Dreams and Visions

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The Barna Group conducts research on emerging cultural trends. It has spent the last five years researching why young people drop out of church. Their findings are summarized in a new book by David Kinnaman entitled, *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians are Leaving Church and Rethinking Faith*. Their study substantiates that the Christian church in America is struggling to retain and attract young adults.

According to their research, 60 percent of people active in church in their teen years drop out in their 20s. Let’s imagine these young people growing up in church. Three of them will drop out of church involvement as 18 to 29 year olds. Those who drop out still consider themselves Christians. They are not abandoning the faith; they are dropping out of conventional church involvement. They regard the church as irrelevant to their life. They are looking to find a way to follow Jesus that connects with their real life.

Some people want to lay this responsibility for dropping out at the feet of today’s secular colleges and universities. In truth, researchers tell us that most young people are emotionally disconnected from church by their 16th birthday.

This fade from church doesn’t occur overnight. It originates with their parents. Today’s 20-somethings are simply continuing a trend set for them by their parents’ generation. The so-called Boomer Generation, those born between the years of 1946-1964, was the first generation to drop out of active church involvement in significant numbers as young adults.

Newer generations of Americans have become increasingly skeptical of institutions of any kind. Religious institutions are viewed with similar suspicion.

Today’s generation of 20-somethings don’t want simple answers to complex social problems. Churches in America are not particularly skillful at dealing with complex social issues, thereby widening the irrelevance gap.

When young adults are asked about the church’s message, most answer that our message has primarily to do with behavior. We tend to measure Christianity by a list of do’s and don’ts. Somehow the core gospel message of a saving relationship with Jesus Christ has become obscured.
Many young adults have been exposed to a superficial form of Christianity. Most 18-29 year olds I know possess an uncanny ability to detect authenticity. Whenever older people dabble in religion and play at church, younger people pick up the discrepancy. Young people are adept at telling the difference between real people and phony people.

Newer generations, in my opinion, are not looking for slick worship. Contrary to popular opinion, they are not looking to be entertained. They want to be challenged and summoned for some great cause.

Some people will minimize this church drop-out problem. They adopt a Little Bo Peep method of dealing with the problem, “Leave them alone and they’ll come home.” Returning to the fold as their parents did after a two-to-three year hiatus from church is one thing. But coming back after a decade or longer is considerably more problematic.

The Bible doesn’t address young adults by name. The reason for this omission is rather obvious. There were only two categories of people in Biblical society: children and adults. In Biblical times, people had jobs and were married in their mid-teens. Jesus’ parents are a case in point. Mary and Joseph were no more than 16, perhaps younger, when they married.

Adolescence has become a recent sociological development. A landmark study in 1904 was the first to identify adolescence as a distinct life stage. The word “teenager” first appeared in the English language in 1941.

In the late 1960s, another life stage began to take shape—what we call young adulthood. The Barna Group prefers the designation “emerging adults” or “Mosaics” to describe this stage between adolescence and the enduring responsibilities of adulthood.

In previous generations, there were obvious markers to indicate passage into adulthood: financial independence from family, career choice, marriage and children. These traditional markers have now been delayed. Most young adults do not expect to be married until their late 20s, if at all. Children come along later as well. They don’t settle on a career until much later than their parents. The issues related to adolescence have stretched well into their 20s. Young people are now entering adulthood much later. This delay is particularly noticeable and acute for young men.

Our Scripture lesson from Acts recounts the coming of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost. Jesus told his disciples it was to their advantage for him to go away, “For if I don’t go away, the Holy Spirit will not come to you” (John 16:7).
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When Jesus lived in a body, he submitted himself to the limitations of human form, meaning he could only be one place at time. But after his resurrection from the dead and his ascension to God’s right hand, he can now be everywhere at once through the Holy Spirit.

When the Holy Spirit comes upon Jesus’ disciples like a mighty wind and tongues of fire, the people assembled in Jerusalem for the harvest festival of Pentecost hear the good news of Jesus Christ in their native languages. Some scoff that Jesus’ disciples are drunk with wine. But Peter interprets these events as fulfilling the Old Testament prophecy of Joel, “In the last days it will be, says the Lord, that I will pour out my Spirit on all people and your sons and daughters will prophesy” (Acts 2:17). This word prophecy doesn’t necessarily mean these sons and daughters will make bold predictions about the future. Rather, the Holy Spirit will give them capacity to declare the mighty acts of God in Jesus Christ.

God declares through Joel, “Your young men will see visions and your old men will dream dreams.” Young and old alike will be filled with the Spirit of the Lord. Young men will speak about God through the daylight hours just as old men will dream of God at night. That is, they will speak of God constantly.

No one will be left out. Old people will not be marginalized. They will be honored and revered for their spiritual insight. Young people will be prized also. They won’t be shelved or dismissed on account of age.

What a glorious vision to imagine young and old alike filled with the Holy Spirit. Our culture has become highly stratified by age. Technology only widens the generation gap. If you doubt what I am saying, ask yourself how many Facebook friends you have that are not in your age demographic.

During the Sundays of June and early July, we’re focusing on five strategic objectives for our church. Last summer, 832 of you completed surveys evaluating our church. This data combined with input from ten focus groups became the impetus for three retreats for elders and staff. We arrived at five strategic objectives or advancing goals for your consideration. We’re asking you to help us discern where God wants us to invest our time and resources for the future.

We’re asking for your feedback and counsel. You can email us at Recalcuting@viennapres.org. After worship this morning, elders are available in the hall for your input and counsel.

Stan discussed last Sunday the first strategic goal is that of spiritual transformation: “To help people become more like
Christ for the sake of others by engaging them in the process of spiritual transformation through personal spiritual disciples, worship, growth groups and service.” The core mission of this church is disciple-making. Our goal is to become disciples and to make disciples. Our church has been working with TAG consulting ministry to help in this discerning process. Let me lift one sentence from their report, “While VPC has a clear understanding of itself as a disciple-making church, it is not perceived as a vision or direction. Rather it is seen as an identity.”

People in our church can identify our mission as disciple-making, yet we are unclear of what discipleship means for our everyday lives. We want everyone to know where they are on their journey with Christ and implement a concrete personal plan for spiritual growth.

The second strategic objective involves next generation ministry: “Develop an inviting ministry that meets college age and young adults where they are on their spiritual journeys and come alongside them on their walk with God in the VPC community.” Some of you fit this 18 to 29 age demographic. We’d like to hear from you. You are, after all, bright, capable people. You have insights to share about our church and reaching people in your age and circumstance.

Those of you who are older also have a vital role to play in reaching newer generations. Studies indicate that young people are far less likely to drop out of church when three factors are well in hand. First, if both parents are committed to Christ and his church. No surprise here! The primary institution for Christian formation is the home, not the church. Second, if the minister(s) of that church preaches engaging, inspiring sermons. What can I say? Third, if older, seasoned members in the faith are invested in the spiritual development of emerging adults. We need seasoned saints who are willing to mentor younger members in the faith.

It’s been my conviction for the past 33 years that God has big plans for our church; bigger plans than we have yet realized. In these days, God desires to pour out His Spirit on all people. He wants our sons and daughter to prophesy. God wants young and old alike to see visions and dream dreams.

Young adults today are reluctant about making commitments. Maybe they’ve watched older people botch the commitments we’ve made or perhaps the dizzying array of choices leaves them immobilized. Yet, I’ve also observed when newer generations commit to something, they are “all in.” They want to be summoned for some great cause. There is no greater cause than following Jesus Christ with your life.