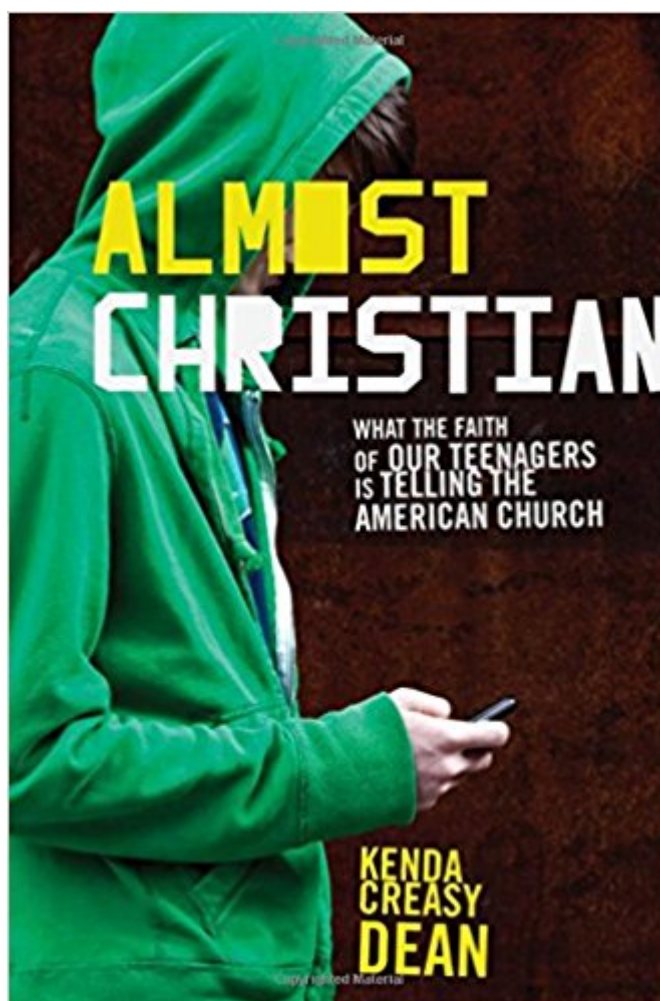


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# Almost Christian: What The Faith Of Our Teenagers Is Telling The American Church



## Synopsis

Based on the National Study of Youth and Religion--the same invaluable data as its predecessor, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*--Kenda Creasy Dean's compelling new book, *Almost Christian*, investigates why American teenagers are at once so positive about Christianity and at the same time so apathetic about genuine religious practice. In *Soul Searching*, Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton found that American teenagers have embraced a "Moralistic Therapeutic Deism"--a hodgepodge of banal, self-serving, feel-good beliefs that bears little resemblance to traditional Christianity. But far from faulting teens, Dean places the blame for this theological watering down squarely on the churches themselves. Instead of proclaiming a God who calls believers to lives of love, service and sacrifice, churches offer instead a bargain religion, easy to use, easy to forget, offering little and demanding less. But what is to be done? In order to produce ardent young Christians, Dean argues, churches must rediscover their sense of mission and model an understanding of being Christian as not something you do for yourself, but something that calls you to share God's love, in word and deed, with others. Dean found that the most committed young Christians shared four important traits: they could tell a personal and powerful story about God; they belonged to a significant faith community; they exhibited a sense of vocation; and they possessed a profound sense of hope. Based on these findings, Dean proposes an approach to Christian education that places the idea of mission at its core and offers a wealth of concrete suggestions for inspiring teens to live more authentically engaged Christian lives. Persuasively and accessibly written, *Almost Christian* is a wake up call no one concerned about the future of Christianity in America can afford to ignore.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Dean (The Godbearing Life), a professor at Princeton Theological Seminary, opens this absorbing portrait of teenage religiosity by throwing down a gauntlet: the faith of America's teens is "not durable enough to survive long after they graduate from high school. One more thing: we're responsible." Dean, who worked on the National Study of Youth and Religion with sociologist Christian Smith, says that American Christians' emphasis on "a do-good, feel-good spirituality" at the expense of deep discipleship may cost them the rising generation, which is (with the exception of Mormon teens, the subject of an admiring chapter-long case study) largely apathetic about Christian faith. How, then, can religious leaders and teachers inculcate what Dean calls a "consequential faith"--i.e., one that bears fruit for the long haul? She identifies four factors teens need: a personal encounter with God, a strong church or youth group, a sense of being called to duty, and hope for the future. In a refreshingly personal final chapter, Dean outlines her frustration at the daunting task ahead but emphasizes the possibilities if the Christian church decides to take up its cross and follow Jesus. Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

"A lot of youth workers have been a bit depressed since the National Study of Youth and Religion revealed what we'd long suspected about American teen religiosity: it's pretty darn benign. But in *Almost Christian*, Kenda Creasy Dean helps us turn the corner from the moralistic, therapeutic deism that afflicts our churches to a hope-filled, consequential faith that has the potential to change the lives of young people and, with a little help from the Holy Spirit, just might transform our world." -- Tony Jones, author of *The New Christians: Dispatches from the Emergent Frontier* "Almost Christian hangs an illuminating theological magnifying glass over the startling conclusions of the National Study of Youth and Religion. Peppered with compelling, sometimes unsettling, dialogue from NSYR interviews, the book pulls no punches but, at the same time, inspires hope that the American church can--in fact, must--move beyond the flimsy, vague, self-absorbed spirituality that has unintentionally been woven into the faith fabric of postmodern American Christianity." -- Mark DeVries, Founder, Youth Ministry Architects, First Presbyterian Church, Nashville, Tennessee "Kenda Creasy Dean argues passionately that the faith of the average American Christian teen is only a pale, watered-down version of the robust faith it could be. Drawing on extensive research and

impressive analysis, Dean offers a smart how-to guide for Christian youth ministers and parents who hope to transform that watered-down faith into something much more." --Donna Freitas, author of *Sex and the Soul: Juggling Sexuality, Spirituality, Romance, and Religion on America's College Campuses*

**Purpose, Main Argument, and Overall Summary;** It is not about getting students in church. Almost Christian does not intend to explore strategies for attracting teenagers to church, nor even what might keep teenagers active in church after they graduate high school. However, as the author points out consequential faith is also by nature lifetime faith. Rather, the author is interested in exploring what allows some teenagers to have a faith that makes a difference in their lives, and what causes other teenagers to practice Christianity with a positive disposition, but one that makes little change in their lives. What contributes to consequential faith, the kind of faith that makes a difference to a teenager's way of life? That is the question that the author explores and attempts to answer in *Almost Christian*. Dean looks at the research from the ongoing National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR) to give readers an understanding of four common traits of teenagers who possess consequential faith. While the NSYR found that a sizeable number of teenagers attend church, just 8% are "highly devoted" teenagers whose faith makes a significant difference in their actions, identities, and lives. While the first part of the book identifies the characteristics of teenagers with consequential faith, the author recognizes that identifying these characteristics does not answer the question of how we go about nurturing them in students. For that task, the author offers the American church a solution to the problem of watered-down cultural Christianity. As a Christian theologian, the author is quick to recognize faith as the unique gift of the Holy Spirit, but the author also emphasizes that parents and faith communities play an integral role in preparing students for faith that matters. **Personal Reflections, Ministerial Considerations, and Questions for Class Consideration;** In this book there were four major findings that I believe would be important for anyone in student ministry to consider. First, there were four characteristics that tend to accompany consequential faith in teenagers. These students know basic tenants of the faith, belong in a faith community, were on mission, and finally these students saw the larger story. As student minister it is very important for me to be developing these for characteristics in our students. And much of it can only occur through repetition and through living it out in everyday life. In addition, these four characteristics cannot be developed in only an hour every other Sunday. Which leads to the next major finding. Second, Parents and congregations get the kind of faith they model. Probably the most important point that this book makes is that the lack of faith among students is a direct result of

the lack of faith of their parents and the feel good messages from the pulpit. Which as a student minister it is really important to make sure you are also discipling the parents along with the students, but it is also key to remember that both need the Gospel more in their lives. There is a temptation in student ministry to help students make better decisions and to use the Bible to teach these moral values. However, as we are seeing this kind of teaching is leading to what the author calls Moralistic Therapeutic Deism. We forget that instead of teaching them of how Jesus was good, we need to teach them about a Jesus that died for their sins and through the work of the Holy Spirit makes them good. Third, a missional imagination is key to developing consequential Christian faith. Students need to see that Christianity is not about them, but a calling for them to change the eternal destination of their friends, family, classmates, and teammates. That they are called to change their family, community, and the world for the sake of the Gospel. And finally, Parents and congregations can help foster a missional imagination by pursuing three historic Christian practices. These students know basic tenants of the faith, belong in a faith community, were on mission, and finally these students saw the larger story.

Significant Quotations

“The religiosity of American teenagers must be read primarily as a reflection of their parents’ religious devotion (or lack thereof) and, by extension, that of their congregations.... Lackadaisical faith is not young people’s issue, but ours.... The solution lies not in beefing up congregational youth programs or making worship more cool and attractive, but in modeling the kind of mature, passionate faith we say we want young people to have.” (34). “The problem does not seem to be that churches are teaching young people badly, but that we are doing an exceedingly good job of teaching youth what we really believe: namely, that Christianity is not a big deal, that God requires little.... What if the blasé religiosity of most American teenagers is not the result of poor communication but the result of excellent communication of a watered-down gospel so devoid of God’s self-giving love in Jesus Christ, so immune to the sending love of the Holy Spirit that it might not be Christianity at all?” (11-12).

“It is in participating in the mission of God that God decisively changes us into disciples.” (15). “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism is what is left once Christianity has been drained of its missional impulse” (39).

“The point of God’s Incarnation was mission, the sending of God-as-love into creation.” (91).

“Missional churches seldom spring from church growth strategies. The purpose is not to grow the church or to serve the church but to be the church.” (p. 95).

Dean's *Almost Christian* is written with the backdrop of the results of the 2003-2005 National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR), which found that youth today in America subscribe to a form of "moralistic, therapeutic deism." This type of belief posits that a "god" exists, but all he wants for people is to be good, nice, fair, and happy. God will not get involved in life unless you need his help (14). The youth that believe this "theology" are, Dean claims, "almost Christian" – religious in some aspects, not at all Christian in terms of theology and practice (4). In light of this study, the purpose of *Almost Christian* is twofold. Firstly, Dean focuses on arguing that the reason for the lack of genuine faith amongst our youth is due to the adults (Part I of the book). The adults are just as at fault when it comes to subscribing to moralistic, therapeutic deism as their kids are; the kids are simply modeling themselves after their parents and adult church members. Secondly, in Parts II and III of the book, Dean walks her readers through not only the consistent set of "cultural tools" that make faith meaningful for youth (i.e. an articulated God story; a deep sense of belonging; a clear sense of a God-given purpose; and an attitude of hope for the world), but how to help young people implement these cultural tools (i.e. through the practices of translation, testimony, and detachment) (22-23). Overall, I appreciated Dean's book. The thesis and problem that Dean presents here is wonderfully provocative, and I am in enormous agreement. When I read this book, I was still an expecting parent for my first child, and Dean's thesis in this book terrified me. The notion that, as parents, our kids become us (at least in terms of faith) haunted me for weeks after reading this book. As an aside, it has challenged me to be more consistent in my personal spiritual disciplines and to more passionately seek out a life of authentic faith in Christ. Key quote: Perhaps parents and teenagers do not argue much about religion because they seem to believe almost the same things. Contrary to popular opinion, teenagers conform to the religious beliefs and practices of their parents to a very high degree. The "breaking away" from authority figures associated with the teenage years comes later in adolescence, but the 13-17 year olds in the NSYR were highly conventional, content to adopt their parents' religious inclinations. By and large, Smith and Denton concluded, parents "get what they are" religiously (p18).

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