



Leaders BOOK SUMMARIES

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You Lost Me

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

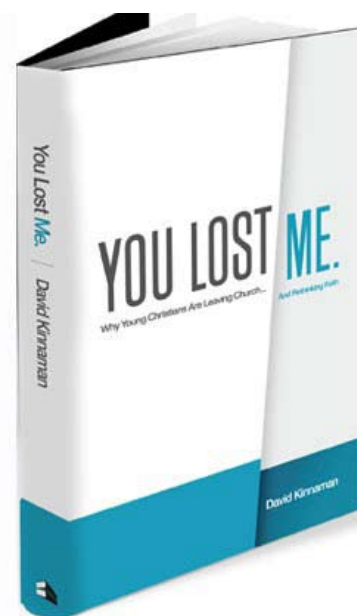
THE SUMMARY

Young adults describe their individual faith journeys in very similar language. Most of their stories include significant disengagement from church, and sometimes from Christianity altogether. It isn't only the dropping out 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 directly at the establishment and say: *you lost me*. *You Lost Me* signals their judgment that the institutional church has failed them. Whether you think that conclusion is fair or not, it *is* true that the Christian community doesn't understand the concerns, struggles, and mindsets of young drop-outs. I hope that *You Lost Me* will help bridge the gap.

Chapter 1: Faith Interrupted

In researching 18-29 year olds, there are three realities that we have discovered:

- Teen church engagement remains robust, but many of the enthusiastic teens are not growing up to be young adult disciples.
- There are different kinds of dropouts, and we need to not lump an entire generation together.
- The dropout problem, at its core, is a faith-development, or disciple-



About the Author

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making problem. The church is not adequately preparing the next generation to follow Christ in a rapidly changing culture.

Teenagers are some of the most religiously active people in America. Twenty-somethings, (or Mosaics, as they are often called) on the other hand, are the least religiously active people in the country. A lot of the spiritual energy that is present in teenagers seems to fade away during the crucial decade of the 20's.

As we looked at the patterns in our data, we discovered 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 church.

It is worth noting that the majority of young dropouts are not walking away from faith; rather, they are putting involvement in church on hold. In other words, most young Christians are struggling less with their faith in Christ than with their experience of church.

Ultimately, we are talking about issues of disciple-making. The church has some significant gaps in its disciple-making (which are actually opportunities to rethink our approach to disciple-making). Those gaps include:

- 1. Relationships.** Mosaics are highly relational, but frequently feel isolated from their parents and other older adults in the realm of faith and spirituality. While they can be self-centered and want to make a difference on their own, they also want to be mentored and do things as part of a community.
- 2. Vocation.** This is the powerful, often ignored intersection of faith and calling. Many young people are interested in serving in mainstream professions, such as science, law, media, the arts, business, etc. Yet most receive little guid-

ance from their church communities for how to connect these vocational dreams deeply with their faith in Christ.

- 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 generation in history, but many lack discernment as to how to apply that information to their lives and world.

Why does all this matter? Several reasons. First, it's a matter of heart. The spiritual lives of millions of young people are at stake. That alone should be reason enough to care. (The most common time for a young person to change their faith are the years 18-29). Second, it's an issue of accuracy. Without accurate information, Christians will either minimize the drop-out problem or sensationalize it. Neither approach is helpful. Third, it's an issue of responsibility. I'm not writing this book to blame anyone for the state of the next generation; we all have a part to play. We also have a part to play in addressing the problem. Finally, it's a matter of leadership. As we talk with current leaders, many are searching for new ways to disciple and develop the next generation. We especially need young leaders who speak the language of their peers, since they are not just slightly different from previous generations.

Chapter 2: Access, Alienation, Authority

Bob Buford, author of the popular book *Half Time*, once told me "I think this generation is not just slightly different from the past; I think they are *discontinuously* different from anything we have seen before." That is so because our culture is discontinuously different. The cultural setting in which young people have come of age is significantly changed from what was experienced during the formative years of previous generations. No generation of Christians has lived through a set of cultural changes so profound

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and lightning fast. This new reality can be summed up in three words: *access, alienation, and authority*.

Access. The first and most obvious change relates to new technology, which is providing the next generation (and the rest of us) with nearly unlimited access to other people, their ideas, and their worldviews. The heightened level of access provided by these tools is changing the way young adults think about and relate to the world. For better and worse, they have unfettered access to the world. Technology is fueling the rapid pace of change and is at the root of a massive disruption between how previous generations relate, work, think and worship and how Mosaics do those things.

Access isn't all negative. Pornography is freely available; at the same time, young Christians are creating new venues to spread the gospel and advocate for different ministries. The key thing to understand is that technology is a native language for the young; for the rest of us it is more like a second language we learned later in life.

Alienation. The second seismic cultural shift is how alienated today's teens and young adults feel from the structures that undergird our society. We might think of alienation as very high levels of isolation from family, community, and institutions. It's rooted in the massive social changes that began in the 1960's, but has developed to a whole different level.

Father absence is an example of profound social change introduced during the 1960's but is much more common today. In the 1960's, 5% of live births were to unmarried women; today it's 42%. In other words, today's kids are eight times more likely to have come into this world without married parents than were boomers.

Regarding adulthood, each generation since the Boomers has taken a longer, more circuitous path to adulthood. This transition is characterized by five key developmental tasks: leaving home, finishing school, becoming financially independent, getting married,

and having a child. Less than half of young adults have done those by age 30.

A third mark of alienating cultural change launched by the Boomers and amplified in the Mosaics is skepticism about institutions. Many young adults feel "lost" from our systems of education, economics, government, and culture; they are quite skeptical, even cynical, about the institutions that have shaped our society.

Authority. The third factor in our culture's discontinuity relates to *skepticism of authority*—new questions about who to believe and why. The default setting of our culture used to be that Christianity and the Bible were accepted sources of authority; that's no longer true.

The Bible's influence on this generation is up in the air. Young people are skeptical about the reliability of the original biblical manuscripts; they read less, and they seem less likely to believe the Scriptures have a claim on human obedience. There is also a lot of skepticism involving the role of Christianity in public life. Issues of faith are viewed as irrelevant at best, as negative at worst. It will be a challenge to the next generation to know how to respond to the growing hostility of our culture toward people of faith.

Because of access, alienation, and authority, the ability of one generation to convey the message and meaning of faith to the next generation—in thought forms, ideas, and practices they can readily understand and incorporate into their lives—has been disrupted. Young people live today in a world completely different from their elders, and they face questions and challenges that others haven't. It is affecting how they think about and understand their own faith and faith in general.

Chapter 3: Nomads and Prodigals

While dropping out is in some ways a natural part of

the maturation process, the struggles faced by MosaiCs today are exacerbated by the new realities of access, alienation, and authority, which combine to make this generation uniquely different from previous generations. Now we'll take a closer look at two types of dropouts: nomads and prodigals.

Nomads. For these young adults, faith is nomadic, seasonal, or may appear to be an optional or peripheral part of life. At some point during their teen or adult years, nomads disengage from attending church or significantly distance themselves from the Christian community. However, most don't discard faith entirely. We estimate that 40% of young adults who have a Christian background will go through a period of spiritual nomadism. It's more often a "slow fade" than a conscious choice, and not all discontinue church participation.

One of the defining characteristics of this group of dropouts is that they have a mix of positive and negative feelings about their "native" faith. Most are disenchanted with religion on some level but have not cut all ties that bind them to Christianity. Most nomads consider themselves to be Christian, although they believe that personal involvement in church is optional. The importance of faith has faded for them, although they aren't angry or hostile toward Christianity. They do tend to be spiritual experimentalists, drawing from many sources for their spiritual growth.

Prodigals. The second category of dropout consists of young people who leave their childhood or teen faith entirely. This includes those who deconvert (atheists, agnostics, and those with no affiliation) and those who switch to another faith. Most are more defined by and committed to their distance from Christianity than they are to their current spiritual perspectives. In other words, one of the identity-shaping characteristics of prodigals is that they say they are *no longer Christian*. Our research finds that many prodigals' negative experiences with Christianity run deep.

For some prodigals, who we might call "head-driven

prodigals" their reasons for abandoning the faith are rational and, many times, well-reasoned, even if many of them also feel hurt by their church experiences. The "heart-driven prodigals" on the other hand, are young people whose faith burns out in an extreme fashion, usually as a result of deep wounds, frustration, or anger, or of their own desire to live life outside the bounds of Christian faith.

Frequently head-driven prodigals define themselves by their faith choices, while heart-driven prodigals focus on their denunciation of Christianity. There often seems to be something open-ended and unresolved about heart-driven prodigals, as though their spiritual flame could reignite any time; head-driven prodigals, by contrast, seem more settled in to their distance from the faith.

Prodigals tend to feel varying levels of resentment toward Christians and Christianity, they have disavowed returning to church, if they have any regrets they usually center on their parents, and often feel as if they have broken out of constraints.

Nomads are far more common than prodigals—roughly four times more common. It's hard to recognize that not all of those missing from church have not completely left their faith; all leaders see is that they are gone. But many are pressing pause on church rather than on God. The challenge is that the new social and spiritual reality in which MosaiCs live makes it less likely that they will follow their predecessors back to church in the same numbers or in the same ways.

Chapter 4: Exiles

For our purposes, we'll define exiles as those who grew up in church and are now physically or emotionally disconnected in some way, but who also remain energized to pursue God-honoring lives. They feel the loss, in many ways, of the familiar church environment in which they once found meaning, identity, and purpose. They feel lost, yet hopeful.

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One hallmark of the exiles is their feeling that their vocation (or professional calling) is disconnected from their church experience. Their Christian background has not prepared them to live and work effectively in society. Their faith is “lost” from Monday through Friday. But rather than disappearing, exiles have a strong desire to engage the culture. They want to inform and transform the culture that surrounds them, rather than withdrawing from it. But many don’t know how. Their rejection of some mindsets and methods common to the church stem from this desire. They are trying on new ways of Christ-following that make sense to their communities and careers.

Here are some common characteristics of young exiles:

- They are not inclined toward being separate from “the world.” They want their faith to matter *in* the world.
- They are skeptical of institutions but are not wholly disengaged from them.
- Young exiles sense God moving “outside the walls of the church.”
- They are not disillusioned with tradition; they are frustrated with slick or shallow expressions of religion.
- They have not found faith to be instructive to their calling or gifts.
- They struggle when other Christians question their motives. (Older Christians in particular often have a hard time relating to their choices and concerns).

Based on our research, I believe that the number and impact of exiles rises during times of tumultuous social and spiritual transition. Biblically, the exiles of today are similar to Daniel and his friends as they tried to live out their faith in a foreign land. They seem to have cooperated with many elements of the culture, while still maintaining their unique identity. The spiritual choices that had been automatic back home were less clear and even dangerous. The world they inhabited was characterized by greater complex-

ity and religious pluralism—much like our world today. They were pushed into a period of spiritual improvisation—much like our exiles today.

The challenge for the Christian community is how to respond to the growing number of exiles. Will we do what we can to equip them to make the choices that faced Daniel in Babylon—choices about balancing cultural accommodation and faithful, Christ-centered living?

Part II--Disconnection

We thought that we would find one big reason why young people drop out, or at most two or three. Instead, we found a wide range of perspectives, frustrations, and disillusionments that compel young Mosaics to disconnect. There are six broad reasons twenty-somethings give for dropping out; we’ll go through those now.

Chapter 5: Overprotective

Protectiveness has become a way of life in our culture (which isn’t all bad). But our obsession with safety has shaped two generations of Boomer and Buster parents who are deeply risk-averse when it comes to their kids. It should come as no surprise, then, that many young Christians feel overprotected. Millions perceive that the church has kept them fearful and detached from the world—the same world that they are called to redeem. Specifically, we hear these criticisms from young and former Christians:

- Christians demonize everything outside of the church; every non-Christian thing is somehow “bad.”
- Christians are afraid of pop culture, especially its movies and music.
- Christians maintain a false separation of sacred and secular.
- Christians do not want to deal with the complexity of the world.

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This risk aversion is causing major disconnections for Moslems. One of the most significant consequences of being overprotected is that millions of young people look for excitement outside of traditional boundaries. That may be porn or sexual experimentation, drugs, thrill-seeking, or any of a host of other things. Risk-free Christianity also inspires the pursuit of other forms of spirituality that offer something more than yawns.

The unwillingness to take risks shows up for many in an inability to make decisions. Some young people are so afraid of making a mistake that they can't make decisions—because the consequences of a wrong decision must be unthinkable (why else would their parents protect them so completely?) Another consequence is the loss of many of the most talented, creative individuals from the church community. This perception—that the church is overprotective—is most common among young exiles, who feel stuck between the safe, comfortable world of their church experiences and the dangerous, all-encompassing faith they believe God requires.

A growing sentiment of this generation is that they want to be “a counter-culture for the common good.” They want to follow Christ in a way that does not separate them from the culture. They want to be culture makers, not culture avoiders. Similarly, I know some young believers who are reluctant to be linked to the “Christian tribe,” which has a decidedly negative reputation in many sectors of our society. It's not that they hide their faith; they are just *intentional* about when and to whom they reveal it. Rather than judge these young people as being ashamed of the gospel, we should think of them as missionaries to a foreign culture that knows next to nothing about Christ.

It's a challenging task, given our culture's powers of seduction. Some Christians withdraw from culture completely; others accommodate and try to seek the world's approval. The challenge for these young believers is to embrace holiness and obedience in the midst of the culture they live in and want to influence. (Looking again at Daniel, we see that holiness

both defined him and gave him influence in the world around him).

Chapter 6: Shallow

I think the next generation's disconnection stems from the failure of the church to impart Christianity as a comprehensive way of understanding reality and living fully in today's culture. To many young people who grew up in Christian churches, Christianity seems boring, irrelevant, and sidelined from the real issues people face. It seems *shallow*.

That shallowness has two sides. We find that young adults often have a very superficial understanding of the faith and the Bible. We also find that faith communities often convey a lot of information *about* God rather than discipling young believers to live in the reality of God.

There are several ways the church contributes to this shallowness. First is in the area of relationships. Most young adults don't recall having a meaningful relationship with an adult through their church, and 80% never had an adult mentor. Our approach to discipleship is too often a conveyor belt approach that is the same for everyone and focuses mostly on imparting information. We also fail to provide meaningful rituals. If they exist at all, we often fail to provide a clear sense of their meaning and importance.

A third problem found in many churches is expecting too little of the next generation. (We also often expect too little of ourselves). We often mistakenly equate attendance at youth events with growth in discipleship. Finally, too many of our youth ministries focus on numbers of attendees rather than measuring spiritual growth and transformation. We emphasize quantity over quality. It's actually easier to put on events for large numbers than deeply mentoring each of them into a mature walk with God.

There are three things the church can do to help

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young people deepen their faith. First is to recapture an apprenticeship model of discipleship. Second is to give our young people an experience of God. Many admit they are frustrated with their faith because "God seems missing from my church experience." They see a gap between what they read in the Bible and what they experience in church. Finally, this generation wants truth, not spiritual soft-serve. This is a generation that hungers for substantive answers to life's biggest questions. They have access to lots of information about what to do; what they are missing is addressing *how* and *why*.

Chapter 7: Anti-science

Millions of young Christians perceive Christianity to be in opposition to science. Issues of science are one of the significant points of disconnection between the next generation and Christianity.

Science and technology have come to dominate and define our collective culture; they shape our current reality. Today's young people have been more profoundly influenced by the development and impact of science than previous generations have. From their earliest days, science and technology have had a hand in nearly every area of their lives. Young people have never lived in a world without email, cell phones, or digital music and video. Because science has come to play such a defining role in our broader culture, it is shaping young adults' perceptions of the church.

In our research, roughly 30% of young people with a Christian background felt that the church was out of touch with the scientific world we live in. Given that science is seen as the "authority" in our world, that creates problems for young adults as to who to believe or look to for answers.

Another challenge relating to science is the disconnect between faith and those who are science-minded. The church is losing too many young scientists. Those who have specific gifts, abilities, and passions in the

realm of science appear to be some of the most likely to struggle with their faith. They have a difficult time connecting the claims of Christianity with scientific evidence and methods.

Add to that this fact: more than half of churchgoing 13-17 year olds say they hope to train for a science-related career (that includes medical & health related industries, engineering, technology, research, etc.) But issues of science are rarely talked about in U.S. churches. Only 1% of youthworkers said they have addressed any topic related to science in the last year! If that is the case, how can we possibly hope to prepare a generation to follow Jesus in our science-dominated culture?

If we are to be shapers of culture, rather than blind consumers of it, we must prepare our young people to be in-but-not-of science. Too many young science geeks have been told their curiosity is dangerous, rather than being encouraged to investigate God's creation with wonder and reverence. We must do a better job training all young Christians (not just the science-oriented) to think clearly and honestly about matters of science, including understanding the philosophical underpinnings.

We are long past the point where we can give answers to our young people. No single pastor, youthworker, or parent can begin to master all the scientific questions and challenges that present themselves to our young people. What we can do is teach them *how* to think, rather than *what* to think. In other words, we need to give them good intellectual tools with which to interact with science. If we can teach them *how* to think, they will be able to engage and come up with answers we can't give them.

Chapter 8: Repressive

Sexuality is one of the greatest expressions of God's creativity; it's also confounding and confusing to teenagers and young adults in their spiritual journeys.

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Marriage and childbearing, if they happen, are coming later in life for most young adults—but sex is in the picture earlier than ever. Among those with a Christian background, the perception is that the church is out of step with the times. Many view the church as repressive—controlling, joyless, and stern when it comes to sex and sexuality. Many are also dissatisfied with the wider culture’s empty permissiveness.

Christian teens and young adults are caught between two narratives about sexuality, which we will call *traditionalism* and *individualism*. The traditionalist view can best be summarized this way: *Sex? What sex?* Any talk on the topic is excluded from polite conversation. Shame is the watchword when it comes to sexuality. There is something dirty about all sexual pleasure, even within marriage. Sex is so shameful it would be best for everyone if it was confined to procreation. This view is seen as repressive by those who adhere to an individualistic ethic.

The new narrative, which has come to define our Western culture, is that of the individualist: *Sex is about me*. In this view, sex is all about personal satisfaction. The goals of sex are pleasure, freedom, and self-expression. Any “rules” are self-defined, or at worst, defined by whatever everyone else in the social circle says is “normal.” (Ironically, even today’s abstinence message often falls into this approach: the message is that if you save yourself for marriage, you’ll have better sex with one partner. It’s still “all about me”).

The changing narrative of sexuality has been shaped in the next generation by the three A’s we discussed earlier. Young people grow up with unprecedented access to sexual content via the internet, TV, movies, music, etc. Their *alienation* from key relationships (especially absent fathers) has created a host of emotional issues, many of which manifest in their sexual decision-making. And their suspicion of *authority* invites them to dismiss “old-fashioned” traditions without wondering first if they might actually be life-giving and healthy.

Young Christians are torn between the two competing narratives—and neither of them is the Christian view of sex. A Christian view is going to be relational. Rather than saying *sex is taboo* (traditionalist) or that *sex is about me* (individualist), the relational approach says *sex is good and is about us*.

Sex is profoundly relational, and it matters to everyone. It is integral to the health and wholeness of families, churches, and communities. Ask anyone who has had an abortion (or an affair) how it affected their relationships with their significant other, parents, and church family. While most Americans believe that their sexual appetites are a matter of personal preference, the fact is that our sexual practices and beliefs have a far-reaching impact on those around us. Sexual sin is not worse than other sin, but it does have profound consequences for relationships.

Because sex is about us, we need to talk about it. Too often the church isn’t a safe place to have that kind of conversation. We must cultivate an environment in the church that invites open conversation about the power, beauty, darkness, and full reality of sex. Mosaics *will* find out what they want to know and *will* connect with others asking the same questions; the issue is whether the church will be part of that conversation.

In the process of talking, we need to have a willingness to talk about and “own” our struggles with sex, while staying alert for any pretense in our hearts. Hypocrisy might be defined as *leniency toward ourselves and strict standards for everyone else*. That all too often describes the church, or at least how young people perceive it.

Chapter 9: Exclusive

One of the most pervasive perceptions among young adults is that the church is *exclusive*. Many in the next generation believe that Christians have an insider-outsider mentality, which flies in the face of their collec-

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tive values and reference points. *Tolerance* has been the cultural North Star for most of their upbringing; inclusiveness, diversity, and political correctness are ideals that have shaped this generation. That reality poses a challenge for the church, in four related ways.

- **Agreement vs. Disagreement.** Young people prefer to find areas of common ground rather than emphasizing differences that may lead to conflict. The history of the church points to a willingness of Christians to split with each other on a host of issues.
- **Peer Responsibility vs. Individuality.** Young adults look to their peers to be their moral and spiritual compass, and base their views on what seems fair, loyal, and acceptable to their friends. In the west we tend to emphasize the individual over the group; that is the exact opposite of how young people relate to their world.
- **Fairness vs. Rightness.** Young people today tend to determine the rightness or wrongness of their choices by what seems fair or reasonable. They aren't looking for an objective criteria, so they might ignore what is "right" if it doesn't seem "fair."
- **Participation vs. Exclusion.** The majority of young people dread being excluded; they want to participate. Underneath that is the belief that *everyone has the right to belong*. No one should be excluded for any reason. (In the church we tend to make belief a prerequisite for belonging).

Young people today are more likely to believe in religious pluralism and less likely to share their faith with others. They don't like denomination's emphasis on how we are different, preferring to focus on what we have in common. And they believe the church is particularly unwelcoming to gays and lesbians.

There is some good news underneath this perception. Those who do share their faith tend to emphasize the importance of action; of serving those they are sharing with. There is also a high value on reaching and ministering to the outsider or marginalized—the "last" and "least" of these.

Chapter 10: Doubtless

While not everyone who doubts leaves the church, doubt is a significant reason young adults disengage from church. Our research shows that there are actually different kinds of doubt that affect people.

- **Intellectual doubt.** This includes people who aren't satisfied with rational proofs that God exists or that Jesus was resurrected, and those who wrestle with "big questions" like the existence of evil.
- **Institutional doubt.** This relates to skepticism about the place or value of the church; many young Christians have a negative perception of it.
- **Unexpressed doubt.** This is a biggie. Many feel it isn't safe to talk about their doubts or questions, which means they don't talk about them and then don't get any help in dealing with them.
- **Transitional doubt.** This doubt is rooted in personal, rather than intellectual reasons, like the death of a loved one or a life crisis.

One of the best ways to deal with doubt is actually giving young people the opportunity to put feet to their faith. Many of the deepest truths of Christianity become clear when we put our faith into action; in the *doing*, faith makes sense. Sometimes the best thing we can do with our unbelief is to stop focusing on it and get busy for the sake of others.

Chapter 11: What's Old is New

There are three things I've learned while studying the next generation:

1. The church needs to reconsider how we make disciples. Segregating by age, in particular, needs to be rethought. Biblically, a "generation" is all the age groups alive at a specific time who are

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working together to fulfill God's agenda.

2. We need to rediscover Christian calling and vocation. In particular, we need to embrace the idea that calling isn't just to the professional ministry.
3. We need to reprioritize wisdom over information as we seek to know God. Wisdom is the spiritual, mental, and emotional ability to relate rightly to God, to others, and to our culture.

The upcoming generation brings a tremendous opportunity to rethink how we do church and how we live out our faith in today's world. They are asking hard questions, and many have soured on the church, and sometimes faith as a whole. But I believe if we take them seriously and develop honest, integrous answers to those questions, the future will be bright.

Since they aren't here, we don't do the things that might draw them. It takes a lot of vision and courage to reach out to a group that isn't engaged or is suspicious due to past experiences. But the payoff is huge. Young adults bring energy, creativity, and passion that the church desperately needs—when they are engaged. If we want to reach the world, we need to reach those in their 20's, for their sake and for ours. They are the ones who will be the future leaders of the church, if we reach and disciple them effectively. I believe it is a challenge worth embracing.

Pastor's Perspective

David Kinnaman certainly nails it with *You Lost Me*. I have three kids, ages 18, 21, and 22. Everything he says echoes conversations I have had with them or their friends. The questions about God and the church, the disillusionment, the struggles they face—all are spot on. I suspect that anyone who is engaged in ministry to younger people will quickly recognize the attitudes and ideas Kinnaman outlines.

Rather than a specific thing that stood out, I think the value of *You Lost Me* is in detailing how widespread and common the experiences of young people are. It is all too easy to stick our heads in the sand and dismiss it, or think that it is only a few people who are wrestling with these things. Of course, if that's how we view it, then we have no reason to make any changes or rethink what we are doing.

Part of the challenge for church leaders is that we so often gear what we are doing for those who are already in church. Often that doesn't include many 20-somethings. So we end up with a Catch-22; we don't address the things they need or do things in a way that is appealing to them, so they don't show up.