

ALMOST CHRISTIAN STUDY GUIDE

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CHAPTER 1



To ask youth workers and parents:

1. When you read on book's first page that "we're responsible," did you count yourself among the "we" being referred to? If so, how did it feel? If not, who do you think "we" means? (page 3)
2. Does the National Study of Youth and Religion reflect your congregation? Would the study's outcomes have been significantly different if they profiled "us" (adults) instead of "them" (youth)?
3. This book is about our teenagers, but it is also about us—the congregations, pastors, parents, and Christian adults who are "charged with 'handing on' the good news of Jesus Christ to the teenagers on our watch." In order to look at the version of Christianity that we are handing on, let's look at the way we first received it. Who handed the good news of Jesus Christ on to you? How did they do this? What did they show you and teach you? (page 6)
4. Do you agree with Dean's statement that "most youth ministry is not accomplished by youth ministers"? Who is doing it? (page 11)
5. Read the "Guiding Beliefs of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism" in the shaded box. Now say the Apostles' Creed. What are the differences? Do those differences matter to you? (page 14)
6. The first finding of the NSYR showed that teens are not hostile toward religion, but they do not care much about it. Religion just isn't a big deal to them. Are teenagers these days passionate about anything? If not religion, where are they placing their energy and passion? What is a big deal to them? Why? What can churches learn from this? (page 17-18)
7. What is your reaction to the news that "parents are by far the most important predictors of teenagers' religious lives"? (page 18)
8. The most recent longitudinal follow-up in the National Study of Youth and Religion modifies the finding that highly religious youth do much better in life than their less religious peers. In follow-up interviews with teenagers in the NSYR, sociologists Lisa Pearce and Melinda Denton found that highly religious youth do fare better in a number of ways than most other youth—but so do non-religious young people (A Faith of Their Own [Oxford, 2010]). Moderately religious young people struggled the most in life. The researchers speculate that cognitive dissonance—inconsistency between espoused belief and behavior—in moderately religious young people may account for the finding. What do you think? Are there any risks in advocating religion for adolescents as a protective measure? (page 19-21)

To ask teenagers:

1. Which adult in your life does your faith/religious beliefs most resemble? Why do you think your faith is much like theirs? How is your faith different from theirs?
2. A lot of teenagers say religion is fine, it's just not a big deal to them. Yet passion means loving something enough that you are willing to suffer or make sacrifices for it. What or whom are you passionate about? What sacrifices have you made for that activity/person? What are you most focused on in your life?
3. Read the "Guiding Beliefs of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism" on page 14. Now read the Apostles' Creed. What are the differences? Do those differences matter to you? (page 14)
4. Can you think of an example when your faith made a difference in a decision you made at school, home, or with your friends? What happened? How often does faith enter into your decision-making?

CHAPTER 2



To ask youth workers and parents:

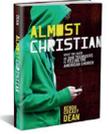
1. What's wrong with Moralistic Therapeutic Deism? What's the big deal? (For further reflections on this question, see <http://kendadean.com/371/moralistic-therapeutic-deism/>)
2. Where do you see your congregation doing a good job communicating the historic teachings of the church to teenagers? Does your church tend to communicate these doctrines, or church teachings, explicitly (by talking about them in front of teenagers) or implicitly (by enacting them without necessarily talking about them)? What are the risks of sharing the church's teachings with teenagers explicitly versus implicitly? (page 28)
3. Do we, like Shannon and Lali, allow the lines to blur between our Christian faith and the different faith or non-faith of another? Does this ever get in the way of honest and mutual understanding? What have young people seen you do in this situation? (page 31) [For another approach to this question, scroll down to #3 in "To Ask Teenagers," below.]
4. On page 36, there is a list of external forces that might disrupt a teenager's commitment to Christian community. Have any of these been an issue in your family or congregation? What effect has it had on the faith of a young person you know?
5. "Even if teenagers participate fully in youth ministry programs, are involved in churches, and manage to dodge disruptive life events and overwhelming counter-influences, youth are unlikely to take hold of a 'god' who is too limp to take hold of them." How does your congregation talk about God? React to Dean's statement in light of the National Study of Youth and Religion's finding that most teenagers think of God as either "a divine therapist" or "a cosmic butler." How do you think about God? Is God powerful or just friendly? (page 36)
6. In the Scriptures, the love God shows us in Jesus Christ, and the love God asks in return, is sacrificial love. How do you feel about that word "sacrificial"? Are you comfortable with faith that involves making sacrifices? Or did Jesus' death on a cross make sacrifice on our part unnecessary? Do teenagers understand sacrifice? Is that a problem for Christian faith? (page 37)
7. Is being a Christian dangerous in our culture? Have we led teenagers to believe that God's love is nice and will keep them safe? If so, is that so bad? (page 40)

To ask teenagers:

1. Read the letter from Alicia to her youth minister (pp. 25-26). What do you think? Do you agree that you would have more to say more about your faith if you had more chances to talk about it?
2. What's wrong with Moralistic Therapeutic Deism? What's the big deal? (For further reflections on this question, see <http://kendadean.com/371/moralistic-therapeutic-deism/>)
3. If you are talking to a friend who is part of another religion (or isn't religious at all) are you more likely to:
 - Try to find out what is similar about your and your friend's (religious) beliefs and practices;
 - Tell your friend about why you're a Christian, and ask about her/his religion (or non-religion) and what s/he likes about it;
 - Tell your friend that you're a Christian and explain how s/he can become a Christian too;
 - Something totally different!
 - Have you ever been in this situation before? How did it go?

4. What words would you use to describe God? Why those words? Pick one and share why you tend to think about God this way. (You could close your discussion with a prayer offered to God, using these names.)
5. Have you ever met someone you consider holy? Describe what, in your opinion, makes that person holy. Is niceness part of being holy? In your opinion, is there a difference between holiness and niceness? If you had to choose, do you think God wants you to be holy or nice?
6. Is it "safe" to be a Christian at your school? Why or why not? Do you think adults who want you to be a Christian "get" what being a Christian means these days?

CHAPTER 3



To ask youth workers and parents:

1. What is your reaction to the way Mormon teenagers are formed in their families and faith communities? Is there anything you want to learn from this approach to religious formation? Is there anything that Mormon parents might learn from your congregation? (page 45, 46, 51-52)
2. Let's talk about our cultural toolkits. A cultural tool is a symbol, a story, a ritual, a practice, relationship, or a worldview that we tend to pick up from the world around us. We use them to find meaning in the world and to guide our actions. What is an example of a cultural tool that you consider important to being Christian? Where did you pick up that tool? Have you ever tried to add a new tool to your toolkit? What happened? (page 48)
3. Dean notes that highly devoted young people seem to share at least four cultural tools across religious traditions: (1) they can articulate a "creed" or a God-story that guides them; (2) they belong to a community that enacts that God-story; (3) they feel called by this story to contribute to a larger purpose; and (4) they have hope for the future promised by this story. Are these cultural tools shared by youth in your congregation? How about the adults? What's missing? (page 49)
4. Religious certainty in highly devoted adolescents could mean one of two things: (1) confidence in God; or (2) a "foreclosed" religious identity [instead of an "achieved" one]. How does your church deal with doubt and religious uncertainty? Has doubt or mystery played a role in your own religious experience and development? (page 53)
5. In Mormon culture, the primary faith community is the family. How does your congregation view the ministries of families? Does your congregation support faith formation in families, or are families expected to support faith formation in church? Which would you prefer? (page 55)
6. Mormon teens are cited as frequently "taking part in church rituals like public testimony, fasting, baptisms, and blessings." What is your church doing to give teenagers a vocabulary of faith? Do they take part in church rituals or faith conversation in homes? Do you think they assume their contributions matter? (page 56)
7. Molly has a joyful faith that is so real for her that she wants everyone to share it. Do teenagers in your congregation exhibit this sort of joyful faith? Do they want to share it with people because they know it is real? (page 57)

To ask teenagers:

1. A lot of Mormon teens get up before school every day and go to "seminary," kind of like confirmation that lasts four years. What would be hard about that? What do you think would be good about it?
2. Have you ever experienced doubt about your faith? Did you tell anyone at church? What happened?
3. Dean notes that highly devoted young people seem to share at least four cultural tools across religious traditions: (1) they can articulate a "creed" or a God-story that guides them; (2) they belong to a community that enacts that God-story; (3) they feel called by this story to contribute to a larger purpose; and (4) they have hope for the future promised by this story. Do you have these tools in your cultural toolkit? Where did you pick them up? (page 49)
4. Do you ever talk about Christian faith with your friends? Why or why not?
5. Which phrase describes you best: (1) church-goer, (2) Christ-follower, (3) neither. Why did you choose the answer you chose?

CHAPTER 4



To ask youth workers, educators and parents:

1. All churches try to “hand on” Christian tradition to new generations and newcomers to faith—a process the early church called catechesis. Sunday school, Bible studies, confirmation programs, songs and hymns, involving youth in Christian advocacy and service, even the liturgy of worship itself all help “catechize” young people. Yet important as this teaching is, Dean reminds us: “Catechesis does not guarantee that teenagers will follow Jesus. Only the Holy Spirit ignites faith, transforming human effort into holy fire that comes roaring into our lives at the first hint of welcome, insistent on igniting us, sharing us, and being shared.”

Have you ever poured a lot of effort into catechizing a young person who winds up walking away from Christianity? How did you make sense of that?

Does your church tend to assume that catechesis will make children and youth into Christians? If faith is the Holy Spirit’s gift and not ours, why do we spend so much energy catechizing teenagers? (page 63)

Can you think of a time when the Holy Spirit came roaring into your life? Did any human effort help you recognize God in that event?

2. Dean states: “Every teenagers recognizes the equation: True love inspires sacrifice. True love is ‘to die for.’ Anything less is not true love.” Is she right? If so, why aren’t more teenagers sold out on following Jesus Christ, who gave everything out of love for us? (page 64-65)

3. Look at the African Christian’s words on page 65: “You Americans think of Christianity as a farm with a fence. Your question is, ‘Are you inside the fence or outside of it?’ We Africans think differently. We think of Christianity as a farm with no fence. Our question is, ‘Are you heading toward the farm, or away from it?’”

Based on this statement only (and you may want to disagree with it), do you think your congregation is more of an “American” church or an “African” church? Give an example to show why.

Being as honest as you can, what or who do you think functions as your congregation’s center? Are you okay with that? (page 65)

4. What does Dean mean when she says that, in Christian tradition, God’s power is love? What does it mean to say God is love? Does a loving God ever set limits? What does the power of God look like? (page 70-71)

5. Caring congregations help teenagers feel a sense of connectedness—both interpersonally (connected to others) and spiritually (connected to God). How connected do teenagers feel to your congregation? Is their sense of connection more interpersonal or spiritual? (page 72ff.)

6. Read through the list of characteristics of highly devoted teenagers on page 80.

- Do you agree with this list?
- Does your own faith look like this?
- What about the faith of the teenagers you know best?
- Think of one teenager you consider highly devoted. Would s/he be considered highly devoted by the NSYR? (page 80)

7. Dean writes: “Scripture repeatedly describes God’s preferential option for the unlikely as God calls people not for what they have, but for what they lack. Empty hands can receive, empty wombs can be filled, empty tombs can proclaim resurrection—and the unformed selves of adolescents can make room for Christ in ways that are difficult for hardened, formed egos.”

Have you ever considered God’s penchant for using unlikely or “empty” things to communicate God’s love and power? Have you ever felt like an “empty” vessel that God has used anyway? (This is a deep question, but your group will be blessed if you share your experience.)

How does God's "preferential option for the unlikely" give adolescents a unique capacity to bear Christ in the world? (page 81)

To ask teenagers:

1. When you think about God, do you think God is: (a) waiting for you to grasp God, or (b) already grasping you? What is the difference? Does it matter to the way you live as a Christian?

2. Pool time (this is a good time to give everybody Lifesavers):

- Is God more like a cosmic lifeguard (sitting on the edge of the pool, watching over everything to be sure people are safe, ready to dive in when somebody gets into trouble) or a divine swimming teacher (somebody who gets down in the pool with you, shows you the strokes, holds you up while you try them out, then watches you swim on your own)?

- Do you envision God as being actively present with you as you walk through the hallways at school, caring for you in your daily life? Or do you think God cares but isn't really involved in your daily life (maybe because God has bigger things to worry about)?

3. What does Dean mean when she says that, in Christian tradition, God's power is love? How is love powerful? Does a loving God ever set limits? What does the power of God look like? (page 70-71)

4. What is the most compelling thing about Jesus for you? (e.g., his birth? The miracles he performed? The way he preached and taught? The way he talked to people? His death? His resurrection?) Does Jesus...amaze you? ...compel you? ...annoy you? ...intrigue you? ...convict you? ...inspire you? ...enjoy you? ...interest you? ...do nothing for you? ...okay with you? Pick a phrase that describes your reaction to Jesus.

5. Dean states: "Every teenagers recognizes the equation: True love inspires sacrifice. True love is 'to die for.' Anything less is not true love." Is she right? If not, what do you consider the measure of true love? If she is right, why aren't more teenagers more sold out on following Jesus Christ? Isn't Jesus an example of true love? (page 64-65)

6. Look at the African Christian's words on page 65: "You Americans think of Christianity as a farm with a fence. Your question is, 'Are you inside the fence or outside of it?' We Africans think differently. We think of Christianity as a farm with no fence. Our question is, 'Are you heading toward the farm, or away from it?'"

- Based on this statement only (and you may want to disagree with it), do you think your congregation is more of an "American" church or an "African" church? Give an example to show why.

- Being as honest as you can, what or who do you think functions as your congregation's center? Are you okay with that? (page 65)

CHAPTER 5



To ask youth workers, educators, and parents:

1. We're halfway through this book. In the opening line of Chapter 5, Dean says: "Some would argue—maybe you are among them—that Moralistic Therapeutic Deism is not worth such a fuss."

How concerned are you about MTD? (page 85)

Note: if you did not discuss this earlier, you can see some of Dean's views on this subject here.

2. React to the story about the Faith Christian School and Gainesville State football teams:

- What part of the story affects you most? Why?

- Faith's coach wanted to send a clear message to the opposing team: "You are just as valuable as any other person on Planet Earth." What is one concrete way teenagers in your community have heard that message? Did it come from a church?

- Can you think of a situation in which your church is being called to send this message to teenagers? (page 85-87)

3. How would you describe your congregation's attitude toward Christian teenagers? Does your church tend to view young people primarily as people who will save the church from extinction, who will serve the church as members, or who are called to be the church? (page 95)

4. In discussing mission, Dean says, "God does not send out a few teenagers in a church van to represent Christ in the world on behalf of the church; God sends the whole church." Is this how your church thinks about mission? (page 97)

5. Dean claims that "translation is how we hand on faith to our children. The principles that describe the gospel's transmission across cultures could just as easily describe the way we ferry faith across generations." She says we are called to translate God's love for young people through the medium of our own lives.

- What does it mean to translate God's love through your life? Are you actively translating?

- Does your church have a mission and/or education committee? How are their tasks different? Who has responsibility for transmitting the gospel across cultures and generations? (page 98-99)

6. Dean describes "liminal moments" in the Christian life as the interval between Christ's call and our response, in which Christ waits for us. Can you think of a time you've lived through a liminal interval with a young person, waiting for him or her to respond to Christ's call? Does God's waiting make you uncomfortable? (page 101-102)

To ask teenagers:

1. [Tell your students the story about Faith Christian School and Gainesville State on pages 85-87. Then ask:]

- Put yourself in the position of one of the players for Faith Christian's football team. How would you feel about your coach's decision?

- What if you were a player on Gainesville State's football team? How would this night have felt to you?

Faith Christian's Coach Hogan wanted to communicate this message: "You are just as valuable as any other person on Planet Earth." Do you know anyone like Coach Hogan? What makes them different from most people? Give a concrete example of when they treated people as equally valuable?

- What is a situation in which your church or youth group might enact Christ's "wasteful" love, the way the Faith Christian community enacted it for Gainesville State?

2. Choose your favorite ending to the sentence and explain why it matters to think about mission this way:

Mission is: a) a trip; b) an event; c) a way of life; d) a purpose; e) something people do when churches send them to other countries; f) something else

3. Do you think "God is up to something good in the world?" If so, what good is God up to? How does Jesus Christ factor in? How do you factor in?

CHAPTER 6



To ask parents, educators, and pastors:

1. Does sharing your faith with teenagers (or your own children) feel intimidating? Why or why not?
2. Dean uses the work of Biblical scholar Walter Brueggeman to describe two kinds of conversations that are important for Christians to have: “behind the wall” conversations (for talking with other Christians, using the church’s distinctive language, symbols, and assumptions) , and “on the wall” conversations (for talking with non-Christians, using language, symbols, and assumptions of the broader culture).
 - Do you think your congregation does a better job preparing young people for “behind the wall” or “on the wall” conversations? Why? What is gained/lost by that emphasis?
 - Which conversation is easier for you? Why?
 - Which conversation is easier for teenagers? Why?
3. Look at the distinction between belief and trust on pp. 118-119.
 - How would you describe your own faith? Are you more of a believer or a truster? Does it matter?
 - What about the teenagers you know? Are they more likely to believe in Jesus Christ or to trust Jesus Christ? Why?
4. “Somewhere along the way, an adult in your life—a parent, a grandparent, perhaps—shared something with you for no reason other than the sheer joy of sharing with you something he or she loved, hoping you would delight in it too.”
 - Can you think of something an adult life shared with you for the sheer delight of having you share their joy? Did you delight in it with them? Was faith one of those things?
 - What would change if your church recruited adult volunteers with youth on the basis of sharing a God they love versus sharing a faith they know about? (page 120)
5. “We learn best what we love most.” Is sharing faith a labor of love? (page 122-123)
6. React to Dean’s statement:

“If we say we want to translate the gospel with young people, this is what we are saying: we are willing to put the very power of the gospel itself—the very power of the Word of God—into the hands of teenagers, people who do not view culture the way we view culture, who do not hear God the way we hear God, who will not worship the way we worship, who will not ‘do church’ the way we want them to simply because they will be listening to Jesus and not to us.”

What might happen if teenagers get their hands on the gospel in your congregation? (page 130)

To ask teenagers:

1. Does your family talk about faith together? Is it easy for your parents to talk about their relationship with God?
2. Read the Charles Blondin story about belief versus trust on pp. 118-119. Do you believe Jesus or trust Jesus? Why?
3. Do you feel like your congregation trusts you with the gospel? Why or why not?

CHAPTER 7



To ask youth workers, educators, and parents:

1. What does testimony mean to you?
2. Look at table 7.1, “Practices Promoting Religious Articulatory in American Teenagers.” Which practice has helped you form a religious vocabulary? What about for the young people you work with? Why? (page 136)
3. People talk about faith differently. Is there anyone in your life who talks about faith in a way that you admire? Why? Have you ever heard somebody talk about faith in a way that embarrassed you? What made you uncomfortable?
4. Do you have difficulty talking about Jesus? Why? Does it matter if young people omit Jesus from their faith vocabularies? (page 139-140)
5. Remember the congregation that started asking for testimony in their worship services, and no one volunteered? The situation changed dramatically when the pastor changed the term in the bulletin from “testimony” to “God-sightings.” What makes one less intimidating than the other? (page 147)
6. Dean quotes Leif Enger’s description of telling others about God’s faithfulness:

“Is there a single person on whom I can press belief?”

No sir.

All I can do is say, Here’s how it went. Here’s what I saw.

I’ve been there and am going back.

Make of it what you will.”

What do you make of this “take it or leave it” attitude towards testimony? Where is the authority located—in the God-encounter or on the credentials of the person giving witness? Does it take some of the pressure away when we leave the effect of our testimony up to God? (page 147-148)

7. What makes religious camps and conferences so significant for so many young people’s faith journeys? How did people talk about God in those camp and conference settings that was different from the way your family or congregation talked about God? Which one influenced you most? (page 155)
8. What is your community doing to prepare teenagers to talk about, and encourage them to share, the places their story has collided with God’s story in Jesus Christ? (page 156)

To ask teenagers:

1. What does the word testimony mean to you? Have you ever heard a testimony to God’s faithfulness—or given one? What was it like?
2. People talk about faith differently. Is there anyone in your life who talks about faith in a way that you admire? Why? Have you ever heard somebody talk about faith in a way that embarrassed you? What made you uncomfortable?

3. The NSYR found that youth with experience in certain practices were more articulate about faith (p. 136). Which of these practices has helped you put your faith into words, and why?

- family conversations
- singing in a church choir
- expressing faith at school
- speaking publicly about faith at a religious service.

4. What's the difference between God-talk and Jesus-talk? Which one is riskier? Why? Do you think not talking about Jesus is wrong for Christian teenagers?

5. Have you ever been to a church camp or conference? How did people talk about God there that was different from the way you talk about God most of the time? Why was it different? Did it feel safer—or more threatening—to talk about the meaning of Jesus' life for your own life when you were away from home? When you returned, was it easier or harder to talk about Jesus in your family and church?

CHAPTER 8



To ask parents, educators, and youth leaders:

1. On p. 165, Dean describes the Celtic idea of thin places, “places where God reached through heaven’s floorboard and grabbed humans’ attention.” Think about a thin place in your own life. Where was it? What happened there? (page 165)
2. Gabrielle says, “We had to leave in order to find ourselves.” Have you seen that happen in the youth of your church? Or do they seem to “leave” on trips for other reasons?
3. Look at the chart on page 169. One column represents youth ministry rooted in anxiety. The next column represents youth ministry rooted in love. Do you think your church’s approach to youth ministry is more rooted in love or anxiety? Give examples.
4. Can you think of a disorienting dilemma that shifted your attention away from yourself and toward God? What are the risks and the benefits of using disorienting dilemmas in Christian education? (page 175-176)
5. How does your congregation understand conversion—as a “one-shot deal” or “an ongoing process?” What difference does that make for ministry? (page 181)
6. Read the final journal entry from Gabrielle on page 184. What is your reaction to her decision? (page 184)

To ask students:

1. On p. 165, Dean describes the Celtic idea of thin places, “places where God reached through heaven’s floorboard and grabbed humans’ attention.” Think about a thin place in your own life. Where was it? What happened there? (page 165)
2. Have you ever left home for a few days to focus more on God? Did leaving home help? Why or why not?
3. Think about the last time you came home from a retreat or a mission trip. What was coming home like for you? Did you quickly start forgetting the trip once you got home? Did anyone ask you to tell about your experiences? Was your experience hard to put into words? Why?

CHAPTER 9



To ask youth workers, educators, and parents:

1. “When we heard that having a highly devoted faith, by definition of the study, meant relinquishing our comfortable, generic Christianity, we—like the rich young man who came to Jesus—went away sad.” (See Matthew 19:16-22). Dean points out that Scripture tells us neither the rich young ruler’s next move or ours. What do you think ours is? (page 186)
2. Dean exposes part of her own response to the NSYR. It revealed that many people have trouble seeing Christ in church. Dean admits that she often has “trouble seeing Christ in church. And yet—the church is where Christ found me, and it is where Christ continues to call me to serve.” She wonders if the problem is in church or in herself. Do you struggle seeing Christ in church? What is the problem? (page 186-187)
3. Imagine a continuum: on one end is frustration, on the other end is hope. Where are you in terms of your attitude toward forming young people in consequential faith? Are you closer to hope or closer to frustration? (page 187)
4. Read the responses to Dean’s email on page 188—especially Andrew’s response: “While the NSYR can give me numbers, I know the names of the kids who have found faith, and who have found it on my watch.” What keeps you hopeful about ministry with young people? What young person can you think of who will not let you give up? Make a list of the names of the students who have “found faith on your watch.”
5. Dean writes: “Those who want to succeed in American life, and attain high levels of visibility in it, will find that being theologically bland helps immeasurably. Yet the gospel is very clear: God wants to liberate us from being defined by these circumstances, so that we are free to follow Jesus regardless of the culture we call home.” How much is youth ministry at your church concerned with helping young people succeed in American life? How about adults? Does this get in the way of following Jesus? (page 192)
6. Respond to Dean’s closing words, referring to this statement: “What Christian adults know that teenagers are still discovering is that every one of them is an amazing child of God. Their humanity is embedded in their souls as well as their DNA. Their family is the church, their vocation is a grateful response for the chance to participate in the divine plan of salvation, their hope lies in the fact Christ has claimed them, and secured the future for them.” Does your church live alongside young people as though these words are true? Do you? (page 197)
7. What is the next step for your congregation, now that you have considered this book together?