

Conversation #5

WHY ARE YOUNG ADULTS WALKING AWAY FROM CHURCH?

We've talked about how our culture is changing rapidly. Not only are most churches not growing and people who attend church attending less often, but of the Christians who are leaving the church, none are leaving more quickly than millennials—young adults under the age of thirty.

In this chapter, we'll drill down even further into the mass exodus from the church that we're witnessing. Unlike chapters 1 and 2, this is not about people we're failing to attract; it's about people who once attended and have left. Specifically, younger people who grew up in the church and are walking away from church and/or faith.

We'll look at some research on the issue of why teens and young adults are leaving, and then we'll explore why a model of church (attractional church) that has been very effective for several decades may indeed be reaching the end of its exponential growth curve. In all of this, we'll discuss why people who have tasted and seen ... are leaving.

GETTING FAITH TO STICK IN KIDS AND TEENS

So why are kids and teens walking away from the faith they grew up in by the time they're young adults? I realize this subject is heartbreaking because we know the kids and young adults who are walking away. We raised them. They may even be your kids. If you're reading this book, there's little question you *want* kids to follow Christ. And naturally, you want *your* kids to follow Christ. Yet the staggering truth is that 40 to 50 percent of students who are active in the church in their senior year of high school will drift away from the church as young adults. Did you catch that? Not 40 to 50 percent of kids, but 40 to 50 percent of kids who are active in their final year of high school will walk away. Why?

Fortunately, when it comes to kids, we have research. Kara Powell, PhD, is a mom, a youth ministry veteran, and the executive director of the Fuller Youth Institute. I had her on my leadership podcast to talk about her decade-long research project that sheds light—and hope—on this growing problem for parents and church leaders.²² The results are published in her *Sticky Faith* book series.²³

Kara's team has studied youth group graduates, families, and more than 150 churches in an effort to find out how to reverse the trend of young people drifting from the faith. Her research has covered different denominations, different-sized churches, and different regions. While she didn't find a silver bullet, she did find certain behaviors in youth that related to mature faith, which in turn seems to predict how well young adults “stick” with church. Her findings are nuanced and varied, but here are a few of the highlights.

Forming Intergenerational Relationships

Surprisingly, one of the key factors in developing a faith that sticks is intergenerational ministry and relationships. As Kara explained, “[For years], we put our children in one part of the building, we put our youth across the parking lot or in another wing of the building, and the adults are someplace else.

As a result, high school students graduate and they know youth group, but they don't know the church." If age-specific environments are the only experiences churches offer, students grow up spiritually and relationally impoverished.

The solution isn't to revert automatically to intergenerational worship that attempts to span all age brackets and, in the process, ends up speaking to no one well (it's exceedingly difficult to communicate to eight-year-olds, twelve-year-olds, and forty-three-year-olds at the same time). So how do you provide multigenerational experiences? Different ages need to develop relationships with one another. The older need to mentor the younger. Churches can offer this through multigenerational groups, with teens in community with older group leaders, or even by mixing up college-aged students with empty-nester adults as leaders or group members. Many millennials are looking for spiritual parents, and these groups and mentor relationships can provide that.

Perhaps the most effective way to partner the generations is through serving. Pairing a teen or child who's volunteering with an adult can be a fantastic way to grow and learn together, provided the adult realizes there's a mentoring opportunity and responsibility that comes with it. If the adult simply sees the younger volunteer as an extra set of hands or "help," the opportunity will be lost. But the environment of doing ministry together *with* a younger adult, child, or teen can be exceptionally formative for both the adult and the younger person.

Giving and Receiving Grace

The *Sticky Faith* research also demonstrates that churches that show grace to teens do better than churches that don't. Kara pointed out that kids grow up in youth group hearing lists of what they should and shouldn't do. "When we fail to live up to that checklist, then young people end up running from God and the church, just when they need both the most," she said. "And here is what young people need to understand, and adults, too, is that ... once we fail, the same grace allows us to go back and receive forgiveness and restoration from God and through the faith community. So grace is not only what enables us to obey; it's also what enables us [to live in community] even in the midst of our ongoing failure."

All of this raises a bigger question. How transparent should parents be with their kids about their own struggles? The *Sticky Faith* research suggests parents could foster more authentic dialogue by opening up with their children and being honest about some of their own mistakes, whether those mistakes were made in the past or even more recently. Even if it's just apologizing for losing it in the moment, being open and saying you make mistakes can go a long way in creating a meaningful dialogue. The honesty can start when your kids are young, too. "It is never too early to start implementing some of these principles and to make your home a safe place to talk about mistakes," Kara said.

It's also never too early to have faith conversations with your kids and talk to them about your own faith. Many parents are afraid to open up out of fear they're not far enough along in their own faith journey to lead their kids. Kara noted, "Our research isn't saying you need to be more spiritual than you already are; our research is saying to share with your kids the spirituality you already have." The fact that they see the faith you have trumps any worry about them seeing any faith you don't (yet) have.

Expressing Doubt Safely

Perhaps the biggest surprise in the *Sticky Faith* research is the role of doubt in a young person's faith

journey. It's natural and perhaps even logical to think that doubt is fatal to faith, but that's not what the study found at all. Kara explained: "Our research shows that it's not doubt that is toxic to faith—it is unexpressed doubt that is toxic to young people's faith." In many ways, that's exactly the kind of research churches need to help kids, teens, and young adults move forward in their faith. Everyone has doubts. But few of us (even adults) feel safe discussing them. What if the church became exactly the kind of place in which people felt safe expressing their doubts? Kara says that the church has to become a forum in which deep doubt and big questions can be safely expressed: "Do young people feel like they can ask big and tough questions about God in our community? And if not, how can we create more safe places so that they can? So if you know a young person whose big questions about God are causing them to drift from their faith, then I would say, how do you make sure they stay in the conversation? Whether it's in small group, whether that's in ongoing one-on-one mentoring with an adult at your church ... because if we don't provide venues for conversation to happen, then they're going to have conversations in other places and come to conclusions we wish they wouldn't come to."

The evidence strongly suggests that churches that create safe, nonjudgmental, personal, and authentic forums for dialogue are going to see more of their kids stick than churches that don't. Add to that some intergenerational mentoring and shared experiences, and the odds of a child's faith sticking as he or she gets older increase.

WHY MANY MILLENNIALS HAVE STOPPED ATTENDING CHURCH

The Barna Group has done a particularly good job of tracking the attitudes of both churched and unchurched millennials toward the church. A 2014 study cited (among others) five compelling reasons church engagement and attendance continue to decline among millennials.²⁴ Of course, the good news is that once you spot the trends, you can work at reversing them.

While the following assessment of the church's culture might seem harsh (once again), as it is with confession, the truth can and will set you free.

1. The church is irrelevant, the leaders are hypocritical, and leaders have experienced too much moral failure.

Sure, that's three reasons in one. But the research lists all three reasons together, and millennials arguably see them as such. This bears itself out in actual conversation as well. Talk to unchurched people about why they don't go to church, and, quite predictably, you will hear them rattle off a list of objections that is almost certain to include their beliefs that the church is irrelevant and full of hypocrisy. After all, just look at the moral failure of so many of its leaders.

To some extent, you can't blame people for this perception. You and I both wince every time we see another headline announcing a new moral failure. And far too many Christians have been burned by the judgment of the perpetually self-righteous who live within our churches.

If you want to attract and keep millennials, it's critical that you foster a culture of integrity, authenticity, and grace. Jesus said that it would be by our fruit that people would recognize us. Live a life of integrity with each other and outsiders, and your church will become a magnet for people searching for God, both for younger adults and, I think, for many others. That kind of integrity and grace is far too rare in the world, let alone in the church.

2. God is missing in the church.

Millennials who engage the church are actually looking for God, but too often they feel as if their search is in vain. It's ironic, but a growing number of people claim to be going to church looking for God but say they are having difficulty finding Him. It may hurt to admit that this could be happening within your ministry, and you might even discount the few who would make this accusation, but in an age where perception is reality, this criticism is too pointed to ignore.

The paucity of personal experience people say they have with God in many churches is disturbing. It would be easy to point at rock-show churches and blame them (I lead one of those—I'll deal with the issues in those kinds of churches later in this chapter), but the truth is that people in all kinds of experiences, from liturgical to charismatic, have left the church in search of God. Although some would disagree with me here, I'm not sure leaving the church for an individualized, personal, or even home-based experience of church helps people find God any better. In fact, I think a meaningful percentage of people who leave the church in search of God find themselves further away from God five years down the road than they'd care to admit, but that isn't stopping people from leaving. In our consumer-driven culture that applauds individually tailored experiences, what if the real paucity is that we have lost a sense of what true maturity and the experience of God is?

Regardless, the accusation still stings and must be taken seriously. Are people who are coming to your church looking for God actually finding him? If not, why not?

3. Legitimate doubt is prohibited.

Millennials will often have the courage to say out loud what our teenagers are reluctant to express. And in this case, what's driving teens away is what's also driving or keeping millennials away: the perception that doubt can't be honestly expressed. Truthfully, I empathize with people who levy this criticism at the church today. It is very difficult to have an honest conversation in many churches, both conservative and liberal. In many conservative churches, legitimate questions get dismissed with pat—and often trite—answers. In many liberal churches, there is often so much ambiguity that questions that actually *can* be answered are left unresolved—as if leaders are taking people nowhere. Church leaders simply have to get better with handling the tension that comes with questions.

So how do you do apologetics? Or is that a dying art? At Connexus, I recently taught a nine-part series called “Skeptics Wanted” in which we invited people to ask their toughest questions about Christianity.²⁵ I gathered people's questions through an online survey and then systematically addressed them. But rather than present “slam dunk” arguments that dismissed the critics and skeptics, I tried to take their claims seriously, engaging them as worthy objections. Of course, I presented strong evidence for why the Christian faith makes sense, but I also wanted to engage the seriousness of people's questions. Above all, the series was designed to be an invitation into a deeper dialogue. Not only did it spawn great discussion of honest doubt in small groups, but we ended it with an invitation to have a coffee on us at Starbucks for anyone who wanted to talk further, well aware that even a nine-part series wasn't going to settle things once and for all in every person's mind. Instead, it would be one step on a longer journey. I think this kind of conversational environment will become crucial in future churches.

4. People aren't learning about God.

It's one thing to attend church and find God missing; it's another to attend church only to find God present but incomprehensible. It still strikes me as incredible that people come to church seeking God

only to leave not understanding anything they hear. One couple that attends our church told me that they tried to go back to church when their kids were young only to give up in frustration after a year. The reason? They couldn't understand anything the pastor taught. The woman said, "It was like he was speaking a foreign language." After five more years out of the local church, they decided to give it one more shot when they came to our church. I'm so grateful they were willing to try again.

The truth is, you and I can relate. Every one of us has listened to a sermon for forty-five minutes only to walk out the door tremendously unclear about what was just said. And—preachers—come on: we've all *given* more than one of those messages.

The solution is simple, yet so many people miss it: clarity. Speak in everyday language, not in churchspeak or in a meandering way. It takes far more work to be clear than it does to be confusing. And no, being clear is not the same as dumbing down a message. You can be thoughtful without being confusing. But it does take great intentionality and preparation to have a clear point to your message. It's also vital for preachers and communicators to be clear about what they want to happen in people's lives when people leave.²⁶

5. They're not finding community.

The Barna study points out that despite a growing epidemic of loneliness, only 10 percent report going to church to find community. Sometimes I wonder if it's because people expect the church to be the last place they'll find community. And that's tragic.

Of the many criticisms that can be levied at the church, lack of community shouldn't be one. *Nobody should be able to out-community the local church.* You can make a legitimate argument that one of the reasons behind the explosive growth of the first-century church was because of the way they loved each other and the world. Love should be a defining characteristic of the local church. If we loved the way Jesus loved, people would line up out the door.

As your church grows larger, small groups become essential. For us at Connexus, *everyone* has a place in a group— from preschoolers right through to seniors. No matter how big or awesome the weekends might be (and they can be awesome), small group is where life change happens most deeply. Among many other strategies for reaching and keeping families, elevating community is an approach we've learned from Orange. If you want more, cultivating an excellent smallgroup strategy is outlined in *Creating a Lead Small Culture* by Reggie Joiner, Kristen Ivy, and Elle Campbell, and in *Lead Small* by Reggie Joiner and Tom Shefchunas.²⁷

Personally, I'm grateful for research that helps us discover how people in a rapidly changing culture actually feel about the church. It can only help us get better at being the church as Christ called us to be.

COOL ISN'T ENOUGH (ANYMORE)

A final word on how to stop people from walking away from your church. For the last few decades, simply being a cooler church than the church down the road helped churches grow. There was a day when all you had to do was *improve* the church you led in order to gain traction. Trade in the choir for a band. Turn the chancel into a platform. Add some lights, some sound, some haze. Get some great teaching in the room. And voilà—you had a growing church. People stuck around. People dug in. And new people joined.

We're quickly moving into a season where having a cool church is like having the best choir in town: it's wonderful for the handful of people who still listen to choral music. And irrelevant to everyone else. Something's changing. Many leaders think that moving a pulpit out and replacing it with a stage and adding lights and a good video system might move them from stagnation to growth overnight. They'd be wrong. If there was ever a time when that alone would grow a church, that time has recently come to a close. Sometimes all a good video system does is magnify your irrelevance. Hundreds of thousands of dollars in lights and great sound gear are probably not going to impact your community like they used to.

You might think I'm against churches having bands, lights, and creating a great environment. Not at all. In fact, the church I lead has all of the above; if you are going to gather people, gather well. My point is not that you *shouldn't*. My point is that it's no longer *enough*. And maybe it never was.

The megachurches many of us watch today didn't get to be as effective as they are simply by being cool. If you really study how most large churches have become effective in leading people to Jesus (and, yes—doubters, suspend judgment— many large churches *are* effective in leading people into a real relationship with Jesus Christ), they have always been about more than just lights, sound, and show. There's substance. More substance than critics would ever give them credit for.

Are megachurches universally healthy? No. But neither are many small churches. In fact, sometimes the dysfunction in small churches eclipses that of medium-sized or large churches. So why would cool church be fading into the sunset?

Cool Church Isn't What It Used to Be

Decades ago as cool church started to take root among large, rapidly growing churches, many other, smaller churches and church plants followed suit. And for a season, it "worked." Getting some awesome lights, better sound, better music, and a slightly more hip communicator grew churches. Sure, some of the growth was transfer growth, but a large percentage of what many churches experienced was not transfer growth. People invited their friends and their friends came back.

So what's changing?

To begin with, most cities now have a great selection of cool churches. Many towns have at least one. It's no longer unusual to have a band in church. It's not even that novel to have lights and great sound or to play all the cool songs. And in the process of all this imitation, three things have happened.

Cutting-edge keeps changing ... fast. Constant connectivity online has sped up trends, memes, and the spread of information. What's novel isn't novel for long anymore. You used to have to hire experts, be in a certain circle, or do some travelling or sleuthing to find cool things. Now you just download an app, watch a video, stream a song, or follow whatever trend you're passionate about in the moment—whenever you want to. Instantly. Usually for free. Consequently, there's kind of a trend fatigue or indifference happening. Trends are shorter, less interesting, and we're all growing oh-so-bored with what's novel. Which means that it's harder than ever for churches to be cutting-edge because cutting-edge keeps changing.

Indifference to church has grown. As the percentage of unchurched adults in the United States has risen from 30 percent to 43 percent of the population, indifference to the church has grown.²⁸ Church leaders in places like Canada, Europe, Australia, and New Zealand have felt the indifference for

much longer. As churches changed their worship style and even architecture in the '80s, '90s, and 2000s, having a cool church got you more traction than it does today. And yet as indifference grows, it's having less and less of an impact. Here's why: if people aren't into church, it doesn't matter how cool, hip, or trendy your church is; people won't be that interested. You understand this pattern from other areas of your life. If you're on a health kick, for example, you're not going to order the burger and fries, even if they are the best in town. If you're not on a health kick, the spinach, arugula, and kale salad with tuna isn't going to capture your imagination, no matter how healthy or on trend it is.

Imitation killed innovation. Because we live in a digital age when church leaders easily keep their fingers on the pulse of what other leading churches are doing, we also find ourselves living in an age of imitation. I'm not against borrowing great practices from other churches or leaders. There can be an arrogance to a leader who feels as if he or she has to reinvent the wheel each time they face a situation, or who is simply too proud to learn from others. But with access to trends, imitation has a shadow side.

To begin with, when churches imitate each other, we rarely borrow all the best practices. We rarely borrow all the best practices. We just borrow the ones that seem obvious or perhaps have caught our imagination. Often the imitation is just that—imitation, not the studied adaptation of a nuanced model. Too many times we're looking for silver bullets, tricks, or gimmicks that will move our church into a growth phase. All the while we ignore the reality that what's making growing churches grow is significantly deeper than the cool factor. Consequently, leaders who finally get what they were longing for—a cool church—are often shocked to discover they don't deliver what they promised. And in the process of all that imitation, something even more important is lost: innovation.

What's needed now more than ever is church leaders willing to pioneer, to go deep into a culture that keeps changing to reach people who are increasingly resistant. What's needed most as we look at what's ahead is innovation. And it's sorely lacking among many church leaders. It is even more difficult to study your culture prayerfully along with the best practices of other churches and then burrow deep into something that perhaps no one has tried before in an attempt to advance your mission. It is even more difficult to prayerfully study your culture along with the best practices of other churches and then burrow deep into something that perhaps no one has tried before in an attempt to advance your mission. But the future will require more leaders and teams to do exactly that. Wise leaders won't let imitation kill innovation at their church.

Is Cool a Bad Thing, Then?

So should you run from all things cool, trendy, or hip? No. The answer to the challenge of keeping up with relevance is not to return to irrelevance. Relevant church has many critics, but *not* bridging the cultural gap is even more dangerous (in my view) than trying to bridge it and maybe failing. All around us is a rapidly changing culture, and when we ignore that culture, we do so at our peril. It is still a great idea to use the culture to reach the culture. So what do we do as we head into the future?

Five Keys to Rebirth (The New Cool)

The church can take many forms. For all those leaders who, like me, believe in gathering people together for the sake of a larger mission, I think you stay relevant (and, yes, a bit of cool is always in order), but you definitely go beyond that. Dig deeper. Here are five keys I see to a future of greater impact with millennials.

1. Authentic Leadership and Connection

Sometimes the reason cool doesn't connect is because underneath all that "cool" is an inauthenticity: people who are uncomfortable with themselves, trying to compensate for something, or who have somehow fallen for the lie that style trumps substance. Again, that may have worked at one point or it might still work in some contexts, but that won't be true for much longer. Unchurched people and younger adults and teens are looking for authentic leadership and authentic connection. Quite simply, authentic resonates. More than ever, people are looking for what's real, what's true, and what's authentic.²⁹ And, my goodness, if the church is anything, it should be a place of deep authenticity.

2. An Elevated Sense of Mission

The church has always been about something bigger than itself. At the center of our mission is Christ. While most organizations naturally drift toward an insider focus, church leaders must resist this at all costs. Not only is it antithetical to the true mission of the church, but a self-obsessed community is a turnoff to a young generation that is well aware of the needs in the world the church often ignores. You lose your narcissism when you lose yourself in a bigger mission. And a bigger mission, by the way, is something millennials are longing to give their lives to. A church that is focused on a larger mission will never become self-obsessed.

3. Hope

We leaders are dealers in hope. And Christianity provides more hope than anything. I'm 100 percent behind making messages practical, applicable, and helpful. I think the gospel is that.

But sometimes the practical can tip too far. We recently heard from an unchurched woman in her mid-20s who had listened to a few of our messages and said, "Well, it's great to know how to balance my personal finances ... but I don't really need God for that, do I?" To some extent, she's right.

The gospel is practical, but it is much more than that—it is supernatural. Christianity at its best has always been about both imminence and transcendence. As millennials and young adults explore the Christian faith, there has to be practical theology, but there also has to be much more.

4. Elevated Community

I'm all for video walls if they help the mission, but as my friend Reggie Joiner says, the church will never be able to out-Disney Disney.³⁰ That's very true. No church will ever have the budget or resources to entertain or engage better than Disney or Hollywood. But even if the church did, what would be the point?

While we can't out-Disney Disney, no one should be able to out-community the local church. God is in the people business. And the heart of Christianity is relationship—a right relationship with God, with each other, and with ourselves. It's also fairly clear that younger adults and teens hunger for community perhaps more deeply than previous generations did. Moving forward, churches that elevate community and prioritize healthy intentional relationships will fare much better in accomplishing their mission than those who don't.

5. Experimentation

How's your church at experimentation? When you talk to many leaders, you realize that the words *experimentation* and *church* do not easily fit together in many circles. Experimentation, of course, is the key to innovation. And, as we've seen, in an age of imitation in the church, innovation has to make

a comeback. So how does a church experiment? Particularly a church that has had success in the recent past or even in the present?

The best approach (if your church is moderately effective in accomplishing its mission) is to do what you do now, but begin experimenting on the side to see what has the potential to make a significant impact in the future. Truthfully, I'm not sure anyone really knows what that is right now. Which is why experimentation is even more important than we might initially think.

HOPE IS RIGHT AROUND THE CORNER

I realize that having conversations like the one anticipated by this chapter and chapters 1 and 2 can at times feel overwhelming or even moderately depressing. I hope your team doesn't end up at that point. The goal is not for us to feel overwhelmed but to see the opportunity.

As Jim Collins has shown us, a significant component in effectiveness as a church or organization is the willingness to confront the brutal facts.³¹ Church teams that do this—look honestly at the changing culture and at themselves—have a distinct advantage over churches that don't. The first step in getting healthy or staying effective over the long run is a willingness to have the conversations few others are willing to have.

While you already know this, hope springs from honest conversation. The truth truly does set you free.

Conversation #5

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Talk About It

1. Would you say that kids walking away from their faith in their teen or young adult years is an issue in your church? To what extent? How do you know?
2. If teens and young adults have expressed reasons why they're walking away, what are they? Make a list.
3. Is your church a safe church in which a person can express doubt about what they believe? Why or why not?
4. Do you have any environments in your church in which adults can interact alongside kids and teens in a meaningful way (beyond being their Sunday school teacher or group leader)?
5. If a millennial were to walk into your church, how would he or she find God? Or would that visitor say God is missing in your church?
6. In this chapter, we saw that cool isn't enough anymore. Of the five keys to the rebirth of "cool church," which would you say accurately describe your church? Where do you have the greatest work to do?

Get Practical

1. Convene a focus group of teens or young adults who are walking away from your church or who have walked away from your church, maybe over dinner or coffee. Ask them why they're making the decision to walk away, and then don't judge; just listen. Listen and take notes. Discuss what you've learned with your team afterward.
2. Create a plan to intentionally pair adults with kids and teens so they can serve together. Prepare those adults to do more than simply "use" the kids and teens as extra hands. Prepare the adults to become mentors to those kids.
3. Do a serious assessment of how well your church is prepared to handle conversations with those who doubt, both formally and informally. Talk to your group leaders or Bible study leaders about allowing people to express their doubt without others rushing to quick or easy answers.

Make It Happen

Identify the single biggest reason kids are walking away from your church as teens or young adults. Once you've identified it, create a six-month plan to remove it.

In addition, identify two to five other key obstacles that are driving teens and young adults away. Now design a one- to two-year plan to address each of the obstacles.