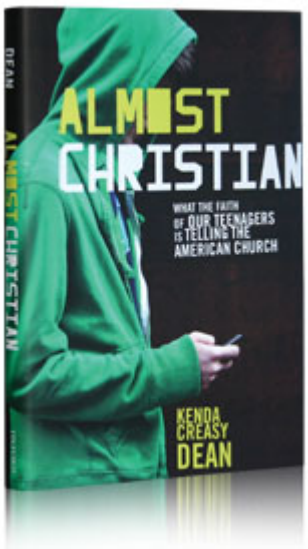
Written by **Michael Tennant** on October 14, 2010

When "Almost" Isn't Good Enough



"Let me save you some trouble," author Kenda Creasy Dean says in the very first sentence of her book Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers Is Telling the American Church. "Here is the gist of what you are about to read: American young people are, theoretically, fine with religious faith — but it does not concern them very much, and it is not durable enough to survive long after they graduate from high school."

"One more thing: we're responsible."

Ouch.

The title, coupled with the cover photo of a teenager in a hoodie, staring down at a handheld electronic device and oblivious to the world around him, might lead one to believe that Dean has written yet another "What's the matter with kids today?" book. Yet the subtitle and the second, brief paragraph make it clear that this book is less about teens' lack of religious commitment and more about the failure of the church to instill such faith in them.

Dean, associate professor of Youth, Church, and Culture at Princeton Theological Seminary and author of several books on youth ministry, knows whereof she speaks. She was one of those who interviewed American teenagers for the 2003-05 National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR), a study that she says "deeply disturbs" her, leaving her "haunted by a strange combination of defeat and hope." *Almost Christian* reflects her conflicted state of mind, and it is likely to leave the reader in the same condition — not a bad thing by any means, for, as she points out in another context, a "disorienting dilemma" such as this is the first step toward transformation. And transformation from a timid, defensive, inwardly-focused social club to a bold, outgoing body of believers seeking to reach others with the love of Christ — to recover "Christianity's missional imagination," as Dean puts it — is what the American church needs.

Where We Go Wrong

The book is divided into three sections. The first, "Worshipping at the Church of Benign Whatever-ism," examines the results of the NSYR and the process by which the American church arrived at the present stage with regard to youth.

Dean writes, "The faith most teenagers exhibit is a loveless version that the NSYR calls Christianity's 'misbegotten stepcousin,' Moralistic Therapeutic Deism, which is 'supplanting Christianity as the dominant religion in American churches.'" She describes the "Guiding Beliefs of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism":

- A God exists who created and orders the world and watches over life on earth.
- God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions.

• The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself.

• God is not involved in my life except when I need God to resolve a problem.

• Good people go to heaven when they die.

Aside from (1) and, to some extent, (2), these beliefs are entirely at odds with traditional Christian theology; but they align well with "America's dominant cultural ethos," says Dean. "Youth and parents are correct if they think that Moralistic Therapeutic Deism will outfit them better for success in American society than Christianity will" — at least over the short term. The American Dream, after all, is first and foremost a desire for personal success.

Moralistic Therapeutic Deism, therefore, is an easy-to-swallow approach to life that has replaced "the hot lava core of Christianity," as Dean describes it, with "an ecclesial complacency that convinces youth and parents alike that not much is as stake." As a result, she says, churches and their teenagers have become "almost Christian," defined by George Whitefield in a 1739 sermon as someone who "is fond of the form, but never experiences the power of godliness in his heart."

With churches and parents both modeling this kind of faith, Dean explains, teenagers naturally come to practice it too, "not because they reject Christianity, but because this is the only 'Christianity' they know."

The second part of the book, "Claiming a Peculiar God-Story," looks at those teenagers described in the NSYR as "highly devoted" (only eight percent of those interviewed) and asks how they came to be so different from their peers with regard to faith.

Of all the religious traditions found among the surveyed teens, conservative Protestants, black Protestants, and Mormons stood out as having the highest percentages of highly devoted youth. Mormons were head-and-shoulders above all the rest, however, and Dean spends an entire chapter explaining why that is. Essentially it comes down to having churches and families who constantly talk about and model the faith that they want their young people to embrace, giving their youth ample opportunities to participate in the life of the church. Christians of all stripes can therefore take some lessons from the Mormon approach, adapting it to their own doctrines and purposes; but, Dean cautions, they must be careful to do so in a way that leads not merely "to church membership, but more perfect love of God and neighbor."

The more devoted young people become, and the more they come to understand their faith, the more they will also realize (contrary to today's political correctness) the importance of not just religion itself but which religion one practices. Though Dean certainly understands this, in her book she avoids getting into denominational differences while focusing instead on basic principles that transcend denominational lines.

Embracing Faith

One thing Christians must *not* do, Dean urges, is to assume that with the right set of programs, curricula, and so forth, they can "convert parental determination and pastoral energy into electrifying faith for the young people we love…. The delusion that human effort can generate mature faith — in young people or anybody else — is as old as fiction itself." Instead, because "Christians believe that faith depends on the electrifying presence of the Holy Spirit," churches can "help by plunging teenagers into Christianity's peculiar God-story, and by inviting young people to take part in practices that embody it." Further, by reigniting their "missional imaginations," churches can demonstrate a faith that

teenagers, children, and adults alike will find worth the investment of their lives.

The final section of *Almost Christian*, "Cultivating Consequential Faith," consists of four chapters that, as Dean writes, "remind us how to be a church that sends young people out rather than ropes young people in." In other words, it's practical advice on how the church can recall its mission and, in so doing, help teens build deep, lasting faith.

She suggests that parents — by far the most significant influence on teenagers' religious devotion, according to the NSYR — and other Christian adults "[shift] the emphasis of Christian formation from religious information to a trust born out of love," while not discounting the importance of knowing the Bible and understanding church practices. She cites Deuteronomy 6:4-7 as the biblical basis for such an approach:

> Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God; the LORD alone. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise.

"The law," Dean expounds, "called upon Jewish parents to *show* their children godliness — to teach them, talk to them, embody for them their own delight in the Lord, 24/7." Adults' modeling the faith can help produce such faith in their children while simultaneously strengthening the faith of those modeling it.

Churches, too, need to consider carefully the opportunities for participation in church life that they offer to teenagers. Too often youth opportunities are, in Dean's words, "*fake* peripheral participation," as demonstrated by "the fact that outreach, worship, and Christian fellowship in most churches can carry on very well without youth at all." Teenagers need to be afforded more meaningful opportunities than the menial or superficial tasks that are often assigned to them — opportunities to influence the life of the church and to interact with adults in their own struggles with the difficult questions of the faith.

Dean concludes her book with a chapter entitled "Make No Small Plans," subtitled "A Case for Hope" — something the reader (not to mention the writer) definitely needs after eight chapters of often depressing thoughts on the state of American Christianity. Dean writes that she has come to only two firm conclusions after all her work on the NSYR: "Here is the first: When it comes to vapid Christianity, teenagers are not the problem — the church is the problem. And the second: the church also has the solution." That solution, says the author, is to "model a theology marked by patience, determination, and, above all, humility."

Almost Christian is an important book that deals with an issue at the heart of many of American Christianity's failings. Written in an engaging, passionate, and lucid style, it can be read fairly quickly but is likely to make the reader pause periodically to consider how he has succumbed to Moralistic Therapeutic Deism and how he could better exemplify the historic Christian faith for his children and others with whom he comes into contact. It is unsettling yet hopeful — a fair description of the Christian faith as well and, therefore, fitting for a book that seeks to restore the church to the joyful, abundant, missional life it is called to live.

Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers Is Telling the American Church, by Kenda Creasy Dean, New York: Oxford University Press, Inc., 254 pages, hardcover.