

PASTOR'S NOTES. Engaging Younger Generations

“Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, “Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, ‘To an unknown god.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.” – Acts 17:22-23 (NRSV)

My sense is that a large part of Paul’s missionary work (and most missionary work since) is about studying the community, and listening to the people. Before bringing his message, Paul spent time studying and listening. If you continue to read in the Bible after verse 23, you find that he preaches a message unique to the Athenians, because of what he has learned about them.

When I look at the state of Maple Street Church I see a situation reflected in most churches through this country, Canada, Europe, and Australia: a church that is in decline, largely due to fewer of the younger generations being involved. While individual churches are exceptions, overall there are a growing number of persons under 40 who have never connected with church life, and large numbers of young people who have left the church (and some of those have left faith entirely).

What I find striking is that while this has been going on right in front of us, we of the “older generations” have done little about it. It’s not like this is a problem way out there, beyond our everyday life. Most of us know plenty of young people, even within our own families, and have never addressed the issue of why church and faith do not seem to interest them. Or, if they have told us that church is boring or irrelevant to their lives, we simply shrug our shoulders like we can’t do anything to change it.

Those of us in smaller churches sometimes assume that all young people, if they have any interest in faith, are interested only in being consumers of large gatherings, professional “entertainment-style” worship, and children's programs. We may think that we have to cater to the younger generations in a way that loses the essence of church and faith. Yet even these large church programs are also finding young people leaving the church.

In 2011, David Kinnaman published [You Lost Me](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books), in which he shared the results of a major study done on young Christians (ages 18-29 at the time) who had left the church. Since the study is now ten years old, those persons are 28-39 now, but I suspect because the trends have continued, most of what he discovered would relate to young Christians under 40.

The bottom line as I see it is that most churches (large and small) have failed young people because we have not listened. Most young people are not looking for the church to cater to them, but they often felt ignored or simply a commodity within church life.

I think that the book is helpful as a guide to open discussions with the younger members of our

family, and other young people that might be a part of your life. My suspicion is that even if neither of you have read the book, you would get a reaction if you brought up any one or more of these six points:

1. Overprotective: Many young Christians have left the church because their parents and the church seemed to be afraid of the outside world, even movies and music, and they did not want to deal with the complexities of real world living.
2. Shallow: Many young Christians have left the church because the church seemed only to care about their being there while the church continued the same old things. They felt bored; the church did little to prepare them for a career, for finding their purpose in life, for growing spiritually, or to be prepared for real life.
3. Anti-Science: Young Christians are educated in science, and many choose careers that depend on science, but many have left the church because the church seemed out of step with the scientific world, fixated on creation vs. evolution, making complex things too simple, and too confident that they have all the answers.
4. Repressive: Many young Christians have left the church because the traditional view of sexuality and the “rules” of the church seemed out of date to them, that they had to lead a double life between their faith and real life, that they were continually being judged.
5. Exclusive: Many young Christians have left the church because the church felt more like a country club, only for insiders; the church was not open to their friends who were of a different religion or race or orientation – even forcing them to choose faith or friends.
6. Doubtless: Many young Christians have left the church because many things in life have caused them to doubt their faith: a crisis, death of a loved one, intellectual questions, depression, college experience; and they did not feel they could ask their questions or talk about their doubts in church.

I believe that the feedback you get from your connections will be helpful for all of us as we seek to be a church that not only meets the needs of this community, but trains people so that they can make a difference. I don't believe there is one right answer: each church has its unique calling, and none of them are meant to be the same. But I believe they all start with careful listening to our community and listening for the Holy Spirit.

So I would be very interested in hearing about what you hear.

Yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be the name 'Kam' or similar, written in a cursive style.