

## The Mosaic Generation:

### The Mystifying New World Of Youth Culture

By David Kinnaman

When you think about today's youth culture, what thoughts or images come to mind? Energetic? Optimistic? Dripping with media? Change-oriented? Technology-driven? Confusing?

Ministry to teenagers has never been easy. But it has rarely, if ever, been as challenging as it is today. The teen world has traditionally perplexed adults. But Mosaics — the generation that includes today's teenagers — represent an increasingly tough-to-influence and confusing audience. With Mosaics, what you see is rarely what you get. Mosaics take the perspectives of previous generations and then blend in their own unique experiences and ideas about life. Because of this — and other things, such as the pace of technology change and the entertainment culture — Mosaics are hard to pin down.

Still, with Mosaics expected to be the largest generation in America's history — even surpassing Boomers in size — and with many Mosaics now in their formative years, the spiritual destiny of this group is up for grabs. Their lifestyles and values are being established. Their faith commitments and spiritual habits are being formed. Their leadership opportunities and tendencies are emerging. The stakes are incredibly high, and spiritual leaders need to act now. To help pastors get their bearings, let me give a bird's-eye view of this generation — with some of its many complexities — so pastors can make the most of their opportunities with the teenagers God has placed in their lives.

## What's in a name?

### Meet the mosaics, the emerging generation

Almost everyone knows about the Boomers, and most have probably heard of the Busters (or Gen X). Now meet the newest generation of Americans: the Mosaics. These individuals came on the scene between 1984 and 2002 (currently ages 3-21), making today's teenagers a significant chunk of this age cohort.

Other cultural analysts have suggested names like *Generation Y* and *Millennials* for this new generation, but these labels seem one dimensional. *Generation Y* was suggested because this generation follows *Generation X*. *Millennials* earmarks the age segment based on the calendar.

At Barna, we believe the term *Mosaics* better describes this emerging generation. Here is why:

- **Eclectic lifestyles:** Teens experiment with many activities, making their lifestyles more multifaceted and stressful than ever.
- **Nonlinear thinking styles:** Rather than using logic and rationality, teens embrace contradictions and process information in a flexible, adaptable manner.
- **Fluid relationships:** Teen friendships are in a constant state of flux; their heroes and role models change regularly; their network of peers is extraordinarily diverse ethnically; and many experience an up-and-down family life.
- **Cut-and-paste values and personalized spirituality:** Most teens embrace moral pragmatism (that is, "whatever works") and customized spirituality, drawing on many sources to decide ethical dilemmas and to determine spiritual meaning.
- **Open-minded attitudes:** Teens are not particularly dogmatic about their views and they give others space to chart their own paths — the same space they want for themselves.
- **Technology-fueled expectations:** The Internet and mobile devices like cell phones drive teenagers' information use and much of their connectivity. The Internet in particular represents an ever-changing and broad-ranging collage of input that fuels much of the nonlinear expectations of teens.

Whether or not you like the name *Mosaics*, their lifestyles and perspectives are changing the way people live, work, and worship.

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Leaders have a responsibility to understand Mosaics not only because they represent future church leaders, but also for self-assessment. Let us examine one of the most uncomfortable realities of youth ministry. In the typical church, 3 out of every 5 teens will be unchurched in the next 10 to 12 years. At your next youth meeting look around. Chances are most of those teenagers will disengage from church attendance by age 30. In fact, participation in church steadily declines following high school graduation, bottoming out during a person's late 20s. Sadly, many of these people will describe their teenage involvement in church as a "Jesus phase."

Keep in mind three things:

- The problem of church post-teen dropouts has never been more dramatic than it is today.
- Fewer people are returning to church than before and these few who do return do so at older ages.
- People are left to fend for themselves spiritually during one of the most important periods of their lives.

Mosaics' religious activity can be misleading (there is a gap between what is visible and what is really happening). They are religiously active because they love new experiences and thrive on relationships — two natural by-products of church efforts. Consequently, many leaders misinterpret well-attended youth events as synonymous with life-changing youth ministry.

However, the goal of ministry to Mosaics — as with any generation — should be transformed lives through the intentional development of a strong, enduring, and growing faith. But whether pastors want to admit it or not, teen discipleship is not working well in most churches, despite the many teens who participate.

How can youth workers and pastors retool their discipleship efforts with teenagers — especially in a dynamic, hard-to-pin-down generation? Here are insights into some aspects of this complex new world of youth culture.

### **Mosaic Lifestyles**

One way to understand the lives of Mosaics is to compare them with their predecessors — Busters (those currently ages 22-40). Mosaics are often characterized as a confident, optimistic, and upbeat generation, especially when compared to the disillusioned, cynical perspectives of Busters. Mosaics are also more interested in developing a meaningful career and getting a solid education. Consequently, they are more willing to take the necessary steps to achieve those goals. Also, compared to Busters, today's teenagers are more likely to consider religion and spirituality to be a positive dimension of life, although Mosaics do not necessarily perceive faith to be indispensable.

There are other differences as well. One of the non-negotiables of Mosaic lifestyles is their desire for fresh and stimulating experiences, well beyond the appetites of Busters. The Mosaic drive for experiential living is fueled by their yearning to be vitally connected to others and to their culture — and to get as much enjoyment out of their lives as possible. One of the implications for ministry is to teach via experiences, rather than by lecture whenever possible.

More so than Busters, Mosaics are in constant search for relevant and fresh means of self-expression. Teens express their perceived uniqueness in many ways from clothing to lifestyles (Skaters, Goths, Gays, and Jesus Freaks), and from creating their own music to getting "body art" (tattoos and piercings). Many teens share their creative efforts with others as a means of self-

expression. For instance, 25 percent of teens say they have put stories, videos, artwork, or photos online. Mosaics also expect customized outlets to express themselves — from having their own Web site, blog, or online identity to having their own personalized media profiles (customized music playlists, ring tones, or movie preferences).

Despite Mosaics' optimism and can-do attitude, there are many contradictions about their lives.

- 🟡 They believe they are likely to succeed in life, but they admit feeling unprepared for the future.
- 🟡 They feel confident and self-assured, but they are facing more life stress and being pressured to mature faster than previous generations.
- 🟡 They are driven to succeed, but they are not sure why or how to define what success means.
- 🟡 Most believe they are popular with their peers, but a majority embraces the label "looking for a few good friends."
- 🟡 Most consider themselves deeply spiritual, but few are pursuing depth beyond attending church.
- 🟡 Seventy-five percent say they are searching for life purpose, but half believe the main purpose of life is enjoyment. With Mosaics, what you see is not always what you get.

### **Mosaics And Media**

Another aspect of teen culture is the prodigious influence of and access to media. No generation has had more entertainment choices — and none has spent more time taking full advantage of these media options. A recent study by the Kaiser Family Foundation shows that the typical Mosaic spends 8 1/2 hours **each day** using various media, including television, radio, music, print resources, computers, the Internet, and video games. That time is compressed into about 6 1/2 hours since they often use more than one media at once (for example, listening to music and spending time online). Still, teens today are spending more than an hour more every day consuming media than teenagers did just 5 years ago.

The Internet takes up much of that additional time. According to research by the Pew Internet and American Life Project, more than 21 million teenagers use the Internet, and half go online every day. Mosaics fit comfortably online; it is a dynamic, adaptable environment where they feel they can be themselves, where they can have some degree of control, and where they can interact with friends. Other technologies — such as cell phones, online social networks (for example, <http://www.MySpace.com>), other mobile devices, instant messaging, and text messaging — facilitate a whole new degree and method of teen communication.

Pastors cannot underestimate how deeply these technologies are shaping teen culture. The impact includes providing teens with a grid to identify like-minded friends, giving them cultural heroes and role models, generating language and stories to help them understand their lives, and facilitating opportunities for shared experiences with their peers.

Maybe most important, the mass media are Mosaics' primary teachers. Media and technology shape their life philosophy and values. This happens not only through the relentless messages imbedded in the music, movies, television, and online content they consume, but also in the fundamental way it shapes how they process input. Partly because of their exposure to media and technology, Mosaics value control, multi-sensory experiences, nonlinear input, and dynamic relationships — all in a personalized, when-you-want-it package. In other words, technology and media energize their eclectic lifestyles and their nonlinear thinking styles.

One clear implication for youth ministry is to supplement the education of the mass media, especially by giving Mosaics' tools and techniques to evaluate and assess that input. When pastors can teach using media — the language, stories, and format Mosaics are most comfortable with — they should do so, though never at the expense of biblical principles.

### **Mosaic Relationships**

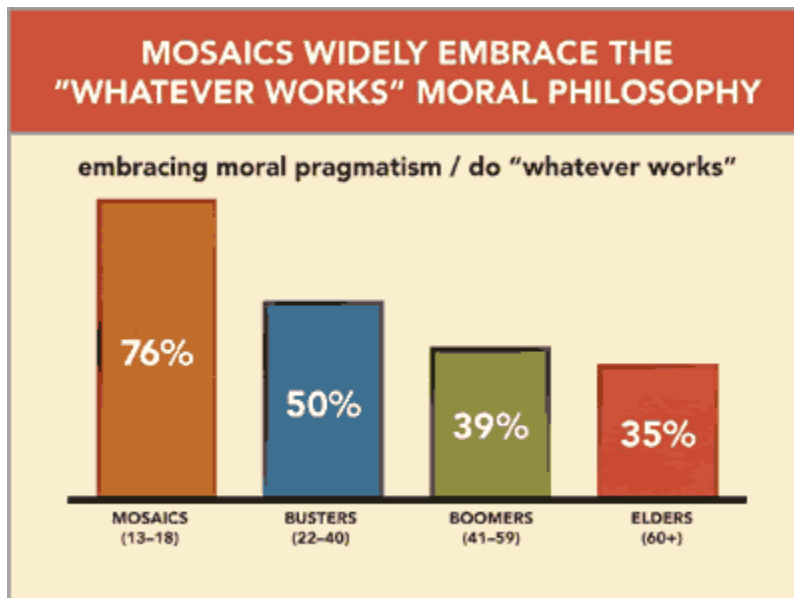
Friendships have always been important to teenagers. But pastors may not realize the new shape of Mosaics' peer relationships — relational tribes. These tribes are typically groups of three to six peers (though a tribe can be much larger) who function as the nerve center for a teenager's life. The tribe dictates much of the teen's discretionary time (what they talk about and how they spend their time). On a personal level, teens derive from their tribe such things as their identities, heroes, sense of right and wrong, and way of viewing and interacting with the world. For Mosaics, ideas have little personal relevance until they have had a chance to bounce those concepts around their tribe a few times.

How do teen tribes differ from teen relationships of the past? For one thing, the environment has changed. Along with experiencing more life stress, many families of teenagers are in disarray. There are intense pressures on Mosaics to perform, to balance deftly a wide range of activities and priorities, and to make sense of the deluge of information, media, and opportunities available to them. So, the tribe creates a miniature ecosystem that brings order, stability, and sensibility to an otherwise chaotic world.

The structure of tribes is also different from the structure of previous generations. Along with exhibiting greater diversity of gender, lifestyles, and ethnicity, the typical tribe also undergoes frequent changes in its core relationships. Mosaics add and subtract peers from their tribe with regularity. This leads to an important insight about teen culture: "Teen power brokers" — the popular teenagers who traditionally wield robust influence over their peers — are less prominent. Mosaics are less concerned with what popular people are doing because they insulate themselves from peer expectations by maintaining equal footing in their tribe. Peer pressure still affects teenage relationships — they want to fit in with their tribe — and some teens naturally gravitate to leadership positions. But the tribal culture of Mosaics softens the power of the traditional brokers, like "jocks," "brains," and "babes."

Although parents still influence teens a great deal, tribes increasingly function as the first place Mosaics turn for advice or assistance in tough times. As such, tribes have great spiritual potential — both to help and to harm. For example, most Mosaics are comfortable discussing faith matters with their peers, but they are just as likely to dispense spiritually damaging advice. One of the ministry implications is to provide opportunities for teens to learn as a tribe and to discover how to give out edifying guidance to their peers when possible.

## Mosaic Morality



While Boomers defied conventional morality to place their stamp on the world, Busters determined their moral views out of their angst and disengagement. For their part, Mosaics are widely embracing **moral pragmatism** — the "whatever works" method grounded in postmodern philosophy. Pastors probably have heard this "whatever works" approach expressed like this:

- "What is right for you may not be right for me."
- "I do what I think is best, not what anyone else thinks is best."
- "You are the only one who can determine what is right and what is wrong."
- "There is no absolute truth."

When teens face moral or ethical decisions, most decide what to do based on what feels right or comfortable in the situation; what will produce the most positive outcome for them, personally; what will make the most people happy or create the least conflict; what they think their friends or family expect; or what they believe most other people would do. In all, 76 percent of teenagers say this is the primary way they make such decisions, which makes it far more common than among Busters (50 percent) or Boomers (39 percent). The generational slide toward relativistic morality — where each individual feels he can decide what is right and what is wrong — has reached Niagara Falls proportions.

The moral dilemma is hitting Christian teens equally hard. Sixty-six percent of born-again teens say they make decisions based on the "whatever works" approach. **Moreover, only 2 percent of teenagers — about 6 percent of born-again teens — have a biblical worldview** (*defined as those who believe there is absolute truth, the Bible defines such truths, and who maintain a handful of orthodox beliefs — for example, Satan is real, and Jesus never sinned*).

Moral attitudes have a direct connection to actions. Most teens — Christian and otherwise — believe music piracy (unauthorized music downloading or copying of CDs other than for personal use) is not a moral issue. That translates into widespread music piracy among both Christian teens (76 percent) and non-Christian teenagers (85 percent).

The “whatever works” philosophy infiltrates every dimension of moral decision making — whether or not to cheat, to view online porn, to experiment with drugs and alcohol, or to have sex. In all, 53 percent of born-again teenagers admit to at least one of those four at-risk behaviors *in the last 3 months*, compared to 59 percent of unbelievers. Sadly, teens’ allegiance to Christ makes little difference in their behaviors. However, those teens with a biblical worldview were significantly less likely to have engaged in any of the four at-risk activities (41 percent), which implies helping teens develop a biblical worldview is one of the best ways to influence them morally.<sup>1</sup>

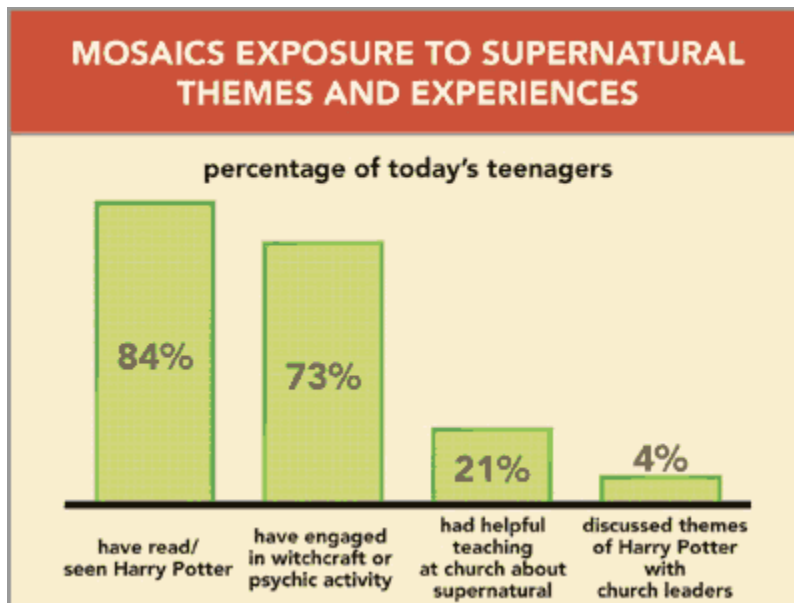
### Morality Chart

The currents of postmodernism run swiftly through the morality of Mosaics. One of these postmodern influences is *teenagers are comfortable with contradictions*, which directly influence their moral decision making. Mosaics are not logic based. They experience no dilemma embracing two conflicting concepts at the same time. While they may appear to give the right answer, they may also believe things completely at odds with that perspective.

Another tenet of postmodern thought is *relationships count; institutions do not*. This means Mosaics’ primary compass for making moral decisions is allegiance to their friends (their tribe). The music industry has felt the deep reverberations of this peer allegiance.

Finally, postmodernism also advocates *the process over the product*. This means Mosaics are more concerned with how they arrive at a moral choice than in what they ultimately decide. To influence their perspectives, pastors cannot argue Mosaics — believers or unbelievers — into an absolutist position; that comes from trust, modeling, and long-term exploration. Pastors need to help them arrive at the decision themselves, rather than telling them what to think. One implication is to *ask questions, rather than give facts, whenever possible*.

### Mosaics And Spirituality



Teens are, in many ways, extraordinarily open to matters of faith. Mosaics exhibit high levels of religious engagement. Most consider spirituality to be a significant dimension of personal maturity. And the vast majority — 86 percent — identify themselves as Christian. However, serious, committed believers are hard to find among teen ranks. Only 33 percent of teens are born again —

and only half of those say they are absolutely committed to the Christian faith. *Only 4 percent of teens are evangelical, meaning they have made a profession of faith in Christ, a confession of personal sins, and have embraced core orthodox beliefs.*

One spiritual reality sweeping the Mosaic generation is exposure to and experimentation with witchcraft and psychic activities. Seventy-three percent of teenagers have engaged in at least one such activity, including most born-again teenagers (69 percent). In all, half have explored witchcraft, including reading a book on the subject, playing a game with witchcraft elements, using a Ouija board, participating in a séance, or casting a spell or mixing a magical potion. And nearly half have engaged in at least one kind of psychic activity, such as having their fortune told, having their palm read, seeing a psychic, visiting a spiritual medium, or being present when someone else was using their psychic powers.

Why do teenagers get involved? Many get involved out of their thirst for new experiences and a desire to find meaning outside of themselves. Others do because they feel powerless, and the supernatural world helps them gain some measure of control — real or imagined — over their circumstances.

Pastors need to understand several things about teens and the supernatural. First, teen exposure to the supernatural world via media is nearly ubiquitous — 82 percent of teens said they have seen spiritual or supernatural themes addressed in movies, television, books, or music, as recently as the last few months. The Harry Potter series has been read or watched by more than 4 out every 5 teens (and it is just as widely read by born-again Christian teens).

Second, teens have little proactive feedback from parents or church leaders about how they are to understand the supernatural world. Despite Mosaics' widespread participation in churches, only 1 out of every 5 teenagers recall any church teaching in the last year that helped to shape their views about the supernatural. Most teens reading or watching Harry Potter have had *no conversations* with their parents or pastors about the spiritual themes in the book. For Mosaics, Potter represents one of the most important modern-day legends, but biblical input from adult believers is missing in action.

## **Shaping The Future**

What can youth pastors do? There is no magic solution or formula for effective ministry to teenagers. The most important thing is to have a clear vision for ministry. Pastors may need to evaluate how God uniquely called and gifted them to influence teenagers. Beyond that, here are five additional things The Barna Group learned from the most effective youth ministries — that is, those that create the most enduring faith in teenagers.

**First, effective youth ministries personalize their ministry to each individual teenager.** Their focus is on the quality of their ministry, not the quantity of those who attend. Since each teen is different, leaders use a spiritual development and assessment process that helps each teen grow in the way that fits him best. This often includes pairing teens up with a mentor who helps to identify and develop their gifts, confidence, and leadership abilities.

**Second, effective youth ministries emphasize career discipleship.** Many teens drop out of church because faith does not seem to address key issues they face as a scholar or as a professional. So, effective youth ministries try to rectify this by helping each teenager integrate his faith with what he loves to do — whether it is music, writing, leading, or studying the Bible. Additionally, they try to

give teens ongoing access to resources — especially to mentoring relationships beyond high school — that address their areas of professional interest.

**Third, effective youth ministries focus on helping teenagers develop a biblical worldview.**

Teenagers with a biblical worldview are the most likely to display the transforming power of faith — they are less likely to engage in at-risk behaviors, they are significantly less likely to experiment with witchcraft and psychic activities, and they are much more likely to stay connected to their faith beyond high school.

**Fourth, these youth ministries pray daily for each teenager and model a lifestyle of devotion to Christ and Scripture.**

These leaders are careful not to stretch themselves too thin. They realize even the most devoted youth pastor cannot personally mentor more than a handful of young leaders, so they recruit other adults and parents who assist not only as chaperones, but also as true mentors.

**Fifth, the most effective youth ministries readily embrace the challenges and opportunities of postmodern lifestyles.**

They carefully limit the amount of talking head presentations they do, and de-emphasize facts and logical arguments (except when personalizing ministry to “brainy” teenagers who respond well to these efforts). Instead, they rely on lifestyle modeling, shared experiences, strategic use of media and technology, intimate and authentic relationships, peer-based leadership, and question-and-answer discussions.

Make no mistake; one must work hard to stay current with the confusing and ever-changing world of Mosaics. If you are effective today, praise God. But soon enough — unless you consistently allow the Holy Spirit to renew your efforts — you will be irrelevant, quickly passed by a generation that does not stay in one place long. After all, Mosaics hate to be pinned down. Would you expect anything less from America’s most mystifying generation?



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**Endnote**

1. A worldview is the way any human being assesses, interprets, and interacts with the world to form his values, morals, and beliefs. A biblical worldview, then, is a means of experiencing, interpreting, and responding to reality in light of biblical perspective.

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