

The Lies We Buy About Youth Ministry

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Ever had a neighbor who played his music so loud you could feel the vibrations in your fingernails? That guy probably played music you hate, and you had to listen to it all the time. Obviously, I'm speaking from experience here. Today we're thrilled we have quiet neighbors (with rambunctious boys and a dog, *we* may be the loud ones), but back in the day our neighbor's loud music swarmed through the cracks in our house like a biblical plague. Though we eventually got used to it, it was maddening.

Likewise, as a professional sociologist I know American Christians hear a steady beat of "loud music"—*aka bad news*—about the Church and its people. In the book I've just written, *Christians are Hate-Filled Hypocrites...and Other Lies You've Been Told* (Bethany House), I catalog many endemic perceptions about American Christianity and put them to the test, using the best available sociological data. The verdict? It turns out that many of the bad things that we hear about Christianity are just wrong; in fact, there's a lot of good news about the Church that's been overshadowed by panicky diatribes and misinformation.

So this is my opportunity to pull back the curtain on what's actually happening, and what's not happening, in youth ministry—the good, the twisted, and the outright false.

Fear & Loathing In Youth Ministry-Land

Want to hear some really "loud music"/bad news? Listen to the way some Christian leaders talk about the fate of our young people—it's absolutely dismal. A few years ago there was a big hubbub about the impending demise of Christianity in America—a leading youth ministry organization warned that, essentially, research indicated there would be next-to-no evangelical believers by the end of the next decade. In the church news department, it doesn't get much worse than this.

In reality, there's no meaningful evidence that Christianity is on the verge of collapse. The source of the original "research" prediction was a comically bad survey that not only didn't meet professional standards, but fueled outright false assumptions. The Christian faith of this generation of young people is, well, a lot like other generations. For example, most young people today report some form of religious involvement. Also...

- In a 2006 nationwide study, three-quarters of 16- to 20-years-olds reported that their religious faith was "somewhat" to "extremely important" in shaping their everyday lives.
- Almost three-quarters of them (70 percent) identified themselves as Christian, and only a smattering (5 percent) described themselves as atheists or agnostics.

- About half of American young people say they attend religious services at least once a month.
- Teenagers typically become more religious as they get older—it's not surprising that marriage, having children, and crises of purpose and identity tend to lead them to increased faith as they move through life. The same dynamic is at work in every U.S. generation, including those who are now middle-aged and elderly. Can I guarantee the same for today's generation of teenagers? Nope—but it's a reasonable assumption.

There's nothing particularly evil or malevolent about today's young people—listening to too much Miley Cyrus has not corrupted their souls. Christianity has prospered in previous generations, even though it has faced significant cultural foes. The '80s was a time of greed and selfishness—labeled the “me” generation. The '70s were infiltrated by disco music and ubiquitous polyester clothing—now *that's* evidence of a fallen world. The '60s celebrated sex, drugs, rock 'n roll and a rejection of established authorities. If ever a generation should've turned from Christianity, it was the children of the '60s. But now they're the ones who are telling us that today's youth are hopelessly lost.

Sex, Drugs, & Rock 'n Roll

Let's move on to the juicy stuff—drug abuse, premarital sex, and the “rock 'n roll” lifestyle. Christian parents and youth workers understandably worry about kids dipping their toes, or their torsos, into these cesspools. But normal concerns have been blown up into apocalyptic over-reactions.

A few months ago I heard an elderly pastor warn his congregation about the number of kids playing the reprobate video game *Grand Theft Auto*—no doubt, the game is a terrible influence on those kids who play it. But the pastor told his congregants that kids were, more and more, learning how to hire prostitutes because the game was teaching them how to do it. Yes, *Grand Theft Auto* is a sleazy game—but dire predictions such as the pastor's can't be verified through social research.

1. Drug Abuse—When it comes to drug abuse there's good news—society-wide, fewer and fewer young people are using and abusing drugs.

- In 1980, more than half of high school seniors had smoked marijuana in the previous year—now it's a little over a third. Likewise, use of LSD, cocaine, and crack are all down.
- Since 1980 alcohol abuse has also decreased. Two decades ago four out of 10 (40 percent) of high school seniors reported binge drinking (five or more drinks in a row) in the previous two weeks. Now? The percentage is down to a quarter (25 percent). Even cigarette use among teenagers is less common.
- Among all adolescents, Christian youth are among the least likely to use drugs. In a nationwide study of 16- to 18-year-olds, a third (34 percent) of kids who have no religious affiliation smoke pot, but only one out of six (16 percent) of kids from

conservative Protestant families did. Likewise, a little over half (52 percent) of nonreligious kids reported getting drunk in the previous year, compared to only a third (33 percent) of the conservative Protestants. The percentage of kids who abuse drugs goes down as church attendance goes up—among Protestant kids who attended church about once a week, only a few (8 percent) smoked marijuana and only a quarter (23 percent) reported getting drunk in the previous year.

2. Premarital Sex—There's mixed news on the sex-before-marriage front.

- Unfortunately, a little over half (54 percent) of today's 18-year-olds have had sexual intercourse. However, this is about the same percentage as the past two generations. Among kids born in the '70s and '80s, six out of 10 (59 percent) reported having sex by age 18—among those born in the '50s and '60s, half (50 percent) reported having sex. This suggests that while levels of premarital sex today are high, they're not worse than what we grew up with.

- Christian kids are less likely to have premarital sex. Among 16- to 18-year-olds, a little less than half (47 percent) of nonreligious kids have had sex, compared to only a third (34 percent) of conservative Protestant teenagers.

- The numbers are less dramatic when it comes to oral sex—a little over half (54 percent) of nonreligious kids and four out of 10 (38 percent) of conservative Protestant kids have engaged in it. Conservative Protestant teenagers who regularly attend church have the lowest numbers—23 percent for intercourse and 26 percent for oral sex.

Do these statistics mean we shouldn't be concerned about our kids getting involved in drugs and premarital sex? Not at all. These behaviors trap far too many kids—Christians and non-Christians. However, it appears that Christian parents, youth workers, and others in the Christian community have been effective in helping teenagers stand strong against these behaviors.

The Great Satan, College

What happens to Christian kids when they go off to college? As a professor at a public university, I meet students who were active Christians in high school but have abandoned a faithful lifestyle in college. Maybe they got sucked into the party culture, or maybe they were bowled over by morally suspect teaching in their classes. College can be a tough time for Christian kids—this is exactly why I've publically identified myself as a Christian; I want to encourage the Christian students at my university. I don't want them to equate higher education with a loss of faith.

Should Christian parents fear having their children attend college—secular or faith-based? Not necessarily. For many religious traditions, more education equates with less religious commitment. However, for evangelical Christians, attending college has, on the whole, a beneficial effect on their faith. Researchers have found that evangelicals who graduate from college, compared to those who have less education, view their faith as more important, are more likely to believe in God, attend church more regularly, and pray more frequently.

Who'd have thunk it?

Researchers point to two main reasons for this surprising dynamic:

1. When evangelical Christians go to college, they confront the mainstream culture. This confrontation can strengthen both their religious beliefs as well as their identity as a Christian.
2. Christians who attend college often find support in church groups and student organizations such as InterVarsity Christian Fellowship and Campus Crusade for Christ. These fellowships tend to buffer the secularizing effects of college for them.

What's Motivating 'Stat Abuse' In the Church?

In my book, *Christians are Hate-Filled Hypocrites...and Other Lies You've Been Told*, I did not set out to uncover all the good news about American Christianity that I could scrape together. Instead, I wanted to clear the air of half-truths and outright falsehoods, using the most accurate data available. What I discovered is that, in many ways, things are going well for Christians and the Church. Nonetheless, I'm positive that we'll continue to hear lots of bad news, especially about our young people.

Why?

Here's my theory: Christian leaders sometimes use suspect (and almost always negative) research to serve larger purposes. For example, some use *apparently* bad news about teenagers to motivate the church to take youth issues more seriously. Pastors who are about to preach a sermon series on how to raise up children in the faith will almost certainly include examples of how badly young people are doing and the many dangers that face them. Included in those examples will be some scary statistics about young people leaving the church and acting immorally. So in the interests of advancing the Kingdom of God, leaders are tempted to seize on bad news that can give oomph to their arguments, even if that bad news has not been critically explored.

At the beginning of this article I targeted a "research finding" that predicted the imminent demise of the evangelical church. I'm pretty sure the good people behind this prediction believed the patently false statistic their campaign was based on would help them promote their message and, therefore, advance the Kingdom of God. They, like many in the marketing and advertising world, used fear to create a need for their "product." You expect a home-security company to pound into us the dangers of home invasions to emphasize the need for its services, for example.

But a steady stream of suspicious bad news about American Christianity has negative consequences. If we think the church—the body of Christ—is failing, why would we want to give ourselves in service to it? Why would we invite others to participate in it? And if Christian teenagers are all abandoning their faith after graduation, what confidence do we have in the power of the gospel? Bad news is demoralizing—which is perfectly fine, as long as it represents a true picture of where we're at right now. When it doesn't, that bad news is simply fear-mongering and manipulation.

There's a lot of good news about the Good News. Yes, raising young people will always pose challenges for both parents and youth workers, and sometimes things will go badly. However, the facts say we don't have to cower in fear of impending doom—we should go forth in a spirit of power and confidence. The time and effort put in by previous Christian generations has made a difference in the lives of Christian young people—we hope and pray that ours will as well.

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