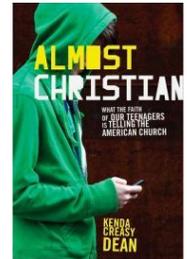


**Almost Christian in a Nutshell—A Summary of the book *Almost Christian* by Kenda Creasy Dean**  
Copyright © 2011 [The Center for Youth Ministry Training](http://www.youthministrytraining.com)



*Editor's Note:* This synopsis was written as part of a Lilly Foundation grant to the [Center for Youth Ministry Training](http://www.youthministrytraining.com) and [YMtoday.com](http://YMtoday.com).

### **The Research in a Nutshell**

What contributes to consequential faith—the kind of faith that makes a difference to a teenager's way of life? That's the question that [Kenda Creasy Dean](http://www.youthministrytraining.com) explores and attempts to answer in *Almost Christian*. Dean weaves together sociological theory along with empirical research on the faith lives of adolescents (from the ongoing [National Study of Youth and Religion](http://www.nsyrr.com) [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, Dean recognizes that pinpointing these characteristics does not answer the question of how we go about nurturing them in youth. For that task, Dean jumps from sociology into a deep exploration of Christian theology to highlight three historic Christian "arts" (or practices) that hold promise for building a "framework" upon which consequential faith can grow. As a Christian theologian, Dean is quick to recognize faith as the unique gift of the Holy Spirit, but she also emphasizes that parents and faith communities play an integral role in preparing young people for faith that matters.

### **The Research in Context**

*Almost Christian* follows on the heels of *Soul Searching* and *Souls in Transition*, two books by Christian Smith, lead researcher of the NSYR. These books are straight-up sociology and report the findings of the NSYR. In *Almost Christian*, Dean takes these findings and interprets them for youth ministry and the church by taking a practical theological approach—an analysis that listens to sociology and educational theory but is profoundly guided by theological conviction.

### **What is the significance of the title?**

*Almost Christian* is shorthand for the kind of faith reported by Christian Smith and Melinda Denton in their 2004 research summary of the NSYR. They said that while a majority of American teenagers described themselves as Christian, in reality they espouse a version of Christianity the researchers termed "Moralistic Therapeutic Deism." This kind of self-centered faith Dean simply terms "almost Christian." Dean's choice of terminology is derived from sermons preached by both George Whitefield and John Wesley. Almost Christians, said Wesley, go through the motions of religion without committing to a relationship of loving God. This reference is not an indictment of certain of Christian beliefs, but rather a form of cultural Christianity that has the semblance and language of authentic faith but lacks its heart and soul. Advocating ways to develop consequential faith in American teenagers is the main thrust of the book.

## **What's *Almost Christian* not about?**

It's not about getting kids 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. (Though consequential faith is also by nature lifetime faith.) Rather, Dean 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 "benign whateverism"—a positive disposition toward Christianity, but one that makes little change in their lives.

## **How does Dean describe Moralistic Therapeutic Deism (MTD)?**

She holds to the basic definition established by Christian Smith in *Soul Searching* which includes "the importance of being nice, feeling good about yourself, and saving God for emergencies" (10). (For a more technical definition of MTD, [see The National Study of Youth and Religion in a Nutshell](#).) Dean is quick to say there's definitely nothing wrong with being nice; it's just not the heart of Christianity. For Dean, MTD is a matter 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" (12). In other words, says Dean, "Moralistic Therapeutic Deism is what is left once Christianity has been drained of its missional impulse" (39).

## **Major Findings**

### **[1] Four characteristics tend to accompany consequential faith in teenagers**

Dean names four characteristics (or cultural tools) that occur with regularity in those whom the NSYR found to be highly devoted. First, teens with consequential faith tend to have "a creed to believe" and were able to articulate their beliefs about a God who was both personal and powerful (71). Second, teens with consequential faith tend to have a "community to belong to"—they find identity within their congregations and have a significant number of adults with whom they can speak about issues of faith and life (73). Third, teenagers whose faith makes a difference in their lives evidence a "call to live out"—they understand their lives as being oriented by a divine vocation on behalf of others rather than being oriented to pursuit of self (75). Fourth, consequential faith seems to come attached with a "hope to hold onto"—a belief that their lives are caught up in a larger story that's "going somewhere" because it is guided by God (77).

### **[2] Parents and congregations get the kind of faith they model**

The bombshell that the book unleashes upon the Christian world is that Dean asserts teenagers *are learning very well* the kind of beliefs and faith that their parents and congregations actually espouse and model—a feel-good replacement of Christianity called Moralistic Therapeutic Deism. Dean agrees with the authors of *Soul Searching* that MTD has infiltrated a large number of American churches and has wooed us into believing a self-serving, feel-good, do-good gospel that is a far cry from the self-giving love of Christ. The lackluster, less-than-consequential faith of American teenagers is directly the result of teens seeing their parents and faith communities practice a kind of faith that is often a thinly veiled self-help moralism. Teenagers have imitated this kind of faith, but unsurprisingly, they don't find it to be

very important; hence, a lack of consequential faith among American teenagers discovered by the National Study of Youth and Religion.

### **[3] A missional imagination is key to developing consequential Christian faith**

Tackling the question of how parents and churches can help foster consequential faith is the heart of *Almost Christian*. Dean's first answer is to remind readers that faith is not ultimately secured by human effort. "Cultural tools can provide support beams for, but not the content of, consequential faith. Christians believe that faith depends on the electrifying presence of the Holy Spirit, who gives cultural tools their holy momentum" (62). Second, Dean identifies the root problem of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism as its self-centered, loveless version of the gospel that engenders self-preservation in lieu of the self-giving love of Christ. The development of a "missional imagination" is required to move beyond the MTD of "almost Christianity" into "altogether" Christian faith (90). A young person must develop an understanding of personal life and faith that is founded upon the self-giving love of Christ. "Young people will not develop consequential faith simply by being absorbed into a so-called 'Christian' culture (if such a thing is even possible)," Dean says (84). Rather, consequential faith reflects Christ who "sends his people as he was sent: to be the light of the world, to give healing and hope...to suffer, perhaps unjustly, on behalf of others" (Andrew Walls as quoted in Dean, 84). When Christians (teenagers or adults) live with this kind of missional imagination, then "consequential Christianity turns self-focused spirituality on its head" (84).

### **[4] Parents and congregations can help foster a missional imagination by pursuing three historic Christian "arts"**

Dean says that a missional imagination is "seeded" by three practices that "figure prominently in missionary history" and in the history of catechesis, or Christian formation—both disciplines which are concerned with handing on the faith to others; these practices are translation, testimony, and detachment (98 and 106). Exploration of these three practices, or arts, as Dean comes to call them, forms the heart of her suggestions for what parents and churches can do in order to frame consequential faith for teenagers.

The first practice that Dean says parents and congregations must engender if they are to pass on consequential faith to teenagers is the art of translation. Primarily, this is faith that is modeled. "Teenagers' ability to imitate Christ depends, to a daunting degree, on whether *we* do," Dean writes (112). While Christian education and Bible teaching is an obvious starting point for translating the gospel and handing it on to teenagers, it is "insufficient for seeding a missional imagination" unless trust in the person of Christ is evoked. This kind of trust is not learned by rote but by observing the lives and actions of others who trust in Christ (115).

Second, Dean speaks of the art of testimony that has anchored Christian faith for centuries. The ability to tell about and witness to the faith one professes is crucial in the development of a faith that is also consequential (Chapter 7). "The point is that words and faith seem to go together," says Dean. "Christian teenagers who referred to their faith frequently [and] interpreted their lives in religious terms...also had a ready religious vocabulary at their disposal" (135). Dean argues for the need of parents and congregations to impart to teenagers a conversational Christianity steeped in explicit conversation about Jesus so that teens develop the "vocabulary indicating a robust Christology" (140). Though she presents several ideas for accomplishing this, Dean urges that this kind of conversational Christianity "requires

immersion in a culture where the language is spoken, as well as first-hand practice using the language with native speakers" (144). She calls out churches that completely separate youth ministry from the worship and life of the congregation as contributing to the lack of articulacy and testimony among Christian youth (145). "Most teenagers have few structured opportunities to eavesdrop on the grammar, vocabularies, habits, virtues, or practices of mature Christian adults" (151).

Third, Dean highlights the importance of practices of decentering that serve to take the focus off us and make us cognizant of God's call and action in the world. Acts of service, hospitality, mercy, and prayer figure prominently here. "Decentering practices like mission trips and prayer pave the way for...threshold experiences where youth glimpse who Christ really is, and what loving him really costs" (183).

### **Implications for Parents**

With startling regularity, kids mimic the kind of faith modeled by parents. In terms of developing consequential faith, Dean says it best in the title to her sixth chapter, "Parents Matter Most."

"Faith is a way of life, not only a body of information to master," says Dean. This means that church youth programs are important, but "play second string when it comes to the transmission of faith" (117). More important are "communities that embody the tradition in three-dimensional form, and adults who can connect these traditions to daily life" (117).

The task of parents who desire consequential faith for their kids is to introduce them to "a way of life, not just a way of believing" (118). Further, says Dean, when it comes to Christ, "handing on faith must mean sharing our love for him, and not just information about him. We forget that catechesis is this straightforward. We fall prey to the myth that teaching is a display of competence rather than an act of love" (120). Dean urges parents to model the radical, consequential faith they desire for their children to have.

### **Implications for Youth Ministries and Churches**

First, too many parents have thrust the role of faith development upon church youth ministries and Christian education programs, and youth pastors and Christian education directors have been too happy to oblige by providing a syrupy-sweet version of Christian faith to the young people under their care. The response of youth ministries to this study should not be to push responsibility for faith development back onto parents, but to discover new ways to come alongside parents in recognition that both community and parents must work in tandem to practice the arts of translation, testimony, and detachment before adolescents. Youth ministry has to include parents, first by supporting parents in their own faith, and second, by helping parents model and communicate faith to their own teenagers.

Second, for those looking for a quick fix to "benign whateverism" in teenagers, whether in new curriculum, a new youth program, or a new youth pastor, the thrust of Dean's book will be difficult to hear. Namely, there is no quick fix but only radical revision of the life and faith of the whole Christian community. This alone will be enough to send many congregations in search of a simpler solution—one that can be measured in dollars and hours rather than in the living of lives shaped by the self-giving love of Christ. The entire Christian community—parents and non-parents—are responsible for "shifting the

emphasis of Christian formation from religious information to a trust born out of life [which] makes a profound difference in mobilizing faith," says Dean (119). The problem is that the church has not conveyed "the Christian story with fidelity," says Dean. To do so, "we must first become the church this story calls for" as we practice "Jesus' last-shall-be-first ethic of love" (89-90).

### **Conclusion**

*Almost Christian* reads as a deeply sobering analysis of the NSYR laced with irrepressible hope. The two conclusions of which Dean says she's most confident are that "when it comes to vapid Christianity, teenagers are not the problem—the church is the problem." And second, "the church also has the solution" (189). Dean's hope is not rooted in wishful thinking that consequential faith is possible, but in the recognition that it is real and comes as result of the work of the Holy Spirit. This means consequential faith cannot be bottled or guaranteed, but there is a solid scaffold that parents and congregations can construct upon which consequential faith seems to grow with providential regularity.