

### Intro

This training session was inspired by a reading a review of a book by David Kinnaman called 'Why Young Christians Are Leaving Church... and Rethinking Faith'. It also comes out of watching a talk on GOD TV, writings from Creation Ministries and personal experience of young people leaving church. Here we look at the research, present some more ideas and some possible solutions / things to consider in your youth work and in your church, as often it's the church they 'leave' and not the 'youth work' !

Let's be very clear from the off. There are **no** easy answers, **no** simple solutions as every young person and every church / situation is different. These are principles that may help. It's really up to **you** as a youth worker or leader to consider what you do specifically.

### The basis of this training session from the book

The essence of the Kinnaman book is that young people are leaving church mainly due to five general criteria. The list below was taken from a Christianity Today email / webpage-

<https://www.christianitytoday.com/pastors/2012/winter/youngleavechurch.html>(accessed May 2019).

**Isolationism.** One-fourth of 18 to 29 year-olds say church demonizes everything outside church, including the music, movies, culture, and technology that define their generation.

**Shallowness.** One-third call church boring, about one-fourth say faith is irrelevant and Bible teaching is unclear. One-fifth say God is absent from their church experience.

**Anti-science.** Up to one-third say the church is out of step on scientific developments and debate. As we'll see, this isn't quite so simplistic. One of the main issues is that scientific teaching is inadequate in church. Just saying 'God did it' may be true but it needs rigorous investigation. Actual observable science proves God and teens need to be armed with this in an unbelieving world.

**Sex.** The church is perceived as simplistic and judgmental. For a fifth or more, a "just say no" philosophy is insufficient in a techno-porno world. Young Christian singles are as sexually active as their non-churched friends, and many say they feel judged.

**Exclusivity.** Three in 10 young people feel the church is too exclusive in this pluralistic and multi-cultural age. And the same number feel forced to choose between their faith and their friends.

**Doubters.** The church is not a safe place to express doubts say over one-third of young people, and one-fourth have serious doubts they'd like to discuss.

These are some of the conclusions of the book...

So are there any other reasons..?

### **Other possible reasons**

I'd also add that young people leave church because of many other reasons. They are under huge peer pressure and the world around understandably seems far more attractive than church.

I have seen a number of young people leave church because church is far too often incredibly boring (I agree!) I'll come back to this but there is a difference between hype and jumping about the place and real **life** that comes from the Holy Spirit.

Others have been hurt by the church for various reasons and carry a grudge against individuals or the church as a whole, while often not blaming God at all (and often not blaming the youth worker / continuing to have sporadic contact with the youth worker).

I have heard a number of young people say they are not allowed to express doubts at church or that they are not allowed to think.

Other times, young people simply choose to walk away from church for no particular reason. They may not even be able to identify why they leave!

Another factor to add in to the mix is one I heard from a speaker when he explained that we do some incredible children's and youth work in our churches that are fun, engaging, creative and full of life. Then at some point we expect young people to attend a service which is mainly static and follows a fairly normal routine. We say to children that God is fun but then we lose that fun.

A number of young people leave because they are not involved in the church / don't get to connect with others / or simply don't get asked / given opportunities. This is incredibly sad. We **must** empower young people **now** as they are the church of now and we need them and what God is saying them to reach the next generation and to keep church fresh and relevant. If we don't do this, our churches will die.

Others will leave because people are fakes and because of other people's hypocrisy. This is very key - we need to model God and must be who we say we are! Integrity is vital and a fruit of the Spirit!

Finally, various young people see their friends leave church, or move away, or go off to University (maybe they aren't a University type so stay behind and then lose their peer group). Many UK churches are so small that having Christian friends within the church of the same age can be impossible.

Many young people and young adults leave church because of genuine disappointment. This may be to do with seemingly unanswered prayers or because they can't find a boyfriend / girlfriend (an increasing problem).

A lot of young people are judged by people in church (all too big a problem generally!) So do your best to deflect criticism and help young people get past any things said as far as you can. And do your best to make sure young people don't leave because of you but remember, you are not responsible for their decisions! Don't ever feel guilty as that's an attack from the enemy. You're called to love God, love young people and be faithful 😊

## **Questions...**

Why have young people left your church?

What, if anything can you do about it / to help prevent it? (The million dollar question!!)

Have you found anything that works elsewhere that you could do, to one extent or another?

## **Working Out Theology That Answers The Questions**

Whatever you believe about creationism or evolution, 'Creation Ministries' has a point that it's worth bearing in mind. The point is that we often talk about 'Bible stories' as if they are somehow like fairy stories or made up. In actual fact we need to teach Bible truths and Bible events, not 'stories'.

Beyond this we need to enable people to think (for example there are a huge amount of Bible resources that are scientific, from both creationist and theistic evolutionary positions. Much of this when presented to those who believe in atheism or evolution blows their mind and leaves them doubting their once strongly held views about their being no God!)

We need to develop a theology that answers the questions that children and young people have. This is not about manipulating the Bible or trampling on Biblical truths but about a theology and ways of 'doing church' that don't indoctrinate but enable young people to be confident in their faith.

## **A theology to help them stand - Jesus must be central**

So how can you put into place something that empowers and enables young people to stand firmly as possible on 'both feet' in turbulent times?

I would say that in everything the answer is Jesus. This is very 'simple' but not 'simplistic'! If we have a passion for Jesus that consumes us, then nothing else will satisfy. Getting to that place is unique for every person but deciding to put God first in all we do and being fully open to him using us and moving in our lives, times together is key. I never want to put limits on God in my life but unfortunately I do. Lord help us all to find full life and freedom in you.

## **How can we respond practically..?**



**1. Confronting isolationism.** The world around us doesn't know God and is (without knowing it) trapped by the lies of the devil against God. Is there a way we can empower our young people to be strong in their faith and themselves so that they mix with life around them but are not mixed into it and into insignificance? This comes with trusting them, supporting them, training them, teaching the Bible with relevance and action, praying over them and letting them work out the fullness of who God has made them to be. As the book 'Faith Under Fire' by Canon Andrew White says, "Don't take care, take risks!"

I've heard people talk about evil genres of music (eg heavy music or hip-hop). Yet a lot of very heavy music is done by Christians! And it's very rarely the music that's evil, it's the spirit of antichrist in the lyrics and lifestyle that is evil. So we don't withdraw out of the world unless it corrupts us. Matthew tells us to shine like lights and to put the light on a stand so people see and God gets glorified. This means let's do things that promote the good, the right, the positive, the uplifting and what is Godly. Let's be trend setters but for righteousness!



**2. Shallowness.** The famous preacher Derek Prince once said that we could carry on doing church without the Holy Spirit and 90% of church life would carry on. He meant that only 10% of what we do is Spirit-filled and God inspired. We need to cut out the clutter and the irrelevance.

We need to talk about issues that are relevant to young people and do so relevantly and with a deep love for God and for them. But more than anything we need to see God move and show his glory. If our youth work, our lives, our churches are powerless, we can't expect young people to look and say they want to be part of that. But if we see God move, see miracles, see lives changed and see the power of God, we cannot stay the same.

As the Matt Redman song says, 'send revival, start with me.'  
Consecration, the Word of God, obedience, prayer, the Holy Spirit's power to do whatever He wants and love is what we need a revolution of. Amen!



**3. Anti-science.** The Myfishbites Talks > God vs Science is well worth reading through to empower yourself. The core of it is that Christianity is not anti-science at all. In fact it was only under a Christian Europe that science flourished because people had the freedom and inspiration to discover the world around them. Many of the pioneers of modern science were both Christian and believers in the absolute truth of the Bible. Many scientists today are Christians, even in very senior scientific positions. The Bible is not a science textbook but discoveries have not discredited the Bible. Evolution is the chief cause of people's doubt as this is (by evolutionists own admission) a religion to oppose Christianity! It undermines people's belief in the Bible. But we don't believe the Bible because we're stupid. We believe the Bible because it is accurate, has hundreds of prophecies that have happened, explains the universe, documents the start of creation by the only ones who were present at the time (the Godhead).

Science is not always about truth. Very often it has its own agenda, is political, lies, gets things wrong and is forever shifting its 'truths'. (There have been three theories of the Big Bang and the latest theory is being rejected by many secular scientists). The debate has never been science vs the Bible. It has always been one set of beliefs vs another and one scientific theory vs another. Evolution is unproven and missing key aspects of evidence without which it completely fails (eg it cannot explain the origin of information needed to create something out of nothing).

Whatever your beliefs (creation or theistic evolution), the Christian faith is more than strong enough to stand up to 'science' and in no way undermines science (or vice versa). As we are informed, we can inform and support young people.



**4. Sex.** I'd like to take issue with the research conclusions that as many Christian young people are as sexually active as their peers. Certainly in the UK this is not accurate. The book was written mainly from US research and in the US, teens are more likely to go to church than they are in the UK.

Therefore the percentage of teens who are nominal Christians is higher. I would like to see research done on Bible believing, truly Christian young people as I strongly believe far far fewer would be sexually active than in schools generally.

However, we need to answer some very tricky questions about sex, about people who are gay, about transgender issues and the messed up genetic and sexual world around us. Again, the truth of the Bible must never be lost - God says, 'be holy because I'm holy' and God puts his Holy Spirit in us to help, warn, deliver, protect and guide us. Being sexually active leaves its effect on any person whether or not they accept that! God is a redeemer, he takes what is dead or bad and breathes his life in to transform for good. Our message should be like Jesus to the women caught 'in sin' (John 4) to go and sin no more.

But we must also provide support, be unafraid of the subject and be consistently loving to all young people around us. The enemy wants to rob and steal, but Jesus came to rescue and save and to bring life.

There are excellent people around who can help you - eg in the UK the [Romance Academy](#) etc. You need to develop a theology within your youth work and church that says, 'we accept you as you are, but God has something so much better'.



**5. Exclusivity.** Many young people feel the church is too exclusive. The Bible tells us that the only way to God / heaven is through Jesus and we should never apologise for saying this.

Actually it's the churches who are faithfully representing the truth of God's Word that are generally standing the strongest. In the UK if you go to the 'liberal churches' you'll find them mostly empty. But the newer Bible believing churches are growing faster than the old ones are dying (so be encouraged!)

The truth is that while we live in a 'pluralistic' age of 'that's your truth and this is my truth', there can only be one truth. For example I can get on a plane to Atlanta, Georgia and believe it's going to Denver, Colorado as much as I want, but it will still go to Atlanta, Georgia! All religions are exclusive in what they believe. Christianity is not unique. Every religion has strongly held beliefs that they will not compromise on. Atheism is a religion, an anti-God religion and despite us living in a so-called 'free' and 'pluralistic' society, it is the atheist religion that wants to completely silence every voice that speaks about God. They want to silence any religious belief. They are the most 'exclusive' of all ! A Christian is quite happy to allow others freedom to believe what they want (this is a freedom God gives all humans).

We must teach and empower our young people to stand strong as a Christian. Lots of basic 'apologetics' can really help, taught relevantly, Biblically and with love as it is the truth that sets us free, the truth about Jesus. We must be clear that teaching that there is only one way to God does not mean rejecting other people or what they believe! It is tough for young people and all of us, as acceptance among peers is understandably so important. But a Christian can find a balance between staying true to God and being respected among peers. God's love in us and through us is a powerful 'weapon' that will touch people's hearts.



**6. Doubters.** One young person from a Christian family was going through all kinds of struggles. He'd been done for possession of cannabis (we also got stopped by the police and searched etc). Eventually he went off abroad. I remember knowing that he would be OK in his faith ultimately; that God would bring him through. Sure enough God did exactly that and he fully gave his life to Jesus when he was away. Not every story has this kind of ending that we'll see but doubt is OK! Questioning is OK! We don't leave our brains behind at the door at church, we were given a mind by God to use. Always make opportunity for questions even if it's after a church service or session. Be willing and open about your own struggles without compromising anyone's faith. Just be real. Young people desperately want to see what is real and your life can be one of the greatest witnesses to this. Our churches should never be like 'theological colleges' that exist only to question the validity of the Bible and undermine it. These types of places wreck people's faith because they only teach what is cynical and have effectively anti-Christian agendas. (So point people to Bible-believing colleges rather than theology departments of Universities!)

In our churches, we often have people making sweeping statements about the Bible and life and being way too dogmatic. But while the Bible is completely true, the application in our lives is always different. So when we teach, it's important not to be too legalistic as our teaching can end up hindering people in their life and faith. The Bible truth is the same but the experience of each of us is different. So we can say, 'this is how God worked this out in my life' rather than 'this is always what God does'. For example if we say, 'God always heals' and then someone isn't healed it's very damaging. Or if we say, 'you should only read the Bible in a certain way' then you'll look ridiculous when God speaks to that person from the Bible in a different way. Don't be so exclusive in your application of your teaching that you actually limit God !!

### **Re-thinking 'doing church'**

I heard the testimony of a woman who became a Christian via GOD TV. She expressed that the media was a great asset because she and other people don't want to go to church. They don't understand it or feel comfortable going. Many people would relate to her.



I've been a Christian for a while now and as I sat in church one Sunday (having again been used by God as a vital part of the setup, tech and worship) I asked myself whether I would stay at 'church' if I wasn't involved. I asked myself what else it was about church that made me go. I often ask what it is about church that would make anyone want to come to it (barring terrible things happening in society as a whole like 9/11).

In some measure, we have to re-think 'church' as we know it. This is most definitely not about 'throwing the baby out with the bath water' but a recognition that in a very rapidly changing world and society, the church simply has not moved effectively enough to respond to the ways that young people think and the world they live in. Many people want to know about Jesus but don't want religion, rules or to simply 'do church'.

This is of course a question that every generation has to confront. The difference today is simply the availability of technology, so called 'knowledge', the speed of change and this worldwide instant communication that is possible. This is unparalleled in any generation.

Does it mean we don't do Sundays? By no means! What I'm getting at is something much deeper than changing the style or format of a Sunday. These are superficial and don't address the deeper rooted problems.

## **Suggestions - nothing original but reminders...**



**1. Worship.** God is raising up a worship movement globally. Spending time in his presence changes us. This should never be contrived or manufactured, but intentional spending lots of time in worship and prayer without agendas is essential. 'Traditional' churches often have 'hymn sandwiches' and you often feel like just when God is moving the song ends and we sit down. This happened to me when playing at a youth event in Devon and it killed what God was doing! But charismatic churches are equally bad with songs, then people giving words, then songs going on for hours. Worship leaders are servants and should be leading for the church not themselves. Always we must be led by and focused on the Holy Spirit and allow Him space to do things His way!

Worship helps us hear the voice of God (Psalm 95.1-7). Worship takes us into the very heart of God (Psalm 100.4). Worship is often the precursor to spiritual warfare (Joshua 6.20, 2 Chronicles 20.21-23) and often wins the 'battle'. Worldwide worship of God is likely to precede the return of Jesus (on a completely new level to anything we've seen - Isaiah 42). Worship is expressed audibly and within our hearts as God calls us to have an attitude of thankfulness at all times (Ephesians 5.18-20, Philippians 4.4). Worship will drive back demons (1 Samuel 16.23).



The list goes on and on. Ultimately worship is about putting God in his rightful place - our life isn't about us, it's about God and our part in his story. In Revelation 4 we see heaven worshipping God - the twenty four elders, the fiery angels, the massed hoards of heaven all worshipping. When we worship God, we are joining in the song of heaven and putting God 'on his throne'. We are agreeing with God about who he is and joining in unity with all of God's people - God is holy, holy, holy and alone deserves all the praise and glory.

So when we worship, I believe we encounter God in a very personal and powerful way. How you do your worship is up to you! God is moving through 'contemporary Christian worship' at the moment as the songs are easy to play, easy to sing and generally have great words. But you worship how God has made you to be - your styles - your music - the music your young people engage with (as much as possible, I realise they're all different and we don't have infinite resources!) But whatever you do, empower and encourage young people and never get stuck in a rut. Keep on praying and seeking God!



**2. The Bible.** We must get back to relevant, engaging, empowering and practical Biblical talks. These don't have to go on for ages and should never be boring! Jesus came to give us life, so if you think about it... No life in our meetings means no Jesus somewhere along the line! And please stop using dull speakers. Yes we want the Bible but yes it must be relevant and relate to people where they're at.

The Bible is the power of God and we must be completely unashamed to teach the whole counsel of God each week. It is the churches that do not teach the Word of God that are going down the pan the fastest. The Word of God is life, light and truth. If we do not get back to consistent relevant teaching of the truth, how can we expect young people to stand, to know God, to stay strong for God and to encourage each other, bring others to faith?!! You have to be crazy not to teach the Bible properly and regularly, encouraging young people to do this - modeling this to them. Get relevant Bible notes, do your own, get them to help you. Get the whole church involved to create a year's set of notes and teaching notes - do this together as a church body.

People around us know all kinds of things about all kinds of things! Climbers know about ropes, shoes, belays, climbing techniques etc. People who love Apple computers and brand will tell you about iPads, iPhones, the advantages of Apple etc. They are unashamed to know all kinds about what will not last or really make a huge impact in life (I speak as a climber and Apple fan!)

So we should know our Bibles. Paul the Apostle determined to know nothing but Christ crucified. So many problems will be avoided in church life and ultimately in the lives of many young people if we consistently and faithfully teach the Bible, relevantly and in the power of the Holy Spirit. Many churches teach the Bible but do so in an irrelevant or dull way and people switch off. It is Jesus in us by the Holy Spirit who brings life, and getting people who have a gift of teaching.



**3. Sunday mornings.** If you're like me, sitting still while endlessly listening to someone can be quite hard unless they are really anointed! Many people are the same. They want to engage, want to think and may not learn very well by sitting and listening.

I'm reminded of how Jesus and the disciples went on journeys, ate together, did things together, climbed mountains, saw God's power, got hassled together and learned both from Jesus' teaching and by following him, walking with him. I think we need to take long hard looks at the full model of how we do 'church'. I was once told by someone that we had to be at church every week if we were involved at the church. My reply was - what if you're speaking somewhere else or leading worship somewhere else etc.

We must get beyond the thinking of 'our church' and that 'Sunday morning' is the be all and end all. This is without stopping meeting together unless God calls you specifically not to. One church I know locally that tried to 'deconstruct' Sundays nearly completely fell apart and others have to. But 'church' is much bigger than one building on one morning!

And let's never lose the creativity or fun! Why should church move from being fun, life-giving and a laugh sometimes - to something that becomes very 'serious' and actually often incredibly boring! This isn't to say that everything should be overly lighthearted, as God is holy and our Christian lives matter. Nor is this about entertainment. But



**4. Leadership.** A lot of things boil down to good and Godly leadership. In my church there is a team of leaders. One of the reasons is that some of the team have had bad experiences with leaders. But leadership is a Godly thing and is not always plural. Even if leadership is plural there are many times when a leader acts independently (otherwise nothing would ever be done!) But I believe churches with teams can work but can also suffer from lack of direction. However you do leadership, it must never be because anyone thinks they're above anyone else. A leader is a servant and the top leader is a slave. Not my words but the words of Jesus.

Humility, integrity, staying close to God, encouragement and right (and varied ways of) accountability are all-important. But without vision the

people perish. I have seen this happen. Don't let it be true, don't drift and don't stop moving forward, upward and onward in God. In a family situation where there's no leadership, the young people can cause chaos. The same is true in church - young people need, want and are fully empowered by good leadership.



**5. Theology.** Our theology impacts what we do, so right theology is essential. What do we mean by 'right theology'? Maybe a better description is good, faith-filled theology. It means it must be Biblical and relevant to our world today. This is not ever about re-defining the Bible or what it says! Liberal theology says we change our beliefs with the times and fit the Bible into that. Wrong. We believe the Bible and read society in the light of God's truth. But let's never be so rigid that we limit God. Some churches say God doesn't heal - I've seen many people healed. Some churches say God doesn't do miracles - I've seen miracles. After a while the churches that say this look ridiculous to be honest, because they are refusing to accept that God does what he says he does in the Bible, simply because their limited theology can't cope. We follow Jesus and God's Word, not denominations or man-made rules.

We are free in Christ Jesus and don't need to go through theology colleges, priests, vicars, popes or anyone else! (You can do if you want to, but we don't have to). And let's make sure our theology doesn't alienate people wrongly, both from within and outside the church.

## Conclusion

I'm sure there are many other things, but hopefully this gets you thinking. We have the greatest news available in Jesus but so many churches alienate young people. Let's be intentional and focused in not doing this as far as we can. Lord, please help us. Amen.