

Losing Our Joy: The Impact of Fear on Student Ministries

Mark Cannister
Gordon College, Wenham, MA

Abstract: Since the Pew Research Center released their 2015 report *America's Changing Religious Landscape* the storylines of research on the American church have been discouraging. LifeWay Research reports an increased number of teenagers dropping out of the church and Gallup research claims that church membership has dropped significantly. The rise of the “nones” (people who claim no religious affiliation); the increasing “dropout” rate of young people; and the decrease in church membership have created a storyline of fear that has become the mantra of ministry in the church to children, youth, and families.

Church leaders always struggle to navigate competing values and rarely lack voices lobbying for what the people want, especially when those voices are parents of teenagers. But are the anxieties of parents and church leaders valid? Has our ecclesial response to these research reports been healthy? Is there contrary research to be examined and other stories to be conveyed? This paper analyzes the interpretation of recent research on the church and how this storyline of fear, regardless of the validity of such research, has caused a seismic shift in the values of church-based student ministry, with particular attention given to the loss of the value of outreach to unchurched teenagers.

Introduction

The past two years have been filled with upsets, comebacks, and surprises. The Cleveland Indians rallied from three games to one deficit to win the 2016 World Series. Just a few weeks

later the world watched as Donald Trump defied all the odds makers, pollsters, and media pundits to win the US presidency in one of the greatest political upsets in history. The New England Patriots executed the greatest comeback in sports in the 2017 Super Bowl, only to be upset by Philadelphia's unlikely backup quarterback Nick Foles in the 2018 Super Bowl. Everyone thought the 2017 Oscar for best picture went to *La La Land*, but the announcement was a mistake, the best was actually—*Moonlight*. Surprise!

Many are predicting the future of youth ministry with great confidence. Will the prognostications come true? Will youth ministry deliver an upset, a comeback, or a surprise as shocking as we have recently experienced in sport, politics, and entertainment? The future of youth ministry may be far more uncertain than we realize. This article strives to explore youth ministry past, present, and future in the hope of shedding light on a variety of possibilities as youth ministry continues to unfold in the twenty-first century.

Surveys of Fear

Youth ministry has turned toward protectionism out of fear and fear is the lynchpin of a consumer culture that thrives on capitalism. The heartbeat of America has been capitalism for a very long time and central to capitalism is the drive to sell product, and product is sold through advertising.

In the last fifty years advertising has become highly sophisticated and companies now go to great lengths in researching the most effective avenues of marketing a product to produce the

greatest return on their investment. Yet, the main formula of advertising has changed very little over the years. Instill fear of failure in people, then assure them your product will provide success. You have bad breath, we have the mouthwash for you! Everyone is laughing at that old car you are driving, we have a new car that will make you the envy of the neighborhood. You don't have any friends, wear our clothing and you will be popular. It is all about the fear of failure. The fear looking good enough, having enough friends, succeeding in business, thriving in a relationship, or parenting well enough all push us toward products that might help us be successful in every area of life.

Therefore, the self-help book industry has exploded in the last few decades. If you have a problem there is a book or a seminar with 10-steps to Happiness, Success in Business, Healthy Living, A Happy Family, Positive Parenting, Faithful Discipleship, etc. and the Christian community is not immune to this marketing. In fact, Christianity contributes significantly to the fear factor of advertising, because fear sells. No one is going to purchase a book entitled: *The Church is Alive and Well in America*. But, every pastor will purchase the book titled: *The Church is Dying: 10 Ways to Keep Yours Alive*. FEAR—"Oh no, churches are dying all around me and I *fear* that mine might die next. We must master the 10-Steps to keep our church alive!"

The latest fear factor to gain significant traction in the church has been the *fear of losing our children*. Church leaders are being told that young people are leaving the church in droves and they *fear* that the church will become extinct and our children will not have faith if we don't – focus all our attention on our children, use the right curriculum, train our volunteers properly,

improve our parent education, etc. But, is the fear factor that is driving us legitimate? Are the surveys that produce the fear accurate? Does the research genuinely warrant the fearful response?

Consider Recent Research

The Decreasing Christian Population

Kosmin, Mayer, and Keysar (2001) found that the number of non-Christians in America increased only slightly between 1990 and 2001 from about 5.8 million to about 7.6 million; growing from 3.3% to about 3.7% of the American adult population. Yet, a significant increase was found among adults who do not subscribe to any religious identification. Those who do not affiliate with a particular religious group more than doubled from 14.3 million in 1990 to 29.4 million in 2001; growing from 8% to 14% of the American adult population.

The Pew Research Center (2015) found that the adults describing themselves as Christians decreased 7.8% from 78.4% in their 2007 survey to 70.6% in their 2014 survey. Over the same time period, they found an increase among adults who do not subscribe to any religious identification. The number of American adults who claimed to be religiously unaffiliated increased 6.7%; growing from 16.1% to 22.8% of the American adult population. Pew claims that the key issue is the growth of the religiously unaffiliated is generational replacement. Millennials seem to display much lower levels of religious affiliation, than previous generations as 36% of younger Millennials (ages 18 to 24) were religiously unaffiliated, while 34% of older

Millennials (ages 25 to 33) were religiously unaffiliated. In concert with Millennial affiliation the median age of unaffiliated adults has dropped to age 36, down from age 38 in 2007.

In 2016 (Choosing a new house of Worship) Pew surveyed religiously unaffiliated adults who claimed to be raised in a particular religion before shedding their religious identity in adulthood. The study sought to discover the reasons that these people no longer identified with a religious group. About 50% cited some form of lack of belief including what they felt was a conflict between science and religion, as well as the lack of evidence they found for believing in God. About 20% had come to oppose organized religion in general due to the hierarchical nature of religious groups, religion becoming too much like a business, and the ongoing sexual abuse scandals involving ministers.

About 18% of the unaffiliated said just unsure about religion. They claimed to still be religious in some manner, despite being unaffiliated with any religious group. Some said they believe in God, but in their own way; others were seeking enlightenment or open-minded; and many claimed to be spiritual but not religious. About 10% claim to hold certain religious beliefs, but don't participate in any religious practices, confirming that they no longer attend church or other religious activities, or that they were simply too busy to participate in religious activities.

Confirming this generational shift Cooper, Cox, Lienesch, Jones (2016) found that 39% of young adults (ages 18-29) are religiously unaffiliated, which is three times the unaffiliated rate (13%) among senior adults 65 and older. In 1986 only 10% of young adults claimed to be religiously

unaffiliated compared to 39% today, a four-fold increase in the young adults who are religiously unaffiliated. Three distinct groups were identified among the unaffiliated: Rejectionists, Apatheists, and Unattached Believers. The majority (58%) were rejectionists, who believed that religion was not personally important in their lives and within society religion is more harmful than helpful. The apatheists (22%) claimed that religion was not personally important, but within society religion is more helpful than harmful. Those considered unattached believers (18%) declared that religion was important to them personally, but they were not interested in organized religion.

Additionally, this study found that 79% percent of young adults (age 18 to 29) who become religiously unaffiliated claim to make this decision as teenagers. Hence, today most people who leave their childhood religion do so before reaching adulthood. In previous generations those who abandon religious belief have done so much later as evidenced by reports that only 38% of senior adults (65+) claim to have abandoned their religion before reaching adulthood.

Newport (2015) reported that America remains a predominantly Christian nation, with 75% of adults identifying as Christians and over 90% Christian representation among those who say they are a member of any kind of religion. He further asserts that, while Americans increasingly claim they no formal religious identification and those identifying as Christians decreased from 80% in 2008 no significant change occurred between 2008 and 2015.

A year later Newport (2016) reported further on religious affiliation of Americans, 74% of whom identify as Christians and 5% identifying with a non-Christian religion. The remaining 21% of the adult population either claim no formal religious identity or did not respond to the question. Newport claims that Americans, while still religious are losing their formal religious identity. Newport reports that between 2008 and 2016 the number of American adults that claim no formal religious affiliation has increased 6%; while the number of people claiming affiliation with a non-Christian religion has remained constant at 5% of American adults. Hence, the shift in affiliation seems to be among Christians, rather than religious people in general.

While church membership has declined significantly (Newport, 2015) in the past two decades from 70% in 1998 to an all-time low of 54% in 2015 and slightly up 2016 at 56% reports of attendance at churches, synagogues, and mosques decreased only about 4% over the same time period. Further, Newport reported that the importance of religion in the lives of American adults has remained consistently in the mid-50% area over the past forty-years.

The 2016 and 2017 Gallup reports (Newport) seem to be confirmed by Schnabel and Bock (2017) in their analysis of sociological studies on religion for 1989 through 2016. They found that Americans strongly affiliated with religion had not changed significantly over that time period, representing 36% of American adults. At the same time those with modest affiliation (but not strong) declined about 16%, while those with no affiliation at all increased about 14%. "Because strong affiliation remains stable while weaker affiliations have declined, those with a strong affiliation actually make up a larger share of the affiliated population over time." (p.688)

Likewise, those who attend church multiple times a week remained unchanged at 8%, while those who never attend church increased about 11% and those who attend church sometimes dropped about 10%. While casual attenders have become never attenders the committed attenders remain committed and attend faithfully.

Further, the number of people who identify as “Evangelical” has remained somewhat steady during this time frame, at approximately 29%. The number of people who identify as having a “Non-Evangelical” affiliation is down from approximately 66% to 51%. The number of people who say they have no religious affiliation is up from approximately 8% to 23% during this same time frame.

So, we can see that the data is rather mixed. Those who have strong faith commitments remain committed and active in the church, while more casual church goes have fallen by the wayside. Another important consideration is reading data of attendance patterns against data of affiliation claims. While more people today claim to be unaffiliated with a religious group the number of people attending church or synagogue each weekend has remained rather unchanged over several decades. Could it be that while a person’s attendance pattern has not changes over the years that their feelings about affiliation have changed significantly? Perhaps those who claimed affiliation a decade ago did so out of family heritage even though they rarely attended church, but with a changing culture today they feel free to declare that they don’t affiliate with any religion and their church attendance pattern has remained the same. Perhaps

some who were faithful attenders a decade ago and affiliated with a particular denomination are still faithful attenders, but no longer feel aligned with a denomination or particular religious group. For them Christian faith has become about Jesus and not organized religion. They embrace Jesus, while shunning religion and become labeled a “none.”

The Secularization of Young Adults

Much has been written about the flight of young people from the local church and the origins of this stream of pontification may rightly be found in the research of the National Study of Youth and Religion led by Christian Smith and published in *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (2005). This landmark study found that teenagers are inarticulate about their faith and the de facto religion among teenagers is what Smith described as ‘Moralistic Therapeutic Deism.’ God is a deity who created and orders the world and watches over human life on earth; God wants moral people who are good, nice, and fair to each other; God does not need to be particularly involved in one’s life except when God is needed to resolve a problem or provide comfort to those in pain.

Kenda Dean followed on Smith’s line of thinking in *Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers is Telling the American Church* (2010) suggesting that teenagers lack of a genuine faith may be due to a hollow and superficial form of faith that adults have conveyed to teenagers in recent decades. Teenagers transitioning from high school to college simply have not developed a faith that is able to withstand the influence of the secular environment that is the modern university.

This line of thinking seems to be confirmed by the Ligonier Ministries and Lifeway Research seemed to affirm Dean's thinking in *The State of Theology* (2015) report, which surveyed theological beliefs of young adult. Self-described Christians responded to a series of statements related to reformed Christian doctrine. Those between 18 and 34 years of age consistently held heretical views (in the reformed tradition) at a higher percentage than older respondents. Concluding that young people who identify themselves as Christians are far more likely to hold views that aren't Christian.

The results of this survey are not surprising considering the increasing liberal bias at colleges and universities. Rothman, Lichter, and Nevitte (2005) reported that 72% of faculty describe themselves as politically liberal in the 1999 North American Academic Study Survey, which was an increase of 39% from a 1984 Carnegie Foundation study. In addition, Gross and Simmons (2006) found that 25% of faculty claim to be atheists or agnostics (while this is the case for only about 6% of the general population) and a mere 6% of faculty believe that the Bible is the word of God. The majority (51%) described the Bible as fables, legends, history or moral lessons. And that of faculty, 75% believe religion does not belong in public schools.

Students entering the secular culture of the university do not tend to continue attending church as they did in high school. Astin, Astin, and Lindholm found that 52% of college student claimed to attend church frequently the year before entering college but only 29% continued with the same level of church attendance by their junior year in college. The secular atmosphere of the

university seemed to have a strong influence on the relevance of church attendance and college students raised in the church did not seem to have a faith that was strong enough to resist sway of the secular university.

Young People Leaving the Church and Losing Their Faith

Bisset (1997) interviewed teenagers whom he identified as having abandoned their faith and identified four reasons that emerged from the research. 1.) Teenagers had troubling, unanswered questions about the faith; 2.) they felt that their faith was not working for them; 3.) they allowed other things to take priority in life; 4.) they never personally owned their faith.

Smith and Denton (2005) similarly found that students often leave faith behind because of doubts and skepticism. When asked why they fall away from the faith in which they were raised, nearly one-third claimed it was because of intellectual skepticism or doubt.

The last reason may be seen as encompassing the first three reasons as coming to own one's faith requires working through the difficult questions and coming to accept that there is mystery in the life of faith as not all questions can be fully answered. Ownership also involves an understanding of faith as a relationship with Christ and the community of faith which is a priority and not a commodity to serve one's own interests. Hence, the conclusion of this study is that students who abandon their faith are students who never personally owned their faith. Which begs the question: Can you abandon something that you never owned? Perhaps these students didn't abandon the faith as much as they never fully adopted the faith.

Ham and Beemer (2009) surveyed 1,000 young adults ages 20-29 who were raised in the church but were no longer engaged in a local church. The responses to the survey told a story of the church losing her children long before they graduated from high school. The conclusion of this research was that while children are participating in church activities they are not developing a meaningful faith that they own for themselves by the time they graduate from high school. Which is to say, young people are not leaving the faith, they are simply leaving church activities behind in favor of other activities that become more meaningful as they grow-up.

The 2017 CIRP Freshmen Survey of freshman students at 184 American colleges and universities revealed that 31% of incoming freshmen are religiously unaffiliated. This marks a threefold increase since 1986, when just 10% identified as religiously unaffiliated. This survey is administered to students before students leave for college, confirming the research of Ham and Beemer (2009) that the decline of religious identity is occurring before students graduate from high school.

The Barna Group (2006) found that teenagers tend to embrace experimentation with spirituality, but then disengage in their twenties. Their survey discovered that 50% of teenagers attend a church-related activity in a typical week and 60% attend at least one church youth meeting during a typical three-month period. More than 75% say they discuss faith with friends and 33% of claim to have participated in a school-based Christian club at some point during the school year. Further, more than 89% of teenagers say they have attended a church for a period of at least two months during their teenage years.

However, in surveying twentysomethings 61% of them claim to have been church-ed at one point in their life, but are now spiritually disengaged. Barna found that only 20% of twentysomethings have maintained a level of spiritual activity consistent with their high school experiences. Another (19%) were never significantly engaged during their teenage years and have remained disconnected from the Christian faith. At the same time 78% of twentysomethings say they are Christians, but cannot find a local church to help them in their faith journey. They are also unlikely to believe that a person's faith is meant to be developed in a local church. Based on this research David Kinnaman concludes that the church is not offering a ministry to teenagers that creates a sustainable faith beyond high school. Once again one must ask what it means to have faith and then disengage from it. In this study faith was defined as attending church activities as little as once every three months or a school-based Christian club at least once a year, or church for at least two months. Then the study claims that twentysomethings are not attending as often. What is the relationship of attendance to faith? Did the students who were attending at teens have faith and no longer have faith now that they are not attending in their twenties? Could it be that they never owned faith in their teens and were simply experimenting or hanging out with friends? LifeWay Research (2007) found that 70% of young adults ages 23-30 stopped attending church regularly for at least a year between ages 18-22. Only 20% of these "dropouts" agreed that while they were attending church regularly in high school that they fully intended to take a break from church after high school. These young people further claimed that they remained involved in church activities throughout high school to avoid disappointing their parents and maintaining their friends.

Others who disengaged from church activities cited life changes and work responsibilities as reasons for leaving church activities behind. While this research found that 70% of young people disengaged from the church after high school, they also reported that 35% of them would eventually return to the church.

The Fuller Youth Institute seemed to paint a more accurate picture of what is happening with Christian students as they enter college in their 2010 College Transition research and 2011 Sticky Faith research that nearly half of student actively engaged in high school church ministries struggle with their faith in college. Students seemed to lack the characteristics necessary for their faith to continue developing in the college environment.

The Barna Research Group (2018) found that among 13- to 18-year-olds 59% of students identify as Christian or Catholic (16% lower than older adults), 21% say they are atheist or agnostic (nearly twice as many as older adults), and 14% say they have no religious affiliation (5% higher than older adults).

While some students in this age group find it hard to believe God would allow so much suffering in the world (29%), that Christians are hypocrites (23%), and science refutes much of the Bible (20%) they also believe that the answers to finding meaning in life are found in church (82%), that church is relevant to their lives (82%), that they can be authentically themselves at church (77%), and that people in church are tolerant of others (63%).

Further, student who have a negative perception of the church declare that it is because the church reject science (49%), is overprotective of teenagers (38%), and is not a safe place to express doubts (27%).

Over the course of their thirty-five year study, Bengtson, Putney, and Harris (2013) found parents to be the single greatest influence on their children's faith and that children who observe faith is making a difference in their parent's lives are much more likely to follow in the faith themselves. They also found that children of Christian parents are more likely to share their parent's faith when they have a close relationship with their parents. Perhaps most important was the discover that over thirty-five years those young Christians who moved away from the faith were far more likely to return to the church, when parents had been patient and supportive of their child's time of exploration.

A Barna Research study (2013) concluded that the most effective ways to keep millennials connected to the church was to: 1. Develop meaningful relationships with millennials; 2. Teach millennials to study and discern what's happening in the culture; 3. Help millennials discover their own mission in the world, rather than ask them to wait their turn; 4. Teach millennials a more potent theology of vocation, or calling, and; 5. Help millennials develop a lasting faith by facilitating a deeper sense of intimacy with God.

Canoeing the Mountains

In his brilliant book on church leadership, *Canoeing the Mountains*, Tod Bolsinger compared the challenges of the contemporary church with the challenges of Lewis and Clark's expedition to discover the Northwest Passage—a water route connecting the Mississippi River to the Pacific Ocean. After fifteen months of navigating the rivers by canoe and believing that they had found the allusive water route to the Pacific Ocean, Lewis and Clark were stunned to realize there was nothing ahead of them but mountains. There was no water route to the ocean. The landscape had changed and they had to abandon their canoes, abandon their plans, change their expectations, let go of their assumptions, and travel by foot and horseback.

Bolsinger uses this metaphor to unpack the leadership changes necessary as the church encounters a changing landscape and needing to adapt its approach, if it is to continue the ecclesial journey through the 21st century. This is an excellent book for anyone concerned with church leadership, but no metaphor is perfect. The very problem with this metaphor offers a mirror into the issues facing the church today. When Lewis and Clark reached Lemhi Pass and saw the mountains to the west they knew instantly that their plans had to change if they were to reach the ocean. In ministry, the landscape never changes so abruptly. Cultural change occurs gradually and incrementally over time. Lewis and Clark recognized their need for change in a moment as they faced the mountains, yet one of the greatest challenges of the church is *recognizing* the need for change. We use words like “fads” and “trends” to describe changes that we believe are temporary and we struggle to recognize the real changes set before us. While Lewis and Clark has no such difficulty as their landscape changed right in front of their

eyes at Lemhi Pass. Yet, we tend to romanticize the past and believe that we can move forward by looking backward. While, there is nothing inherently wrong with describing fads and trends, and looking to our past to consider our future, it demonstrates the difficulty of recognizing the true changes in the landscape.

Another problem with the metaphor that provides insights for us is that Lewis and Clark lead an expedition known as the Corps of Discovery that was comprised of about three dozen men. This was a small group of likeminded men who were relatively close in age, committed to a single mission, and commissioned in an authoritarian military system. When Captain Meriwether Lewis and Second Lieutenant William Clark recognized the changing landscape, and gave the US Army Corps of Discovery orders to abandon the canoes, set out on foot, and locate some horses, there was no push-back. Everyone followed orders as this homogeneous group was committed to the mission, respected the leadership, and understood military protocol of following orders.

Even the most homogeneous churches have greater diversity than the Corps of Discovery and few churches employ such an authoritarian model of leadership as the military. Once church leadership recognizes the changing landscape they must communicate vision, plan incremental change, and convince the congregation to embrace change. What makes this even more challenging than in the past is that the typical congregation today is comprised of four unique generations each of which hold different values. What was once considered the normal length of a generation, twenty-years, has shrunk to fifteen-years creating a compression of the

generations. In a typical church today we see a significant number of Baby Boomers (54-74), Gen Xers (38-53), Millennials (23-37), and Screeners (7-22), with a handful of elderly folks from the silent and greatest generation (75+) who are still significantly engaged in the life of the church. Our congregations are far more diverse than the Corps of Discovery and the challenge of casting vision across four or more generations to influence change can be daunting.

The greatest challenge of course is to recognize the real change and cast the most appropriate vision in response. Based on the data, much of which is conflicting, the change is not so much that we are losing young people at a greater rate than in the past. The change is that we have created a culture of fear in the church that is turning the church inward as we wrongly cast vision for protecting and keeping those growing up in the church within the walls of the church to the detriment of reaching out to those beyond the walls of the church.

The Mission of the Missional Church

Pastor and former seminary president James White (2018) recently reflected on the change in name from Dunkin' Donuts to just Dunkin'."

The New England based company made the change recently because more than half of their sales are now from coffee and other beverages. They are no longer just a donut company anymore. Prior to 2011 Starbucks was known as Starbucks Coffee, but they too recognized that their company name needed to communicate something larger than coffee and became simply Starbucks.

Understanding one's mission is often done through the retelling of the oft told story of the railroad barons of the late 1800's who apparently ignored the development of the automobile. With a monopoly on transporting both goods and people throughout the country and the belief that that people would own personal automobiles the leaders of the railroads ignored the new invention. As the automotive revolution developed the railroad owners declared that they were in the railroad business and nothing would threaten their success—especially the novelty of the automobile.

However, the tychoons of the train industry did not understand their true business. They thought they were in the railroad business. But, they were really in the transportation business. Time and opportunity passed them by as they could not see their true mission.

White raises the provocative question: "if Dunkin' isn't in the donut business but the food and beverage business ... what about the church? Well, you're not in the Sunday School business, the Awana business, the Upward Sports business, the Men's Fraternity business, the Catalyst business, or any other programmatic business. Let's go further: you're not in the small group business, women's ministry business, men's ministry business or any other sub-ministry business. All of these may be well and good and helpful, but they are not your business and should not be treated as such."

If our mission is not defined by our programs that what is our mission? White declares: "You

are in the business of evangelizing the lost, assimilating the evangelized, discipling the assimilated and unleashing the disciplined. It's been that way for nearly 2,000 years."

Two decades ago one of the founders of Youth Specialties, Mike Yaconelli (1997) commented on the mission confusion in youth ministry declaring: "Let me tell you what youth ministry is all about. It is about bringing kids into the presence of Jesus Christ. We are not social workers. We are not counselors. We are not family fixer-uppers. We are not people who put on performances for kids. We are not programmers. We are just people who love kids and who love Jesus and who want kids to know about Jesus. What's what we're all about. That's what we do." And who are the teenagers most in need of being brought into the presence of Jesus Christ? They are teenagers living outside the walls of the church far from God in every respect.

While the church is responsible for teaching parents to raise their children in the faith and to come alongside parents in doing this important work, the missional church of the twenty-first century must be committed to reaching teenagers who are far from God and would never darken the door of a church if it were not for faithful Christian adults who are willing to enter their world and introduce them to Jesus in a winsome manner that from the start communicates that Christ is relevant to every aspect of life.

Conclusion

When we are afraid we run and hide. When we are afraid of losing our children, we strive to protect them. When we fear that our children dropping out of church or “losing their faith” we invest all of our resources into serving the children of the church at the expense of reaching out to those teenagers who have yet to be introduced to Jesus in a meaningful way.

Regardless of the validity of the research data on the faith formation of teenagers, the response of the church to these headlines is destroying the churches very mission to seek and save the lost. We must re-think our student ministries from a holistic perspective and to paraphrase White: commit ourselves to reaching lost teenagers, assimilate them into the faith community, disciple them in the faith, and unleashing these Christlike souls to transform the world!

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