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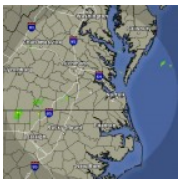
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Guest columnist: Reach out to young people

By Tom Gilson

November 10, 2007

Young people in America see Christians as "hypocritical, anti-homosexual, sheltered, too political and judgmental." They consider us too focused on getting people saved, and thus inauthentic in our relationships. These are some of the findings of a research study reported in David Kinnaman's and Gabe Lyons' new book, "unChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks About Christianity ... And Why It Matters."

With a negative report like that, it may surprise readers to know that Kinnaman is the president of the Barna Group (barna.org), a highly respected Christian social research firm, and that Lyons is the head of the Fermi Project (fermiproject.com), which is dedicated to building Christian leaders to influence culture.

This message is transmitted from within Christians' ranks. It originates from outside, though, from unchurched persons age 16-29. Kinnaman and Lyons write that, "many outside of Christianity, especially younger adults, have little trust in the Christian faith, and esteem for the lifestyle of Christ followers is quickly fading among outsiders."

The result is that we — Christians, that is — are losing a generation. The following struck me as one of

the study's most unexpected findings:

"We consistently find that the vast majority of teenagers nationwide will spend a significant amount of their teen years participating in a Christian congregation. Most teenagers enter adulthood considering themselves to be Christians and saying they have made a personal commitment to Christ.

But within a decade most of these young people will have left the church and will have placed emotional connection to Christianity on the shelf. ... This leads to the sobering finding that the vast majority of outsiders in this country, particularly among young generations, are actually de-churched individuals."

Misperceptions of Christianity are to be expected, yet image management is not the answer. In fact, to concentrate on that would be to further the error and to compound the impression of Christians being inauthentic and hypocritical.

In an Oct. 25 interview, Kinnaman told me, "The church has been trying to polish the image and be 'relevant'; but relevance is a false idol, it doesn't produce depth. So we're trying to raise attention to spiritual depth."

How then ought we to respond? Not by backing away from Biblical truth. Nor should we seek to conform to culture, or let others define for us what it means to be Christian or "unChristian." In the interview, Kinnaman emphasized that our response "can't just be a campaign. We need to be more transparent, honest, real, accessible; we need to listen beneath the surface, and listen to God."

This book helps us to do that, first by giving us a clearer picture of those we hope to reach. Missionaries know they must understand the culture in which they work. "unChristian" stands squarely in the tradition of good missions practice: holding the truths of Scripture in one hand, and a thorough, respectful knowledge of the culture in the other hand, so that we can communicate the good news in a way the culture can best understand it.

The study reminds us that we need to listen. Take, for example, the very contentious question of homosexuality. Should Christians "hate the sin but love the sinner"? The Bible says homosexual practice is wrong, but God loves every person, and so should we.

It has been my experience, though (and Kinnaman supports this), that communicating godly love to homosexual persons requires a lot of time spent listening. Without it, too often the message is dominated by "hate the sin." As a result, then, "loving the sinner" gets buried or lost. The authors point out that "stereotypes kill relationships." Some outsiders' misperceptions of Christians are based on unthinking stereotypes. That fact ought to remind us not to respond in like manner, and one of the best ways to avoid that is by spending time listening.

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We also need to deepen our discipleship. Though 29 percent of Americans in their 20s and 30s say they are highly committed to Jesus Christ, only three percent embrace a Biblical worldview, defined for research purposes as adhering to eight historic Christian doctrines (for example, that God is the Creator, that Jesus died and rose again for our sins, that there is objective morality based in the Bible). Our practice, if I may be forgiven for speaking in generalities, has been similarly shallow. More genuine love, more genuine caring and service, would overcome much (not all, but much) of the negativity outsiders have toward Christianity.

We need to practice humility. Christ is the answer for the needs of the world. We who recognize Him as such should also be the first to recognize how much we ourselves need Him, and how our own lives depend on His grace. We are nothing special. He is.

"unChristian" offers many more positive suggestions, provided by a wide variety of leaders, for dealing constructively with the reality the study has exposed. It's hard to be happy about that reality, but it is good that it has been revealed. My prayer would be that every church staff team would study this book and ask, "what do we do about this?"

Gilson is the director of strategic processes for Campus Crusade for Christ. He can be contacted through his blog at www.thinkingchristian.net.

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