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# Eremos Consulting Group

*Facilitating Transformation for Clergy, Congregations, Nonprofits and their Leaders*

## Fall 2012 - In This Issue

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## Careful the Things You Say, Children Will Listen

These are words from *Into the Woods*, a musical by Stephen Sondheim that blends several fairy tales together with scary and realistic implications in the storybook woods. Recently there have been two sociological studies about the attitudes of American youth toward religion. The first focuses on American teenagers mostly still living at home. The second study polled young adults in their twenties. The differences in attitude between the two studies are striking and both are a little scary for those who lead communities of faith.

In our [Summer 2012 Newsletter](#) we told you about some of our research into generational attitudes. We looked at the way historical and cultural events shape the world view of generational contemporaries and also influence how the generations approach congregational life. Those events even shape the way different generations deal with conflict. We spent a bit of time talking about the silent generation and baby boomers. In this issue we want to

## Suggested Reading for Generations & Religion



The Barna Group  
[www.barna.org](http://www.barna.org)

*unchristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks About Christianity...And Why It Matters*

David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons.  
Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2007.

*You Lost Me: Why Young Christians Are Leaving*

focus on only one generation, the Millennials, born between 1981 and 1999. [Sorry Generation X -- ignored again! We'll get to you soon.]

From 2001 to 2005 the National Survey of Youth and Religion sponsored by the University of North Carolina - Chapel Hill surveyed 3,290 Americans between 10 and 19 years of age. The survey was led by Dr. Christian Smith, professor of sociology at University of Notre Dame and Dr. Lisa Pence, assistant professor of sociology at UNC-Chapel Hill. They followed up their massive random telephone survey with in-depth in-person interviews with 265 teenagers from 45 states. Many of these interviews are reported on at length in Dr. Smith's 2005 book, *Soul Searching*. While the book has the data, charts, and many footnotes you would expect, it is the hearing from American teenagers, in



their own adolescent words, struggling to articulate their view of religion that is so compelling. The teens come from a multitude of various home environments and traditions and non-traditions. Just about every world religion or denomination we have heard of was represented among the respondents, as well as 16% who indicated they were not religious and 2% who refused to say.

The researchers use the interviewees' own words to illustrate their main points:

- **They are not rebels.** American young people are, theoretically, fine with religious faith.
- **They can be painfully inarticulate** when asked to explain the core teachings of their faith communities.
- **Faith really doesn't concern them very much** and they tend to consider it as one extra-curricular activity among many. Religion may be important, but it is not a priority.
- **The character of teenage religion is very conventional;** most are fine adopting the views of their parents.
- **Their faith may not be durable enough** to last long after they graduate from high school.
- **The Mormon and conservative protestant teenagers surveyed were the most confident** in their answers to religious questions. But even some of them were vague on traditional teachings of their faith

In fact, the researchers saw enough repeated expressions of similar vague theology among the rest of the religious respondents of all backgrounds that they speculate **we may be seeing the rise of a new religious expression in America. They dubbed it "Moral Therapeutic Deism".** Its principle tenets are:

- **A god exists** who created and orders the world and watches over human life on earth.
- **God wants people to be good,** nice, and fair to each other
- **The central goal of life is to be happy** and to feel good about oneself.

## *Church...And Rethinking Faith*

David Kinnaman. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2011.

## National Study of Youth and Religion

[www.youthandreligion.org](http://www.youthandreligion.org)

## *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*

Christian Smith with Melinda Lundquist Denton. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.

## *Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers is Telling The American Church*

Kenda Creasy Dean. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.

## The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life

[www.pewforum.org](http://www.pewforum.org)

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- **God does not need to be particularly involved** in one's life except when God is needed to resolve a problem.
- **Good people go to Heaven** when they die.



Phil Thompson

Author Kenda Creasy Dean, who worked on the NSYR and is an associate professor at Princeton Theological Seminary, speculates that the reason so many teenagers follow Therapeutic Moral Deism is not because they are inattentive learners or listeners, but just the opposite. They have learned very well from their parents, pastors, and churches this watered down, inoffensive, and "nice" religion. Because, to be candid, it is what the parents really believe, too. At least that is Professor Dean's take in her 2010 book, *Almost Christian*. Perhaps those of you who work with teenagers could do a reality check and ask your teenagers directly what they know about or believe about the teachings of your community. As Smith says in *Soul Searching*, the young people they surveyed could converse quite fluently about drug abuse and sexually transmitted diseases, but the researchers got the impression they were the first adults who ever asked these teenagers what they think about faith.

The two works mentioned so far also include suggestions and advice for those in religious youth work. Both authors suggest there is a direct correlation between successful youth ministry and those congregations who have the resources to employ a full time paid leader for the youth program. (But you probably knew that already.) They also affirm that the single most important social influence on the religious and spiritual lives of adolescents is their parents. If you want your youth to have a more solid grounding in the teachings of your tradition, teach the parents first.



And now the bad news. Two books that I recently finished reading have to do with the phenomenon of youth leaving the church after high school and not coming back until after college or beyond, if they do come back at all. Both were written by David Kinnaman, a marketing researcher by training who is president of The Barna Group. Both works focus solely on the Christian tradition. While Kinnaman's prescriptions and recommendations speak to the conservative evangelical tradition, his research and polling cover the entire spectrum of Christian expression and should be instructive to anyone in any religious community. **In a study of 1,296 Americans with a Christian**

**background ages 18-29**, 57% said they were less active in church than when they were 15 years old.

What are especially disturbing are the responses about Christianity from young American who are not involved in any church. The negative perspectives of these "outsiders" are striking. In a 2007 study The Barna Group reported the percent of outsiders with the following unfavorable images:

- the church is anti homosexual - 91%
- judgmental - 87%
- hypocritical (saying one thing - doing another) - 85%
- too involved in politics - 75%
- and boring - 68%; among other things
- On the other hand, 71% of outsiders considered Christians "friendly".

Kinnaman expands on this research in his 2011 book, *You Lost Me*, by giving six reasons why young Christians leave the church during their 20s.



1. Churches are overprotective
2. The young adults' experience of faith is shallow
3. Churches are antagonistic to science
4. Churches are simplistic and judgmental in regard to sexuality
5. The faith seems exclusive toward other religions
6. The church is unfriendly to those who doubt.

Both of these large studies indicate that faith communities have some work to do to maintain the involvement of the Millennial generation. This work will involve some reflection by congregations on how they really feel about science, their comfort in allowing expressions of doubt, their tolerance of mores and sexual expressions that earlier generations never even spoke about, and a commitment to go deeper than the call of Moral Therapeutic Deism to be "nice".

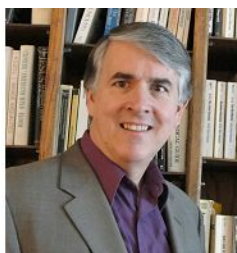
So brave journey congregation leaders. Careful the things you say, children will listen. Maybe we should ask GenX what they think about this!

Blessings for the journey,

Elizabeth & Phil



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Strategies & Tools for Colorado's Clergy  
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Wednesday, October 3, 2012

8am - 3pm

PPA Event Center

2105 Decatur St., Denver 80211

**Cost: No Charge**

*but space is limited*

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Includes continental breakfast and lunch  
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- the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration/U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
- *with additional support from* The Colorado Trust directed contributions program at the request of Rev. R.J. Ross

**We look forward to seeing you there!**

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