

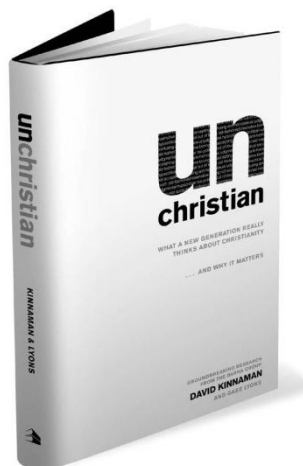
Jim's Tool Box

“Is the Church “UnChristian”?”

At the recent Capitol Area South District Spring Leadership Conference (aka District Conference), Ms. Jill Moore was the featured presenter/teacher for the afternoon meeting (see the article about the conference elsewhere in this edition). Jill is the Director of Camps and Next Generation Leadership for the West Ohio Conference.

Jill talked with those present at the District Conference about the importance of congregations in our “graying” church reaching out to younger generations. She also encouraged those present to brainstorm about ways that might happen (you will find the list of brainstorming ideas in this edition of the *CAS Connection*, too.

In her teaching, Jill referred to the book *UnChristian* (Baker Books, 2007, you can order the book through



Cokesbury at <http://www.cokesbury.com>). David Kinnaman president of the Barna Group wrote the book with Gabe Lyons. *UnChristian* is the result of research that Kinnaman and Lyons did into the beliefs and values of persons born between 1984-2002 (known as “Mosaics” and those born between 1965-1983 (the “Busters”). The book contrasts the attitudes of “outsiders” to the Christian faith with persons who are in the church.

According to Kinnaman, the title of the books reflects outsiders’ most common reaction to the Christian faith: they think Christians no longer represent what Jesus had in mind, that Christianity in our society is not what it was meant to be; hence, the title UnChristian. Kinnaman writes, “To engage nonChristians and point them to Jesus, we have to understand and approach them based on what they really think, not what we assume about them. We can’t overcome their hostility by ignoring it. We need to understand their unvarnished views of us.”

Kinnaman then reports on six broad themes that he says are the most common points of skepticism and objections raised by outsiders. Here is a chart from a PowerPoint presentation on the UnChristian website that shows these six broad areas and the percentage of youth and young adults ages 16-29 who have these perceptions about Christians:

The Perceptions of Christianity

Perception	Outsiders, 16 to 29
Antihomosexual	91%
Judgmental	87%
Hypocritical	85%
Sheltered (old-fashioned, out of touch with reality)	78%
Too political	75%
Proselytizers (insensitive to others, not genuine)	70%

How do these views match up with your own views of the characteristics of Christians? How do they match up with the view you have of folks who make up your congregation? It’s tempting to say this paints with too broad of a brush. However, the surveys that Kinnaman and Lyons conducted indicate that whether the labels we use are “United Methodist” or “Baptist” or “Pentecostal” or “Roman Catholic,” this is the way that many young adults view anything that has to do with Christianity. Of course Kinnaman’s point is that if this is the way that Christians are viewed (and perception is reality), how can we ever reach these younger generations with the good news of Jesus Christ?

In each chapter Kinnamon outlines the problem and possible solutions in the change in attitude and approach that Christians need to have when it comes with dealing with each of these broad themes. In most cases, he would suggest that a gentler, more understanding, listening heart would go a long way toward allowing Jesus’ love to show through our lives to these generations.

What if we as United Methodist Christians were to take seriously our slogan of “Open Hearts. Open Minds. Open Doors.”? It seems to me that if we are willing to “practice what we preach” about “Open minds. Opening hearts. Open doors.” this would provide a wonderful opportunity for us reach others with God’s love and grace.

With this kind of openness, we have the opportunity to enter into conversation with youth and young adults in our neighborhoods and communities. It would mean inviting them in and reaching out to them on their terms rather than on our terms as we begin a dialogue about what it means to faithful and what it means to follow Jesus today.

I would invite you to read this book and to study it with others in your church if your congregation is serious about reaching youth and young adults today. It is filled with insights and teachings that will be helpful to those efforts. The UnChristian website (<http://www.unchristian.com>) contains a section for church leaders. There you will find a PowerPoint that shows the broad areas of study in this book. A data summary of the book and a study guide are also available on the site.

If we as United Methodist Christians, were to take seriously our theme of “Open Hearts. Open Minds. Open Doors.” that would go a long way toward welcoming others of any generation. How willing are you and your congregation to step out in faith to reach new generations for Christ?