is the compilation of our best thinking on the subject thus far—but it is hardly the final answer. There are no easy, one-size-fits-all ways to disciple the next generation or to transition faith from parents to children. If you are looking for elementary formulas or simple explanations, this is likely not the book for you. I will do my best to be clear and concise, but when it comes to questions of faith and culture, nothing is simple.

Third, it's an issue of responsibility. I am not writing this book to blame anyone for the state of the next generation or of the church. We all have a part to play, young and old, church-ed or prodigal. If you're a young nomad or exile or faithful Christ-follower, I would like you to remember that, as people redeemed by Jesus, we are citizens of a kingdom that unifies us with the generations of believers who have gone before. That's a lot to live up to, but I believe God's grace is sufficient for you and for me, and that he is calling us to follow Christ wholeheartedly, with courage and boldness.

If you are a prodigal, I urge you to reconsider your choice to disavow Christianity. Whatever your journey, whatever your age, whatever your gripes against Christians and the church, you at your worst are, like me,

no better. Yet you and I at our best can be counted among the humble saints who have trusted that God's grace is greater than the shortcomings of his people. Together we could lovingly challenge the church from within to repent and become truly Christian again.

If you're an older believer, a parent, or a Christian leader, I am not pointing the finger of blame at you. Instead, I want us to recognize together our collective calling to love, accept, and partner with this next generation. That's not easy. Philosopher James K. A. Smith encourages parents with this poignant observation: "[Your children are] going to break your heart. Somehow. Somewhere. Maybe more than once. To become a parent is to promise you'll love prodigals."⁶

Part of that promise we make as parents and Christian mentors is to be honest with ourselves. We have to admit that we have messed up too often, attempted the impossible by our own effort, and missed divine moments of opportunity. But we don't have to miss the next ones. If we are to live in obedience to the Great Commandment and the Great Commission, we must love our young adult neighbors (rather than condemning them) and find new ways to make disciples among their number (rather than writing them off). As we look at the rate at which they are dropping out, the Christian community's challenge is to assess our culpability. In what ways are we complicit in the next generation's loss?

If you are a leader in a local church or Christian institution, you are in a position to help the faith community make course corrections on its way to fulfilling its God-given mission. I hope that the information and analysis you find in these pages will help you and your colleagues in ministry wisely discern our times and, with the Spirit's guidance, reform and renew our institutions to meet the deep spiritual needs among the next generation. How can your parish, church, or ministry expand or refine its vision to cultivate lasting faith in every generation?

Caring about the faith journeys of young adults is, finally, a matter of leadership. Every year we have the great privilege to work with many of the nation's top faith-based groups and forward-thinking leaders, including student ministries, Christian schools, denominations, faith-based colleges and universities, publishing houses, and student-focused parachurch organizations. Interacting regularly with these individuals,

we see that many sense a shift happening. Many are searching for new ways to be effective in their work with this new generation, and many are waiting for the next generation of leaders to emerge. Among these groups, there is a growing sense that we need new ways of discipleship, a new way of teaching, instructing, engaging, and developing the lives of young people. We need a new mind to focus on apprenticeship in the way of Jesus.

As such, understanding the next generation is certainly relevant to stakeholders (parents, pastors, educators, employers), as well as to organizations (publishers, schools, businesses, churches, ministry organizations). To respond effectively to the spiritual needs of the next generation, established institutions and communities must understand them, and change in appropriate, biblical ways.

The evidence presented here can also make a difference for young leaders, who need to understand their peers. Young Baby Boomers in the 1960s and '70s had to know what was happening within their generation to be a part of shaping their collective influence on American religion. The same is true for leaders in the emerging generation.

Today the influences of technology, pop culture, media, entertainment, science, and an increasingly secular society are intensifying the differences between the generations. And many churches, leaders, and parents—the established generation—have a difficult time understanding these differences, much less relating to the values, beliefs, and assumptions that have spawned them. So we need younger leaders. One of the most rewarding aspects of this project has been meeting the many young Christians who are motivated by godly concern for their own generation. Their enthusiasm and hope is refreshing, and I respect their extraordinary efforts to see their peers awakened to the love and purposes of God.

Young leaders who speak the language of their peers are sorely needed because today's twentysomethings are not just slightly or incrementally different from previous generations. Mosaics are living through *discontinuously different* social, technological, and spiritual change.

In the next chapter, we'll take a long look at just how deep these differences go and what they may mean for the future of the faith.