

IN PART

THE MAGAZINE FOR THE BRETHREN IN CHRIST COMMUNITY IN NORTH AMERICA

Summer 2012

You lost me

David Kinnaman on why
young Christians are

*leaving the
Church . . . & rethinking
faith*



You found me

Young adults on their experience
in the Brethren in Christ Church

PLUS: How one church welcomes questions

IN YOUR WORDS

As I looked over the Spring 2012 issue of *In Part*, I was excited to see the article “Take heart.” However, I was disappointed that there was no mention of SPICE, a program that provides children in India and Nepal with access to education, housing, food, water, and care. In the words of Sanjay*, whose story was featured in the article, “SPICE is one of the most vital ministries of the BIC Church in Nepal to extend God’s kingdom and strengthen the churches across the country.” It was through SPICE that several of the Church leaders in India and Nepal were nurtured in their faith and acquired educational skills that have enabled the advancement of the Church.

Joleen Brubaker, SPICE coordinator
(Mechanicsburg, Pa.)

Just a word to commend you on the “Take heart” article. Since the person who was captured is a close friend of mine, [I can affirm that] this story gives a good overview (perhaps a bit mildly) of the incident. Also, because I was in Bihar right after the 2010 floods and saw the devastation, this returned the reality of that situation. True “stories of struggle and hope.”

It would be great if other areas of the world (Africa, South America, etc.) could be featured once a year or at least every biennium.

Harvey Sider
(Stouffville, ON)

*Name has been changed to protect identity

Creative Contributor



Ammon Perry is a freelance illustrator and a 2009 graduate of Messiah College (Grantham, Pa.). He lives with his wife, Steph, in Harrisburg, Pa. Ammon’s “To Our Core” illustration appears on page 3.

THE VIEW FROM HERE

A couple weeks ago, I was in the grocery store, scratching my head confusedly in front of the tofu display, when I was almost bowled over by an elementary school-aged boy wearing Heelys. As he whizzed by in his sneaker/roller skates, he clipped my elbow, throwing me off balance and propelling me into the packaged bean curd. Before I could say anything, he had sped off, without a word or a backward glance.

Well! I thought indignantly as I returned to the safety of my cart. *In my day, children didn’t have sneakers with wheels on them, and if kids did accidentally run into people, we were certainly taught to stop and apologize.*

It wasn’t until aisle 8 that I recognized how unloving my response was, despite being grounded in a kernel of truth. I’m still quite young myself, but I realized how easy it is to look down on younger people for their perceived shortcomings, while elevating your own generation.

We in the Church are not immune to this impulse. As time passes and younger generations emerge, things change, and that can be unsettling. We might experience discomfort or nostalgia when the church youth group wants to sing an unfamiliar song, when we encounter new technology, or when we perceive the next generation’s “eroding values.”

This edition of *In Part* focuses specifically on the up-and-coming Mosaic generation—of which I am a part—and explores what we have to say about the Church. My hope is that this issue will not divide the Church into simplistic categories or be a source of discouragement. Instead, I’m praying that these articles might spur dialogue among all generations in our midst, that they might be one way for all of us to learn from each other, to better understand each other, and to offer mutual peace, hope, and joy.

The Church needs to know what young people are thinking and saying, not so that it can accommodate their every whim or sacrifice truth to fit their lifestyle, but so that it can fully appreciate what they have to offer—and then speak prophetically to renew their minds.

I love the picture that Joel paints in Joel 2, where he describes “the day of the Lord” and the exhilarating ways that people of all ages will take part in bringing about God’s kingdom:

In the last days, God says,
I will pour out my Spirit on all people.
Your sons and daughters will prophesy,
your young men will see visions,
your old men will dream dreams.
Even on my servants, both men and women,
I will pour out my Spirit in those days,
and they will prophesy.

Whatever our age, I think we can all agree that this is the type of Church that we pray the Lord will help us to become.

Kristine
Kristine N. Frey, editor

Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known. I Corinthians 13:12

BRETHREN IN CHRIST CHURCH

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FEATURES

4 You lost me

→ *Why young Christians are leaving the Church . . . and rethinking faith*

BY DAVID KINNAMAN

8 You found me

→ *Young adults in the BIC talk about their faith, their friends, and why they've decided to remain a part of the Church*

BY VALERIAN CURD, GRAEME HOGG,
OLGA JIMENEZ, ZACH SPIDEL, SHEENA
THRUSH, & SHEILA TYSON

DEPARTMENTS

2 IN MOTION

→ *Focus, The dropout problem*

3 TO OUR CORE

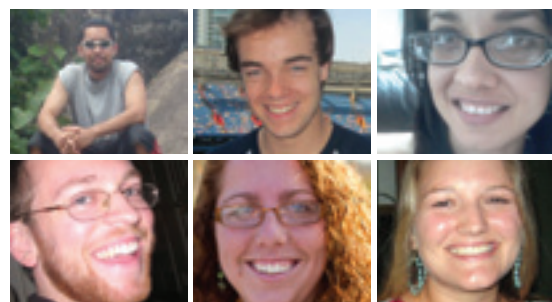
→ *The science of reaching out*
BY JEFF PIEPHO

11 VIBES

→ *Changing channels*
BY JACOB EVERS

13 PARTING WORDS

→ *"... I'm a lot like you were"*
BY PERRY ENGLE



**GENERAL
CONFERENCE**
2012

In early July, 500+ Brethren in Christ met in Ontario, Calif., for four days of conversation and fellowship at the 2012 General Conference of the BIC Church of North America. To view the blog, photos, and videos from the time, as well as a summary of the business that was accomplished, visit BIC-CHURCH.ORG/GC2012.

Also, the keynote message delivered at the 2012 General Conference by David Kinnaman, Barna Group president and author of *You Lost Me*, will be available for viewing from September 14–16 at BIC-CHURCH.ORG/GC2012. See page 7 for more information!

IN MOTION

Stories of transformation mark Dayton BIC Mission's centennial



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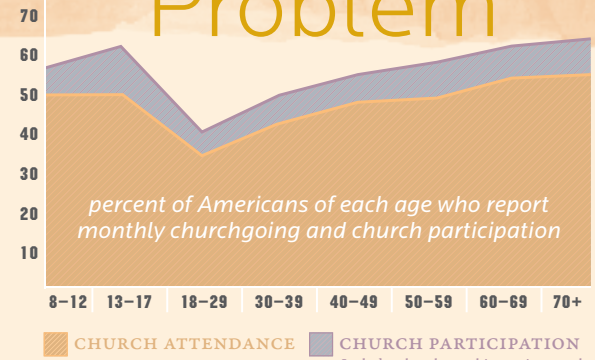
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For many years, Creed Ledington (pictured above) struggled to cope with wounds he suffered as a child. It was Christ's power—revealed through the Dayton (Ohio) BIC Mission—that brought healing to his life. Creed, now in his 80s, and several others shared their stories of the Mission's powerful impact on their lives on April 8, at a special service celebrating the Mission's centennial. Says Creed, "Hearing the word of truth and seeing it lived by other people helped to keep me on the straight and narrow path."



The Dropout Problem

- Teenagers are some of the most religiously active Americans.
- Twentysomethings are the least religiously active Americans.



CHURCH ATTENDANCE CHURCH PARTICIPATION
Includes church worship service, youth group, small group, or Sunday school

Source: Barna Group, nationwide studies, conducted from 1997-2010, N=52,496

TREND . . .



of young people with a Christian background report that they've "dropped out of attending church, after going regularly"



say they are less active in church today than when they were 15



say they have gone through a period when they significantly doubted their faith

. . . AND COUNTERTREND



of 18-to-29-year-old Christians say they "are very concerned about my generation leaving the Church"



describe their desire for "a more traditional faith, rather than a hip version of Christianity"



say they are "more excited about church than at any time in my life"



9 in 10 teens say they've reflected on questions about life's purpose, suffering in the world, and what happens after death

54 percent acknowledge that they have spiritual needs



7 in 10 teens identify with a religious group

3 in 10 attend services monthly or more

TO OUR CORE

EXPLORING THE CENTRAL VALUES OF THE BIC CHURCH

THE SCIENCE OF REACHING OUT

Why the Church's witness must include answering—and asking—questions

by JEFF PIEPHO

Tom, one of the new twentysomethings at our church, had a smile when I approached him Sunday morning. “I love your radio program,” he exclaimed as we launched into an excited discussion about scientific discovery, astronomical events, and the likelihood of life occurring on any given planet. Astrobiology may seem like an odd topic of conversation five minutes prior to a worship service, but the absence of dialogue like this just may be driving many young people away from the Church.

Researchers have found that the Church is losing the younger generations, who are asking questions like, Is it possible for my logical belief in science to coexist with my faith in Jesus? and, When I have doubts about faith, is it ok to express them?

Sometimes, churches are outright hostile to these issues; however, most seem to be simply disinterested or withdrawn about them. Unfortunately, both responses can lead people to believe the Church is dogmatic, unwelcoming, or antagonistic. As a result, the Church's prophetic voice is not being heard by many young people.

So, I'd like to propose a new church growth strategy: embrace questions, promote scientific discussions, invite young people to take on important roles, and welcome them to challenge assumptions about how faith works in today's culture. Basically, let's try to connect with a generation that feels like the Church no longer has answers to their daily lives.

→ **WITNESSING TO THE WORLD:** We value an active and loving witness for Christ to all people.



For example, we at Revolution Church host a radio program with the tagline “Where faith and reason meet.” The goal is to examine archeology, mathematics, and other hard sciences to show that logic and faith can complement, stimulate, and offer insight into each other. It has been a powerful draw for many young people.

Another way we've attempted to welcome young people (and enrich our church as a whole) is to actually invite people to text me questions, challenges, or witty comments during the sermon. The messages arrive directly on stage, allowing me to respond to them on the spot. Since we began this a couple years ago, we've had over 1,200 text messages sent in from our relatively small church.

Revolution Church really isn't that different from yours, in terms of what we believe and teach. But attracting

young people is something we've done well. I believe one reason is that we not only accept, but encourage their questions and challenges. One twenty-something, Jeremy, recently showed up at our church wide-eyed after listening to our radio program. It took him only a couple weeks to sign up for the membership class, explaining, “I've never been to a church like this before!”

The Church need not fear questions; we should love them. When younger generations are asking questions, that means they're still engaging with the Church, and we have a chance to demonstrate the love and mercy of Jesus Christ.



Jeff Piepho is the founding pastor of Revolution Church (Salina, Kans.), husband to Meadow, and father to Simeon. He doesn't think mathematical probability suggests that intelligent aliens exist but hopes his math is wrong.

YOU

LOST

ME

Why young Christians are leaving the Church . . . and rethinking faith

by David Kinnaman

FIVE YEARS AGO, *unChristian* became a bestseller when it revealed how young non-Christians view the Christian faith. Drawing upon groundbreaking research conducted by the Barna Group, *unChristian* showed that a new generation was describing Christianity in “extraordinarily negative” ways—as hypocritical, judgmental, too political, and out of touch. Yet co-author and Barna Group president David Kinnaman made an even more shocking discovery: Young Christians agreed.

Kinnaman and the team at the Barna Group decided to further probe how Christians in the Mosaic generation—those born between 1984 and 2002—describe their experience with faith and the Church. After extensive research and interviews, they found that “the majority of young people dropping out of church are not walking away from the faith; they are putting involvement in church on hold. [. . .] Overall, there is a 43 percent drop-off between the teen and early adult years in terms of church engagement.”

As Kinnaman—who addressed the BIC community at its 2012 General Conference this July—illustrates in his most recent book, *You Lost Me*, any body of believers committed to witnessing to the world should be concerned with sharing the good news not only with those living on the other side of the world, but also with those in the next generation.

KELLY GREW UP in an evangelical Protestant church, and both her parents are committed churchgoers. Kelly describes struggling with an anxiety disorder and “never feeling that she fit in with the youth group or, later, at her college’s campus ministry, where the focus was on “quotas for getting people saved.” But, she says, “The third strike [against the Church] was the judgment my parents received from their church friends about me. They told my parents that they did a bad job raising me.” Despite these negative experiences, Kelly prays and reads her Bible often. She told me, “I never lost faith in Christ, but I have lost faith in the Church.”

Mike grew up in the Catholic church, but his love for science and his razor-sharp wit—which was sometimes perceived as disrespect—regularly put him at odds with parish leaders. After a period of searching and wrestling with his faith, he says, “I just stopped believing in those Christian stories.”

Nathan, the lead singer of a successful band, had parents who were fixtures in an evangelical church. Then they split up. In an interview with *Relevant* magazine, this young musician described his “enormous cynicism toward all things institutional Christianity.” He and his bandmates were “all really embarrassed by and ashamed of a lot of the [Christian] subculture

we came from, but not necessarily ashamed or embarrassed by the beliefs we had.” Nathan’s faith is still intact and was largely saved by his association with other young artists who were honest about their struggles and willing to help each other heal. The magazine describes Nathan and his band as “asking questions and resisting some aspects of their own conservative upbringing—yet still searching for something more from their faith.”*

While the story of every person is unique, these accounts echo the experiences of about 8 million twentysomethings in the U.S. who were active churchgoers as teenagers but who will have left the Church—and sometimes the faith—by their thirtieth birthday.

Most young Christians are struggling less with their faith in Christ than with their experience of church, which they view as an unsafe and inhospitable place to express doubts. Many feel that they have been offered slick or half-baked answers to their thorny, honest questions, and they are rejecting the “talking heads” or “talking point” they see among older generations. Whether fair or not, their response—“You lost me”—signals their judgment that the institutional Church has failed them. It’s not that they’re not listening; it’s that they can’t understand what we are saying.

Most young Christians are struggling less with their faith in Christ than with their experience of church.

DISCONNECTION, EXPLAINED

When the Barna Group embarked upon its investigation, I suspected that we would uncover one big reason for why young adults disconnect from the Church or walk away from their faith—maybe one or two. Instead, we identified six themes that capture the overall phenomenon of disconnection between the Mosaic generation and the Church.

While people in every generation may experience similar feelings, the combination of our cultural moment and the discontinuity of the next generation** makes these attitudes among young adults particularly combustible. Many twentysomethings are not hesitating, as have previous generations, to burn the bridges that once connected them to a spiritual heritage.

Here are the broad reasons they offer for dropping out. They find the Church to be:

Overprotective

The impulses toward creativity and cultural engagement are some of the defining characteristics of the Mosaic generation that are most obvious. They want to reimagine, re-create, rethink, and they want to be entrepreneurs, innovators, starters. To MosaiCs, creative expression is of inestimable value. The Church is seen as a creativity killer, where risk taking and being involved in culture are anathema.

How can the Church peel back the tamper-resistant safety seal, making space for imaginative risk taking and creative self-expression, traits that are so valued within the next generation?

Shallow

Among MosaiCs, the most common perception of churches is that they are boring. Easy platitudes, proof texting, and formulaic slogans have anesthetized many young adults, leaving them with no idea of the gravity and power of following Christ. Few young Christians can coherently connect their faith with their gifts, abilities, and passions. In other words, the Christianity they received does not give them a sense of calling.

How can the Church nurture a deep, holistic faith in Christ that encompasses every area of life?

Antiscience

Many young Christians have come to the conclusion that faith and science are incompatible. Yet they see the mostly helpful role science plays in the world they inhabit—medicine, personal technology, travel, care of the natural world, and other areas. What's more, science seems accessible in a way that the Church does not; science appears to welcome questions and skepticism, while matters of faith seem impenetrable.

How can the Christian community help the next generation interact with science positively and prophetically?

Repressive

Religious rules—particularly sexual mores—feel stifling to the individualist mindset of young adults. Consequently, they perceive the Church as repressive. Sexuality creates deep challenges for the faith development of young people.

How can the Church contextualize its approach to sexuality and culture within a broader vision of restored relationships?

Exclusive

Although there are limits to what this generation will accept and whom they will embrace, they have been shaped by a culture that esteems open-mindedness, tolerance, and acceptance. Thus, Christianity's claims to exclusivity are a hard sell. They want to find areas of common ground, even if that means glossing over real differences.

How can the Christian community link the singular nature of Christ with the radical ways in which He pursued and included outsiders?

Doubtless

Young Christians (and former Christians, too) say the Church is not a place that allows them to express doubts. They do not feel safe admitting that faith doesn't always make sense. In addition, many feel that the Church's response to doubt is trivial and fact focused, as if people can be talked out of doubting.

How can the Christian community help this generation face their doubts squarely and integrate their questions into a robust life of faith?

THE TURN TOWARD CONNECTION

Once we begin to understand the problems the next generation experiences with the Church and Christianity, our second task is to determine how those areas of disconnect are challenging the Christian community to change. Are there ways in which the struggles of the next generation ought to shift our thinking and practice? If we ignore or discount the spiritual journeys of the young, could we be at risk of missing a fresh move of God in our time?

The Spirit-inspired interplay between generations is a common theme in Scripture. As one example, consider the story of Eli (the older generation) and Samuel (the younger generation) described in 1 Samuel 3. You may recall the episode: In the middle of the night, God calls to Samuel, but the young prophet-in-training repeatedly mistakes God's call for the voice of his mentor, Eli. Finally, it occurs to Eli, after Samuel has interrupted his sleep several times, to instruct his protégé to say, "Speak, Lord, your servant is listening."

Once I heard present-day leader and pastor Jack Hayford observe that the younger generation needs the older generation to help them identify the voice of God, just as Samuel needed Eli to help him know God was calling him. Hayford also observed that helping in this way requires that we recognize, as Eli did, *that God is speaking to the younger generation.*

My hope is that *You Lost Me* can, in some way, catalyze this vital dynamic between generations—that it will help young dropouts *turn* their reason for leaving into a hunger for deeper faith and help the Church's older generations *turn* our frustrations and occasional feelings of failure into renewal.

If you are a younger Christian, this means it's *your* turn to listen.

If you are a "well-established" believer, maybe it's time to trust in a deeper way the work of God within the next generation.



David Kinnaman is author of *You Lost Me* (2011) and *unChristian* (2007). He is president of the Barna Group, a private, nonpartisan research and resource company in Ventura, Calif. He and Jill, his wife, have three children and live in California.

Adapted from You Lost Me ©2011 by David Kinnaman, with permission from Baker Books (Grand Rapids, Mich.)

- * Kevin Selders, "No More Secrets for the Cold War Kids," *Relevant* (January–February 2011), 56–59.
- ** Kinnaman describes seismic cultural shifts that have resulted in Mosaics being "discontinuously different" from previous generations in their unlimited access to people and ideas through technology; alienation from family, community, and institutions; and skepticism of authority.



David Kinnaman's keynote message to General Conference 2012 will be available for viewing from **September 14–16** at BIC-CHURCH.ORG/GC2012.

We hope you'll tune in to learn more about the faith journeys of Mosaics and the prophetic role of the Church among this new generation.



Win a copy of *You Lost Me*

Want to read the rest of *You Lost Me* by David Kinnaman? *In Part* is giving away five signed copies!

For a chance to win, go to INPART.ORG/FEATURE/YOU-LOST-ME and leave a comment about what you appreciated or felt challenged by from this article. We will randomly select five winners from those who have entered comments by September 11.

This contest is a sweepstakes. No purchase necessary to enter or win. Void where prohibited. A purchase will not increase your chances of winning. Offered only to residents of the U.S. and Canada who are 18 years or older. Limit one entry per person via any method of entry. Entries must be received by midnight (Eastern Time) on September 11, 2012. To enter, leave a comment online at INPART.ORG/FEATURE/YOU-LOST-ME or send a standard 3" x 4" postcard with your name, address, email address, and proper postage to: *You Lost Me* Sweepstakes c/o *In Part* magazine, 431 Grantham Rd, PO Box A, Grantham, PA 17027 USA. Complete rules and details are available at INPART.ORG.

You found me

Young adults in the BIC talk about their faith, their friends, and why they've decided to remain a part of the Church

Christians today face the growing trend of young adults leaving the Church, as identified by David Kinnaman and the Barna Group. To explore the state of young adults in our denomination, *In Part* asked representatives to share their thoughts on the BIC Church, their faith, and their generation.

A dozen twentysomethings accepted the invitation and offered generous and candid responses to our questions. As demonstrated in the selections that follow, these young people realize that the Church is not perfect, but they also celebrate many aspects of the spiritual home that they've found within the Brethren in Christ.



Valerian Curd

Age: 27

Current involvement:
Harrisburg (Pa.) BIC

How did you come to the BIC Church?

IN PART

One Sunday, while I was in college, someone invited me to Harrisburg BIC. I enjoyed my time, but what really blew me away was that the message was on racism and our responsibilities as Christians in this area. I'd never heard this topic brought up in an actual church service before, so I was definitely intrigued. Once I got a car, I began to attend as regularly as I was able.

In what areas do you think the Church can grow?

IN PART

One thing that frustrates me is Christians' tendency to try solving problems, namely social issues, by avoiding them. Like there's a possibility that if we ignore the issue, it will go away. Looking back through history, I see that powerful change has often come when the Church is out in front of these things. When the Church fails to engage, I feel it damages its credibility and effectiveness to reach out.

What questions are you asking about faith and life?

IN PART

The impression that I often get, particularly among those in my generation, is that to truly display the love of Christ, you must accept anything and everything. While I believe in respecting all people and "speaking the truth in love," I don't think this means that everything goes. I believe it's important to know how to bring the truth of Christ to people while still conveying the power of His love, and that is something that I'm trying to work out in my life and faith right now.



Sheila Tyson

Age: 28

Current involvement:

member of church board and congregational life team at Ashland (Ohio) BIC

How would you describe where you are in your faith?

IN PART

Three years ago, the Lord called me to be a part of an amazing ministry in Central America. I returned last summer and am in a time of transition personally. Spiritually, I have experienced God's incredible and timely provision in many ways—from employment to friends.

What are your thoughts on your generation?

IN PART

I think my generation is inundated—with stuff, information, schools of thought, choices. It's like being near a waterfall next to a super highway during a cicada year while trying to decide on an entrée at the Cheesecake Factory: too loud and too much. I have friends who have left church or the faith. I think they are searching for simple truth and faith. Rather than beefing up our programs, I think that we need to pare down. We have forgotten, in some respects, how to be the still, quiet voice. We shouldn't be adding our voice to the fray. We should be quietly living the Way and following God's leading for timing and words when our opportunity comes.

What has kept you involved in the Church?

IN PART

God's call to community and love for that community. Also, the godly wisdom and teaching of my parents and others I respect and love.



Graeme Hogg

Age: 21

Current involvement:

The Agora (Welland, ON); leadership programs director at Camp Kahquah (Magnetawan, ON)

How did you come to faith?

IN PART

I committed my life to the Lord many times in fear of “going to hell.” But my true identification with Christ took place at Camp Kahquah at the age of 14.

What questions are you asking about faith and life?

IN PART

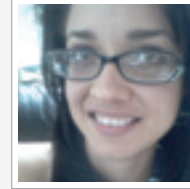
Issues surrounding the eternal realm contribute to my questioning/faith: heaven and hell, predetermination, etc. But I'm not sure if the Church is a 100 percent safe place to ask these questions. If you've been attending church for your whole life and begin to ask questions, the people in the church begin to look to you differently. The attitude is sort of, How could you just suddenly begin questioning all that you have supposedly been living for this whole time? or, How could you even dare to consider not believing in all of this?

In what areas do you think the Church can grow?

IN PART

In general, the Church is extremely ritualistic in nature, and that scares me. The same thing happens every single Sunday, which makes participants comfortable. But when I go to church, I want to feel uneasy, challenged, and ready to change.

I also believe that church can be an extremely isolating experience. You go; sit in the row; listen to the music, prayer, and sermon; and go home. Where does the community or interaction occur? Who can I ask these questions that are troubling me?



Olga Jimenez

Age: 23

Current involvement:

Maranatha BIC (Hialeah, Fla.)

How did you come to faith?

IN PART

When I was 16, I visited a church in Cuba, and from the very first moment I stepped into that place, I can say that my life changed. I accepted Christ as my Lord and Savior, and a month later I was baptized.

In what ways has your community of faith loved you?

IN PART

I was shy, timid, and alienated when I came to the United States four years ago. But the leaders and the church believed in me and what God could do through me. I have changed and overcome many of my insecurities because of the support and help from Maranatha.

What questions are you asking about faith and life?

IN PART

One of the things I question is, How should we treat homosexuals? I feel the Church rejects the sinner and sometimes accepts the sin, when it should be the other way around. I believe this is an issue we are facing, and we should learn to show love to people instead of rejecting them.

What are your thoughts on your generation?

IN PART

I believe our generation needs Christians who do not trade their faith and commitment for anything that this world offers. Unfortunately, I do have close friends that have left the Church. I think we sometimes fail in reaching out to the ones who have left. We (including me) tend to forget about them. We try for a while, we pray, and then we keep moving.



Zach Spidel

Age: 26

Current involvement: church multiplication pastoral intern at Fairview BIC (Englewood, Ohio); Great Lakes Conference relationship development team member

How would you describe where you are in your faith today?

IN PART

I'm in a season of fresh discovery. After finishing seminary a year ago, I find myself challenged to translate what I believe into a lifestyle that makes sense for my context.

Are there any BIC values that particularly resonate with you?

IN PART

Its embrace of the peace position. To follow a God who would die for His enemies means being willing to do the same. It's an impossibly difficult teaching, which makes it necessary for us to depend on grace. It's also a deeply countercultural teaching, which allows us, when we really live it out, to present a living picture of God's love in its astonishing intensity.

What weaknesses do you see in the Church?

IN PART

I am worried that we are adopting models of ministry grounded in the marketplace rather than the Bible. We elevate leaders who, through careful demographic research and marketing acumen, were able to found large churches. We think about efficiency in ministry, how to reach as many people as possible with our resources. But our God persists in giving to those who show no signs of gratitude. Our God is a shepherd who'd leave a flock of 99 just to find a single lost lamb. The Church does not need more marketing. Rather, we need to take our cues from Jesus, who thought dying on a cross was a good way of winning victory over the world. We need more of the prodigal love of God.



Sheena Thrush

Age: 24

Current involvement: worship director at Gateway Community Church (Chino, Calif.); YouthQuest planning committee; BIC Ambassador; Pacific Conference's board for congregational life

In what ways has your community of faith loved you?

IN PART

There are people from Gateway whose first memory of me is a somewhat embarrassing event that I don't even remember: As a 3-year-old, I started wailing when my parents went up on stage to be installed on their first Sunday. Yet in spite of this, these people have helped me grow up and now trust me to lead them in worship as we all continue in our walks of faith. This is what being the Church is all about—growing together, learning together, praying for each other, encouraging one another.

How would you say the Church is doing in reaching out to young people?

IN PART

I think the question should be, What are we doing to reach *people*? The Church needs to meet people of all ages at their point of need.

Justice, poverty, war, homosexuality, earth care, immigration, sexism, ageism—these are issues my generation in particular talks about. We need to hold the Church accountable so that as it addresses these issues, we do so in the way that Jesus would.

What has kept you involved in the Church?

IN PART

I stay involved in the Church not because I "have to" or "should," but because I want to be around other believers. I need their fellowship and accountability. As I grow closer to God, I am able to better love my brothers and sisters, and as I love my brothers and sisters better, I grow closer to God.

To read more thoughts from young adults in the BIC and to share your own perspectives, visit

INPART.ORG/FEATURE/YOU-FOUND-ME

VIBES

AN EXPLORATION OF FAITH AND POPULAR CULTURE



Hearing from God through an unexpected medium: popular TV

by JACOB EVERS

If you've read even a chapter or two in the Old Testament, you've probably noticed the series of events that plays out over and over (and over): God communicates His instructions to the nation of Israel, Israel fails to follow those commands, and, eventually, God uses "outsiders" (the Persians, Medes, Assyrians, etc.) to confront and to correct His people.

It occurs to me that God continues to use today's "outsiders" to help bring perspective and instruction to His people. True, armed Babylonians aren't storming into our churches. Rather, I see God speaking to Christians through what might be an unexpected medium: popular TV.

From FOX's musical "dramedy" *Glee* to ABC's "Texas-sized show" *GCB*, Christian characters are highly visible in the network lineup. At times, these characters witness to the best aspects of our faith, demonstrating grace and compassion in the face of great need. At other times, they depict the worst, responding with ignorance and hypocrisy to the situation they're in.

As Christians, we might find ourselves alternately gratified and frustrated by these depictions. Yet we must

remind ourselves that these portrayals reflect the thoughts and perceptions of real people—the writers and actors. At some point, these folks came into contact with some form of Christianity, and they formed opinions based upon those experiences.

So when we come across these shows, I don't think God's telling us to change the channel. Rather, He might be asking us to engage with what these shows are communicating. If we listen hard enough, I believe we can hear God speaking to us through the messages these shows are sending about how the world views Christians.

"Texas-sized" hypocrites?

The ABC network's new show *GCB* (an acronym for Good Christian Belles) takes what culture thinks of Christianity and exaggerates it. The opening scene of the episode "A Wolf in Sheep's Clothing" typifies *GCB*'s Christian stereotypes. Amanda—the show's protagonist—shows up for church wearing slacks. Gigi, Amanda's mother, proceeds to judge her daughter for this fashion faux pas. Amanda responds, "Seriously, I think God just wants us to show up. I don't think He cares how you look."

I have to agree: God does not care what we wear. But after further questioning from Gigi, Amanda reveals that she wore slacks because she tripped over a keg at a bar and did not want everyone to know why she had a bruise, and not because she was trying to make a point about God's acceptance.

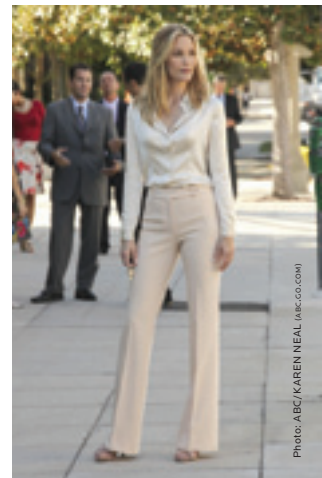
In this brief scene, *GCB* succinctly depicts the hypocrisy (through Amanda) and quickness to judge (through Gigi) that many people

associate with Christianity—a sentiment I've heard expressed by many people in many contexts. One of the biggest challenges that the Church faces today is accepting people for who they are while still holding on to our own convictions. We are called to follow Jesus' example and hold people accountable for what they do, but we must also lovingly accept people into the grace of God. If we are going to posture ourselves after Jesus, we must understand that people will make mistakes, but it is not our place to judge their hearts.

Further, we need to get more used to admitting that we make mistakes; otherwise, we will just look like hypocrites. Jesus compared Himself to a doctor: He came not for those who are healthy but for those who are desperate to be saved. So why do we feel the need to always pretend that we're great? Revealing our brokenness to others is one way that we can be witnesses for Christ and His redeeming work. If we find ourselves in a situation like Amanda's, where we are so embarrassed by the ways that we've fallen short, perhaps it would be best for us to simply come clean—to God and to each other.

Community ignorance

While shows like *GCB* depict Christians as hypocritical, the NBC sitcom *Community* characterizes Christians as ignorant. In the episode "Comparative Religion," Shirley, an evangelical Christian, hosts a Christmas party for



In an episode of *GCB*, Amanda wears (gasp!) pants to church to conceal the brokenness in her life.



Photo: NBC. Comparative Religion (wisc.com)
Community's Shirley reacts insensitively when classmate Abed brings a traditional Palestinian dish to her Christmas party.

the members of her community college study group. It's clear from the start that she believes everyone celebrates Christmas. When she discovers

otherwise, she repeatedly makes disparaging remarks toward her classmates, who come from a variety of faith backgrounds. For instance, when Abed, a Muslim, brings a traditional dish from his culture to Shirley's Christmas party, she thanks him but then adds, "I'm guessing as a woman, I won't be allowed to eat that." Though she claims to "respect all religions of the world," her actions suggest that she either doesn't really respect them or doesn't know anything about them.

As someone with a degree in comparative religion, I found this episode funny, yet disturbing in regard to Shirley's lack of knowledge about other faith traditions. Shirley assumed that there is a war on Christmas, and she sought to defend her holiday. Yet in the process, she failed to show the love of the One whose birth she was celebrating.

We, as Christians, have a responsibility to reflect Jesus upon the world as much as we can. In college, I befriended a professor who was a Hajji, a Muslim who had traveled to Mecca and thereby performed the fifth pillar of Islam. I could have told him I thought he was wrong for worshipping Allah of Islam. Instead, I asked him to coffee to learn of his travels. After a relationship of mutual trust and friendship had been established, we were able to dialogue with each other honestly. I shared my beliefs, just as he shared his. But before we reached that point, I wanted to follow the example of Jesus: to show love to my friend by taking a

genuine interest in his experience. Jesus dined with everyone, and as a result earned Himself a "worldly" reputation as a drunk, a glutton, and a "friend to tax collectors and sinners" (Luke 7:33–34). Yet Jesus did not allow such condemnation to stop the power of His love (John 3:16–17). Unlike *Community's* Shirley, Jesus welcomed all people to the table, even as He witnessed to the true Redeemer and His love.

"Grilled Cheesus" or real Jesus?

Unlike *Community's* Shirley, some of the Christian characters in FOX's *Glee* represent faith in a more positive light. In the episode "Grilled Cheesus," Kurt—a young gay atheist whose father has tragically suffered a heart attack and slipped into a coma—receives an invitation from his friend Mercedes to attend her church. While there, Mercedes asks her congregation to pray for Kurt, no strings attached. Regardless of Kurt's sexual orientation or religious faith, Mercedes' community promises to pray for him and his father. Kurt receives Mercedes' kindness and love with gratitude. Although he is not a Christian by the end of the episode, he acknowledges that everyone needs some sort of faith, and he is moved by the way the church demonstrates love to him.

As *Glee's* storyline suggests, the world is starving for a Christianity that—following Jesus' model—comes in and heals, loves, brings joy and food, and prays without ceasing. Looking at the Bible, we see that when Jesus prays, He does so because people need it. What if we, like Mercedes, simply began to pray for people because they need it?

I have friends from a variety of faith perspectives: atheists, Muslims, Jews, Sikhs, Buddhists, agnostics. I bring to these relationships love for my friends,

their problems, their joys, and their stresses. These friends know that I truly believe that Jesus is the "way, truth, and life," and I do my best to live this among them and not just preach it to them.

Taking heart from TV

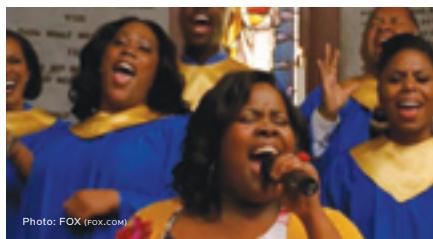
It would be easy to dismiss much of what North American television says about Christians, but is this the right thing to do? We must take time to see God in all avenues. We should look at these examples of Christians with new eyes and consider whether God is trying to speak to us through these unusual mediums.

Many of these characters are complicated and draw mixed emotions from us as viewers. Characters like *GCB's* Amanda and *Community's* Shirley remind us that, as Christians, we are not perfect. Sometimes we get it wrong, and we deserve to be laughed at. From these experiences, we learn to humble ourselves and seek redemption from those we have belittled, while still holding firmly to our own convictions. Other characters, like *Glee's* Mercedes, show us how we can respond to potentially volatile situations with love and grace, armed with the knowledge that we don't need to "convert" someone before we can serve them.

The good and the bad, the stereotypical and the transcendent—characterizations of Christians in television today reflect lived experience and demonstrate that Christians are just as complex as the rest of humanity. More than that, they might also be another way that God is calling us to consider how we're doing in our witness to His world.



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Jacob Evers is married to Danielle, and they are members of GracePoint BIC (Ontario, Calif.). In his spare time, Jacob serves as a roller derby announcer and ponders Anabaptist values at his blog, jacobevers.blogspot.com.



In *Glee*, Mercedes and her church minister to her hurting friend, Kurt, even though he doesn't believe in God.

PARTING WORDS

“... I’M A LOT LIKE YOU WERE”

An “old man” and a few emerging leaders come together to imagine the Church of the future

by PERRY ENGLE

My ears perked up as Neil Young came on my classic rock station while I was taking Sophie, my daughter, to school this past spring. If it hadn’t been one of my all-time favorite songs, I probably would have let her change the station, which she almost always does.

The song, “Old Man,” has struck a chord deep within me ever since my high school days. The Canadian rocker’s thin, quavering voice and poetic lyrics always seemed a comforting counterpoint to the angst-ridden years of my adolescence.

This particular ballad is an ode to an elderly caretaker on a California ranch. The song reflects an exchange between the 24-year-old songwriter and a grizzled farm hand with a lifetime of experiences to share. “Old man, look at my life,” Young sings wistfully. “I’m a lot like you were.”

The song reminds me of interactions I’ve been having recently with a group of 20- and 30-year-olds. Our Emerging Leaders Gatherings* have been an attempt to open up dialogue with younger people in the Church, listen to their ministry dreams, and provide them with opportunities to serve God. In this scenario, I increasingly find myself in the role of the Old Man, and not the wide-eyed idealist that I once was in my youth.

What I like most about our Gatherings (besides the organic free-trade coffee cart that has become a fixture at

our meetings) is the free-form conversations that energize our times together. I love hearing the openness and passion with which this generation speaks about serving Jesus. Much less likely to concern themselves with denominational politics, our emerging leaders are more apt to focus on how to turn our Core Values—values like living simply, belonging to the community of faith, believing the Bible, and pursuing peace—into core *practices*. More than ever, they seem determined to live like Jesus, while letting the forms of Church follow naturally.

One attender of the Gatherings was so taken with who we are as a Church that he and his wife have approached us with a proposal to start a new church in Seattle. As a result, a few of us from the West Coast made a trip to the Emerald City this May for a weekend of prayer, demographic study, and plenty of invigorating conversation and strong coffee. The journey helped confirm that God is calling us to launch a new network of churches in this dynamic area of the Pacific Rim.

One Gatherer is now doing an internship in an eastern city, exploring new models of how to “do church” in the urban context. Another is on a mission assignment in an embattled Middle Eastern country. Still others are exploring ways to use their gifts as worship leaders, nurses, church planters, teachers, and entrepreneurs in a world



I love hearing the openness and passion with which this generation speaks about serving Jesus.

that seems more and more open to some of our Christ-centered values.

As I engage with these young leaders, I love the way they encourage and challenge me at the same time. I smile as I think of Neil Young’s song, and how I’m quickly becoming the old man he’s singing about, with my life increasingly reflecting the lyrics, “I’ve been first and last / Look at how the time goes past . . .” I’m excited for our emerging leaders, and grateful to be a small part of the process of preparing them to lead the Church into the future.

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Perry Engle rocks on as bishop of the Midwest and Pacific Conferences of the BIC Church. He and his wife, Marta, and their family live in Ontario, Calif.

*The Emerging Leaders Gatherings are sponsored by the Pacific Conference Board for Evangelism and Church Planting.

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