

Flesh and Bones: Experimental Outreach and Church Orthodoxy

Scott Simonds
March 31, 2014



The Unification Movement and our close cousins, evangelical Christianity, are struggling to engage young adults between the ages of 18 and 29. David Kinnaman, a sociologist with the Barna Group research firm and author of *unChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks about Christianity...and Why It Matters*, analyzed data on what people in this demographic think about evangelical Christianity, and why it matters for outreach ministries.

While researching how “Outsiders” — those outside the church — view Christianity, he also discovered common reasons why young believers

are leaving the church, which he documented in his follow-up book, *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians Are Leaving Church...and Rethinking Faith*.



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Kinnaman and the Barna Group have delineated and characterized four generations which form the backdrop for his book: Elders, Boomers, Busters, and Mosaics.

Elders are characterized as having grown up in homogenous communities, engaged in organized churches, they are patriotic, and had limited means of communication outside of their neighborhoods. They lived through the Great Depression, World War II and the Korean War.

Boomers are the counterculture generation. They rebelled against tradition in part due to the Vietnam War, scientific discovery and the sexual revolution.

They embraced drugs, sex and rock and roll. Some became violent revolutionaries; others joined spiritual movements influenced greatly by Eastern mysticism.

Busters are the fallout from the boomer generation. They generally do not share the idealism or political activism of their parents. They are extremely cynical, and are oriented toward career and self-advancement. Most don't marry until their late twenties or thirties.

Mosaics are characterized by their access to information through technology. They dwell in multi-cultural communities, and pick and choose beliefs and values. They are individualistic, but their supreme value is “relationships.” However, the nature of their relationships is to support one another on their own, unique journeys.

The generations don't exist independent of one another. The first generation of Unificationists, Boomers, came from traditional families. The Divine Principle was attractive to this group because it resembles the familiar teaching of the Bible they grew up with, yet it's also a challenge to Christianity. Witnessing and teaching the Divine Principle fit the worldview and sentiments of that generation, but not the majority of Busters and Mosaics.

One Outsider summarized his perception of the church this way:

“Most people I meet assume that Christian means very conservative, entrenched in their thinking, anti-gay, anti-choice, angry, violent, illogical, empire builders; they want to convert everyone, and they generally cannot live peacefully with anyone who doesn't believe what they believe.”

Most Outsiders do not have an unfavorable view of Jesus or the Bible. Their views of the church are based on the people who claim to represent them. They believe that all religions basically teach the same thing. It's a question of how the believers practice those beliefs.

These are three big, common perceptions:

Anti-homosexual. This does not refer to the belief that homosexuality is wrong. It's a question of how a Christian treats homosexuals. Most Outsiders have relatives, friends or colleagues who are gay or lesbian. They reject groups that use political means or disinformation to oppose homosexuals.

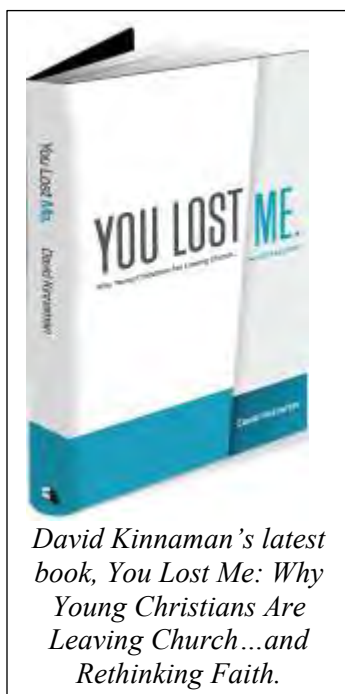
Judgmental. Outsiders are put off by Christians' air of moral superiority. They are fine with a message that upholds standards. But they don't like exclusivity, or criticizing others for their beliefs or lifestyles. The culture of the Mosaics is to support the outcast, not group conformity.

Hypocritical. Outsiders view Christians as projecting an image of living up to high moral standards, but not being completely honest about their own shortcomings. With access to information through the Internet, the critic doesn't have to dig very far to find discrepancies between words and deeds. They are jaded by a constant barrage of glitzy advertising and question whether Christians genuinely care about them when they are approached, or have ulterior motives.

Reverend Sun Myung Moon told the early followers in the U.S. (I paraphrase), "You are the bones. Bones aren't attractive, but they provide the structure for the flesh." The skeleton of the Family Federation (FFWPU) is the blessed family community. The expectations to receive the blessing were very high for the first blessings. Gradually, the qualifications became less demanding. True Parents gave the earlier couples authority to be Tribal Messiahs and pass along the blessing freely, with the understanding that tribal messiahs will assume responsibility for their tribes.

We are emerging from conversion mode looking for prepared people to join a church, other than for training purposes. The orthodox church maintains the skeletal structure with core believers and our early community of blessed couples. But to engage mainstream young adults today, we must assume a parental position and support people on their own journeys of faith, including our own adult children. Kinnaman says to be successful, a ministry has to give young adults what they want. That involves more listening, embracing the things that drive them, mentoring, and less lecturing.

Older adults need to embrace technology. The virtual community young adults are engaged in is more substantive to them than weekly meetings. Mosaics never experienced living without cell phones and the Internet. Rather than trying to convert and change lives in a weekend workshop, churches will be more successful helping young adults fulfill their dreams. Admitting our shortcomings and the failures in our movement won't put people off. It's not necessary (and not possible) to try to cover up controversy. In today's climate, everyone is flawed, and if we don't admit it, we're being hypocritical.



*David Kinnaman's latest book, **You Lost Me: Why Young Christians Are Leaving Church...and Rethinking Faith.***

Our young adults are members of the Buster and Mosaic generations. Kinnaman separates young adults who grew up in a church into four categories.

The first category is "Believers." Believers stay active with the church and remain faithful to its doctrines and traditions. "Wanderers" are friendly to the church, but explore outside and choose what they believe from various sources. They bend the rules to fit their own lifestyles. "Exiles" are people who believe the church's doctrines and practice the church's traditions privately, but feel called to serve outside the institutional church. They feel the organized church is actually an impediment to their calling. These people are often misunderstood as having left the church, when in fact they are deeply committed to serving God according to their calling.

The last category is "Prodigals." Prodigals have dissociated themselves completely from the church. They do it either because they can't reconcile the church's teachings with their own worldview, or because they had a very bad emotional experience, often with someone they looked up to in the church or in their own family who committed some act of betrayal.

Typically, one doesn't stay in one category. Young people are most active in the church during their teenage years. Once they become independent, they are exposed to all sorts of information and lifestyles. It's natural for them to drift. The Amish encourage their young people to leave their community for a while, then decide whether or not they want to return. Some will have epiphanies while participating in organized church missions. Others will wander. At any time, a person could have an overwhelming disappointment that challenges their faith.

Kinnaman emphasizes that with this generation, it's all about relationships. Don't seek to convert. Instead, seek to build authentic relationships that can survive doubt, disappointment, mistakes, in short, anything that life offers up. In that context, a lot of sharing happens naturally. Bones represent truth and tradition. Flesh is all about relationships. We need both.

I support traditional services, Divine Principle workshops, reading and teaching the words of our founder. I am also in conversation with friends I've met over the years about a broad-based outreach that supports people of faith. My friends and I have two things in common. We all have faith in a higher moral authority, whether it be "conscience," "ethical evolution" or a personal God. And most of us have some connection to my home state of Maine. That's my tribe: anyone who has ever been to Maine, or wants to visit. It has no geographical limitations, but has roots in the state's unique culture. Other communities could be based on professions, culture, sports, or scientific discovery with some element of faith or values. This is a practice Rev. Moon taught us.

However we define our own tribe, the flesh has to be somehow attached to the bone structure — not the church per se, but the blessed family community. The stronger the blessed family community, the more latitude experimental outreach programs can have without drifting too far from the core. During a conversation, a Mosaic co-worker said to me, "I'm looking for a spiritual community." In the past, I would have invited him to a service or workshop with less than a 25% chance of conversion. That day I said, "We need communities that support people on their own journeys of faith. Let's create one." That got him excited.

It's a collaborative effort. It's risky. I don't know where it will lead, but it could be a rewarding journey as we travel together and pick up others along the way.

Scott Simonds is an employment specialist with Creative Work Systems, a comprehensive non-profit rehabilitation agency serving the needs of persons with disabilities. He and his wife, Jaclyn, are part of the 2,074 couple marriage blessing (1982), have three adult children, and live in Maine. An earlier version of this article appeared on the FFWPU-USA site.