

Springtide Research Institute

PRACTITIONERS REFLECT

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Springtide Research Institute studies the religious and spiritual lives of young people ages 13 to 25. Its findings can advance one's understanding of the many ways young people form and express beliefs, participate in communities, and practice their faith—both within traditional religious structures and beyond them.

In 2025, Springtide conducted a national survey of nearly 3,000 young people with more than 50 in-depth interviews. To explore how these findings resonate in practice, we invited a group of practitioners—including theologians, religious leaders, teachers, and youth mentors—to reflect on two recent reports:

- [*The Four Dimensions of Young People's Spiritual and Religious Lives*](#)
- [*Parents, Peers, & Personal Belief: A Framework for Young People's Religious Involvement*](#)

This document presents their reflections on the reports' findings and their implications for engaging and supporting young people in religious and spiritual contexts.

Table of Contents

<i>Reflections from</i> Christian Camacho, FSC	3
<i>Reflections from</i> Elizabeth W. Corrie, PhD	5
<i>Reflections from</i> Megan Dewald	8
<i>Reflections from</i> Justin Forbes, PhD	11
<i>Reflections from</i> Emily Jendzejec, PhD	13
<i>Reflections from</i> Tracey Lamont, PhD	15
<i>Reflections from</i> Susan Fleming McGurgan, DMin	18
<i>Reflections from</i> Brendan McInerny, PhD	21
<i>Reflections from</i> John T. Noble, PhD	24
<i>Reflections from</i> Brenda Noriega-Flores, PhD	27
<i>Reflections from</i> Jill E. Olds, DMin, MDiv, MA	30
<i>Reflections from</i> Kara Powell, PhD	33
<i>Reflections from</i> Shannon Wimp Schmidt, MA	36
<i>Reflections from</i> Adam P. Setmeyer	39
<i>Reflections from</i> Blair Trygstad Stowe, ABD	43

Christian Camacho, FSC

Young people are the future of not only the church but of every other institution that we can think of. When I think of them, I think of a picture of two human beings with flowers as heads, one pouring water into the other to help it blossom. Mainly stating that we, as educators, theologians, authors, mentors, human beings are always learning from each other, and to pass down knowledge and wisdom to the next generation not only helps us grow as people but helps keep the legacy strong of what it means to be a strong and faithful person on this earth.

Springtide has targeted a simple question to be reflected on: What's working? Sometimes statistics are not going to help you listen to a young person speak about how the Church hurt them or how they saw something that resembled the Virgin Mary on their first pilgrimage outside of their home country. However, through essential characteristics found in groups and what keeps young people engaged, Springtide has gathered data to answer that question of what's working and how we, the Church, can maximize our spirits to open our arms to those who, by the Holy Presence of God, are entrusted to our care.

Community is defined as a group of people having a particular characteristic in common. Faith and spirituality, although connected via religion, are not exactly connected strictly the way some of us have grown up to see it as. As I enter my ninth year in the field of education, I am in awe of how young people continue to find connections, not separation, between themselves and faith and spirituality. All titles aside, the characteristics of "inclusive," "inspirational," "purpose-driven" and "goal-oriented" are equal with religious and non-religious groups when young people were surveyed. This shows that the context of working towards becoming a better person, diving deeper into one's spirituality with goals in mind and community support is what young people need at this time and it is affirming what we do!

As someone who grew up in the Catholic Church, there wasn't a supportive community for me, but there was a supportive God. As I attended my undergrad, I found that the supportive community and my view of God had changed. Why? Because when I was younger, I needed to know the definition of my faith; I needed to know that it wasn't something that leaves like a cut or a bruise. It is something that gives me a purpose in life, opens myself up to goals and inspires me to go out into the world and be a better person than who I was yesterday. Most importantly, it reminds me to find God in every person I meet and to also leave a piece of God with them that I believe is real. I found "fun" to be an interesting factor that was highly sought after when it came to young people. There was not much of a distinction between religious and non-religious groups, but the need is there. The need for young adults to not only feel like kids again but to know that growing up can have

its perks, too. Catholic Churches have learned from this, and at certain universities, fellowship has taken on the word fun and has given it a community-feeling as well as the opportunity for young people to be connected.

Some key findings from *The Four Dimensions of Young People's Spiritual and Religious Lives* include a conversation on what it means to be an adult, if any of us are brave enough to give a definition! As teens become adults, their attendance at religious services drops by 12%; the percentage increases to 19% for their lack of involvement in at least one club/team or group. This is adulting! The shift from being a high school graduate to being in the workforce / college / trade school is not something that is walked together as a community. It is that gray area where young people must find their rhythm, again, to push them into the next phase of their life. I think of the phrase used for a lobster and how it grows; lobsters grow by shedding their shell when it becomes too restricting, a process repeated multiple times throughout their life.

Young people must learn to become lobsters, and we, adults, must remember that we, too, are lobsters, as are the ones we mentor. If we continue to walk side by side with those entrusted to our care, and become reminded of our youth, we exemplify what the Gospel of Matthew tells us in Chapter 18: "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." Our impact on the world does not just stretch to the bounds of the ones in front of us. Our influence as faith leaders lives in the hearts of the young and will be shared with generations to come.

Of those surveyed, 62% are not a part of a religious/spiritual community; 33% of those young adults have never been a part of a religious community. These numbers are scary. The reasoning for their departure, if there is one, is not something that should be the label placed on them but reasoning for their introduction should be their Genesis. How can we create an open-door policy for those young people to feel that there is a space for them in our sacred spaces? Even just growing a spiritual life, feeling that you can have security in your thoughts and feelings; how can we do so? It varies in multiple communities, but at the core of this question, show them what it means to be of your faith; friends ask me at times, "Am I talking to Christian or Brother Christian?"; I smile and remind them that they are the same: *Preach the Gospel at all times. Use words if necessary.*

Brother, Christian Camacho is a teacher at Christian Brothers High School and his local parish through the Lasallian Charism. He grew up in Philadelphia and is currently based in Memphis, Tennessee. His work focuses on providing a quality education to those entrusted to his care and giving students a teacher he wishes he had in school, which has led him to complete his Master of Arts in Teaching at Saint Mary's University of Minnesota.

Elizabeth W. Corrie, PhD

In Springtide Research Institute's most recent study on "Young People's Organizational Involvement," one data point stood out to me. When asked to name the top five most essential characteristics that a group/club/team should have, the only trait that received more than 50% of young people responding was "fun." Fifty-three percent of young people involved in a religious group indicated that fun was most essential, while 63% of young people not involved in a religious group selected this option. Not a single other descriptor—"safe," "goal-oriented," "flexible," "purpose-driven," "inspirational," "inclusive," or "authentic"—even came close. In the full report, I noted that another question asked respondents to indicate what factors they consider when forced by a time conflict to choose between attending two different organizational events. Again, "fun" was the only factor that more than 50% of respondents chose. "Fun" jumped out clearly as something to which we should pay attention.

A cursory reading of this report might lead to the conclusion that faith communities should become more "fun" to attract and retain young people. But decades of youth ministry programs based on the assumption that faith communities can compete with secular forms of entertainment and succeed in luring young people to their buildings to "win" them for God have proven shallow and misguided. It would be a mistake for a faith community to read this report and decide to make their youth and young adult ministries more "fun" by making them more "entertaining." Rather, there are clues within the qualitative data that can help us consider a different approach.

When I turned to the highlights from some of the interviews with young people, I was struck again by the recurrence of the word "fun." The way young people used this term was varied and sometimes vague, as though they lacked more precise language to describe what they enjoyed about participating in religious and other organizations. For Brianna (age 14, Protestant), church is fun because you can "learn more about your religion and learn more about God." For Sean (age 21, Catholic), church is a fun way to spend time with his grandparents, while for Sierra (age 22, evangelical Protestant) and Leah (age 24, evangelical Protestant), going to church and youth activities meant doing something regularly with friends. For Avery (age 14, unsure of religious affiliation), church seems like a place where you enjoy "fun little cookouts" and have "someone to talk to." Despite her experience of discomfort as a single person around married women with children in a women's Bible study, Leah still described it as "fun." What is especially striking, however, is how Nia (age 18, Protestant), describes the responsibilities she had working with the kids and babies in her church as a teen:

. . . it seems more fun to, not "fun," I don't know the specific word I'm trying to use. Not "fun" . . . It was just more meaningful to me to have a reason to be there.

What I take from these answers is that “fun” does not, at least primarily, mean “entertaining.” It means growing, learning, spending quality time with family and friends, engaging in intergenerational fellowship, and contributing something to the community that is valued and needed. It is most definitely not passively experiencing an entertaining moment.

Faith communities that want to take something from this study might consider reframing “fun” within theological frameworks that give us more adequate, Spirit-led language to capture what young people may be describing. I suggest three.

The first framework comes from German Catholic priest and scholar Josef Pieper. In his 1948 essay, “Leisure, the Basis of Culture,” Pieper highlights the dangers of the era of “total work,” in which humans are valued only in terms of their productivity as workers. The danger is an inability to experience “leisure,” which he defines as “an attitude of mind, a condition of the soul” that is “only possible when a man [sic] is at one with himself, when he acquiesces in his own being.” This is a “receptive attitude of mind, a contemplative attitude, and it is not only the occasion but also the capacity for steeping oneself in the whole of creation.” Pieper distinguishes leisure in this contemplative sense from “acedia,” often defined as the sin of “sloth,” which he describes as a kind of restless refusal to acquiesce to one’s own being as created by God. While such distinctions may seem arcane today, “acedia” deftly captures the anxiety-producing ways we spend our free time in doom-scrolling and invidious comparison to the curated perfection of social media personas. Young people instinctively know that most of what they are given as entertainment is not “fun” but in fact detrimental to their mental health. True fun is leisure in Pieper’s sense: a chance to breathe, to pray and meditate, to practice Sabbath.

The second framework comes from the “Theology of Joy and the Good Life” project of the Yale Center for Faith and Culture. In his introduction to “Joy: a Guide for Youth Ministry,” David F. White notes that while our modern drive towards consumption “sometimes yields momentary fun or happiness, only rarely does it yield joy.” Arguing that youth ministry should center itself in joy, White defines the “biblical notion of joy” as “marked by a sense that these things are gotten not by our own dogged efforts or as accidents of an unfolding universe, but as gifts of a gracious Creator.” As a disposition and virtue, joy is best cultivated within religious communities. True fun is joy in White’s sense: a community that gathers to rejoice and give thanks, a community that receives the gifts not only of the Creator, but from the young people that are looking for meaningful ways to contribute.

The third framework comes from Courtney Goto's "The Grace of Playing: Pedagogies for Leaning into God's New Creation." Goto describes the moments when "an everyday instance of religious education becomes 'thinner' or translucent, allowing the divine mystery to be seen and felt shining through the experience of being together." This can happen in the context of worship, Bible study, or service, and is often experienced at a weekend retreat or camping experience, when young people are away from the pressures of their regular lives and can focus more easily on spirituality and community. This "revelatory experiencing" cannot be predicted or demanded, but the conditions for it can be cultivated through thoughtful religious education. Goto argues for the reclamation of the language of "play," taking it out of its association with "fun, frivolity, and childishness," that requires expensive toys or adventures for purchase. Rather, play can be used to describe pedagogies that invite players to "lean into God's new creation" and encounter mystery through creative interpersonal engagement. True fun is *play* in Goto's sense: a learning experience that disrupts our normal ways of being and recenters us in the divine in ways that make us grow.

These frameworks all offer ways to take this notion of "fun" as a direction to pursue, but to pursue critically and theologically. Rather than assume that young people want more consumer-driven entertainment, we can investigate whether young people might want a chance to engage in leisurely prayer, joyful celebration, and playful learning—all of which are practiced most authentically within religious communities.

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Megan Dewald

Fun Trouble

“We need someone who will focus on more *serious* discipleship with our youth,” the pastor said during a youth director interview years ago. “Our kids just came back from a ski trip that a volunteer led. I know they had fun, but I’m getting a lot of calls from parents. They can take their kids skiing on their own, you know?”

I nodded and accepted the job.

Three years later, I sat in the same office with a group of leaders during an evaluation of the youth ministry. Since that conversation, I had focused on “serious.” I implemented a safe church policy, trained a volunteer team, redesigned confirmation, implemented new curriculum, raised scholarship money, and many more “other duties as assigned.”

“What we really need,” the pastor said, “is a ski trip. Something just *fun* for the kids, you know?”

The other leaders nodded. Soon thereafter, I left the job.

I know hundreds of youth workers with their own version of this story. The debate between fun and serious is one into which youth ministry leaders are regularly pulled. Whether from the young people or church leadership, youth workers often feel like a ping pong ball volleyed between two players—the *youth ministry should be fun* crowd vs. the *youth ministry should be serious* crew. To make matters worse, those who urge a compromise often merely add to the problem—the *make Jesus fun* folks.

The actual dilemma youth workers know is that there is no universal definition of fun, just as there is no clear metric for serious. Both are subjective, and the presence of one doesn’t necessarily preclude the other. Some [young] people enjoy athletic activities. Others don’t. Some [young] people look forward to service opportunities. Others have social anxiety. Some [young] people want to lead and enjoy public speaking, musical performance, or teaching. Others want nothing to do with any of that.

Arguably, the reason this struggle is so difficult for churches to relinquish is that doing so requires us to name a couple of uncomfortable realities. First, we must acknowledge that some young people will take faith seriously and/or experience the faith journey as “fun,” and others won’t do either while they’re in our care. Deep down, we know that chasing one or the other is pointless. We can’t control for fun or serious, and if we try, we inevitably fall short.

Second, we must acknowledge that there is no secret ingredient or concoction in our control that will guarantee young people's commitment to faith. The so-called "attractional model" that dominated the youth ministry landscape in the 80s and 90s might've drawn higher attendance and cash flow. However, if success looks like lifelong faithful Christian discipleship, then the corresponding rise in disaffiliation among the Gen X and Millennial audience targeted by this model ought to give us pause. Instead, we keep battling over fun and serious, swinging the pendulum from one overcorrection to the other and expecting youth workers to land on the magical formula to *fix it*.

Thankfully, a new study from Springtide on young people's religious involvement brings me some hope that a different approach might be possible. The findings entirely avoid the fun vs. serious debate. Striking in their simplicity, the interviews and surveys of 13–25-year-olds reveal that parents, peers, and personal belief are the primary dimensions of a young person's sustained religious involvement.

According to the study, parents and caregivers often introduce faith, and the faith of the parents is witnessed and experienced by the young person. This doesn't always translate into the young person's own faith commitment, but it makes a strong impact. It also can be "fun" to participate in a faith community with one's caregivers, as when Sean, 21, says: "[When I do go to church,] it's an activity I can do with my grandparents. . . . I enjoy it, it's fun, and we just go get, like, lunch together [after]."¹

The study also found that peers play an important role in a young person's religious involvement, especially fostering a sense of belonging. If a young person feels connected to the faith community through peer relationships, they tend to remain involved. Sierra, 22, says, "I had the best time. Now that I'm thinking about it, I had a better time than I thought when I was there. Before it was like, 'All right, this is just something you do as a kid.' You go through Sunday school, you go to church two or three times a month with the same group of friends. But it was just fun."² Reminiscing, Sierra recalls that regular church involvement with her friends was "fun."

The third dimension of Springtide's framework is personal belief. Unlike decline narratives, Springtide found that 47% of young people surveyed rank religion as important in their lives.³ Brianna, 14, sets us straight: "[Church] is not a bad place [to go] because it's fun to go and learn more about your religion and learn more about God."⁴ Meanwhile, Nia, 18, struggles to describe her church experience: "I used to go a lot . . . I wanted more responsibilities . . . it just seemed more fun to—not 'fun,' I don't know the specific word I'm trying to use. Not 'fun'... It was just more meaningful to me to have a reason to be there and step up and have a reason to do something."⁵ "Not 'fun,'" she says, not wanting to convey a lack of seriousness. In church, she exercised agency and ownership of her faith. It meant something to her, and that made it "fun."

We know some young people will take faith seriously, some will have fun with it, and some will do both or neither. None of that is in our control. Springtide’s framework offers a good place for us to focus instead. We *can* get to know our young people’s parents and caregivers. We can offer them care, education, and support. We can pay attention to their practices and ask them about their beliefs. We can equip them for the important task of Christian discipleship, and we can teach them how essential they are to the faith development of their children. We also *can* foster healthy peer relationships in our communities. We can facilitate spaces for friendships to blossom, and we can attune ourselves to young people who seem lonely or isolated from their peers. We can find areas of mutual interest and create opportunities for shared experiences and connection. Lastly, we *can* nurture personal belief. As Brianna and Nia attest, that nurturing *can* be fun, even when fun isn’t our focus. We can teach young people about faith, we can provide opportunities for practice, and we can accompany them as they wrestle with traditions, stories, and ideas. We can listen closely, we can guide, and we can hold space for their process.

As a youth worker, this sure sounds fun to me.

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2. Springtide, *Parents, Peers, & Personal Belief*, 4.
3. Springtide Research Institute, *The Four Dimensions of Young People’s Spiritual and Religious Lives*, Springtide Research Institute, 2025. <https://springtideresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/04/springtide-the-four-dimensions-pages.pdf>, 5.
4. Springtide, *The Four Dimensions*, 7.
5. Springtide, *The Four Dimensions*, 7.

Justin Forbes, PhD

On a good Wednesday night, youth ministry can feel like a small miracle: a table that somehow holds the loud kid, the anxious kid, the kid who doesn't talk much, and the kid who talks a lot—and the leader who's trying not to over-function for all of them. On a hard Wednesday night, it can feel like trying to build a house on sand. Attendance is spotty. Parents are stretched thin. A few students drift in late, drift out early, or don't come at all—and you wonder whether anything you're doing is really “working.”

That's why I'm grateful for what these Springtide findings name with clarity and tenderness: young people's spiritual lives are real, but they do not always look like the institutional map we inherited. Belief, identity, practice, and community don't always move together. Many young people still describe a genuine orientation toward God or a higher power (43% say they have “no doubts,” and another 32% say they “believe more than they doubt”). Nearly half say religion is “the most important” thing (14%) or “among the more important things” (33%) in their lives. And yet patterns of practice are uneven: 42% attend religious or spiritual services “rarely” (20%) or “never” (22%). In other words, “disengagement” is not the same thing as “disbelief.”

Springtide's “Parents, Peers, and Personal Belief” framework helps us see what's really at stake. Parents often provide the first on-ramp—sometimes as a gift, sometimes as an expectation. As Theo (age 17, spiritual but not religious) put it: “I feel like [most people my age are] just not super involved with [religion]. It's just something that they learned from their parents.” Carlos (age 19, Catholic) says it even more plainly: “I feel like if your family didn't go to church growing up, you definitely didn't go. No kid in their right mind was saying, ‘I want to go to church, I'm going by myself.’ It wasn't happening. It was definitely family.”

Those quotes quietly correct the fantasy that youth ministry can out-program the home. Family influence is not everything, but it is not nothing. If parents and caregivers are primary introducers, then spiritual formation becomes a shared vocation: the congregation surrounding households rather than replacing them. The question isn't only, “How do we get students to show up?” It's, “What practices are we building that young people can actually carry?”

Peers, meanwhile, are where the emotional energy of belonging often lives. Springtide's community data is sobering: only 38% say they are currently part of a religious or spiritual community; 29% used to be; 33% have never been. Young people can attend and still not belong. That's not a minor detail. It's a theological one.

Human encounter is never merely social. In the presence of another person, something is at stake—an opening where God can meet us. Youth ministers know this. You can “run” an event without anyone being known. You can have a room full of teenagers and still have no community. And you can have a small group—six students, a leader, and a bag of chips—and find yourself in holy territory because someone finally tells the truth and is not punished for it.

Avery’s (age 14, unsure of her religious affiliation) imagination of church is not primarily doctrinal; it is relational and joyful: “My interest in [religion] is seeing all these videos of communities and churches getting together and actually enjoying each other’s company. And that’s important for me, having someone to talk to. . . . When you join a church, you get to experience that a lot, and they have these fun little cookouts and stuff, and I was like, ‘Hmm, maybe I really wanna join something in the future.’”

This also reframes leadership development. Many churches still imagine leadership as a pipeline: belong → believe → behave → lead. But the path is often messier—and more human. Some young people practice before they can name what they believe. Some lead because purpose arrives through service, not through mastery of religious language. Iseul (age 21, Evangelical Protestant) names that kind of formation with striking clarity: “From religion, I’ve learned about working to serve others . . . working to serve my neighbors, the community around me, [and] the less fortunate. I’d say that religion has definitely given and continues to give me purpose and drive throughout life.”

So where do I see hope here? In young people’s refusal of performance and their hunger for something real. In their clarity that “attendance” and “belonging” are not the same. And in the quiet signs that God is still giving faith as gift—often through the ordinary means of family, friendship, and meaningful purpose.

If the Spirit is already stirring desire for communities where people “actually enjoy each other’s company,” then our calling is not to manufacture relevance. It is to practice faithfulness: to build spaces where young people can be known, can contribute, can fail safely, can grow slowly, and can discover that God is not merely an idea to be believed—but a presence encountered in the life we share.

Dr. Justin Forbes is an Assistant Professor of Religion at Flagler College, where he also directs the Center for Religion and Culture and advises the Youth Ministry program. A 2002 graduate of Flagler, he spent a decade in youth ministry before earning a PhD in Divinity from University of Aberdeen after studying at Princeton Theological Seminary. He now lives in St. Augustine, Florida, with his wife and six children.

Emily Jendzejec, PhD

If it were not for the orange, dingy couches in the basement of St. Christopher's Church in York, Maine, I most certainly would not be a theologian today. It was the people that populated those couches alongside me during my youth and young adult years that shaped my faith, created a sense of belonging, and supported me in my vocational calling. Spiritual friendships matter. In the Springtide data, what I was most drawn to is young people's experience of friendship and the emphasis they place on their desire for fun and belonging in a community. The study states: "Having friends in religious groups can turn participation into something joyful and meaningful, creating opportunities for belonging and shared experiences." I read this illuminating reflection not that there is solely a desire for church to be like a social club but instead as a crucial insight into the longings of young adults who are looking for meaningful and joy-filled experiences of church, in which spiritual friendship can be fostered. The Springtide data contradicts the common narrative that young people do not care about their faith or religious belonging and instead offers data that reveals how many young adults are deeply spiritual, and want to be supported in their faith, known in community, and sustained by meaningful connections.

For young adults to view a community as a viable space of belonging there needs to be inclusive welcome and authentic support and connection. What is ultimately at stake, as this Springtide research highlights, is that when young adults don't find belonging, they often disaffiliate from their religious communities. This is a missed opportunity for young people to develop in their faith and have a space of religious belonging while also a missed opportunity for the religious communities to be enriched and transformed by the voices and participation of young people.

So how do we foster spiritually grounded, meaningful connections and sustain joy-filled communities? We need to create a "culture of encounter." Pope Francis was a strong advocate of this concept, encouraging the faithful to reach beyond their own comfort zone to get to know others, across difference, across generations. In *Fratelli Tutti* (2020), Francis' encyclical letter about fraternity and social friendship, he reflects, "To speak of a 'culture of encounter' means that we, as a people, should be passionate about meeting others, seeking points of contact, building bridges, planning a project that includes everyone. This becomes an aspiration and a style of life."¹ This style of life challenges churches to engage in welcome that moves beyond hospitality to inviting inclusive engagement and participation.

Within the Catholic Church, synodality is the method Pope Francis, and now Pope Leo, are stewarding to better achieve a culture of encounter. Synodality is about journeying together, through listening and communal discernment. The goal of synodal listening is not simply to hear another, but to compassionately seek to understand another. It asks us to suspend judgment, not concentrating on thinking

about what you should say next but entering dialogue open to how the conversation will change us together. Synodality calls communities to listen and discern as the “People of God.” This is not some far off theological concept, but the idea that those in the pews around us *are* the People of God.

The Springtide data shows that “young people may understand involvement in religious or spiritual communities as distinct from attending worship services.” Through a synodal lens, we can look at this Springtide data with curiosity and openness and then should be tasked with continuing to ask good questions and listen in our own communities. We must view young people as active participants in discerning the works of the Spirit. Does this research resonate with the young adults in our own communities? What are their experiences of community and belonging? What might it take to move someone from just attending to being involved? The key to synodality is to not assume and generalize, but to deepen inquiry, and continue to listen and discern.

Through a synodal lens, in the work of young adult ministry, we are called to listen to young adults, to invite dialogue, and encourage participation. Beyond the need to “create” inviting spaces for young adults, we must “co-create” spaces, empowering young people to be current leaders and not the next generation of leaders. The synodal tenets of co-responsibility and communal discernment invite this type of empowered leadership development. It gives agency to young people to not just be receivers of ministries, but to be leaders in ministry so that they can hold space for one another and foster spiritual friendship and belonging.

Springtide’s research offers rich insights into the religious practices, needs, and spiritual longings of young people. This research brings me hope that young people are seeking to be part of a culture of encounter that leads to communities of belonging, joy, and spiritual friendship. Our task as ministry leaders is to continue to listen, co-create, and be open to how the Spirit is moving. Because She certainly is!

Dr. Emily Jendzejec is an Assistant Professor of Pastoral Studies at Loyola University New Orleans. Dr. Jendzejec’s most recent research focuses on synodality, community organizing, and young adult ministry. Her scholarship draws on and connects Catholic traditions and history, Catholic social teaching, and lived experiences to equip and empower people to respond to the signs of the times as contemplatives in action.

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Tracey Lamont, PhD

Hope/Renewal and Practice

It is exciting news that more young people today are identifying as religiously affiliated or spiritual in some way. Up until now, these trends have been consistently moving away from religious affiliation or towards disaffiliation, so these reports are hopeful, but also complex and nuanced.

Trends in disaffiliation have caused great concern for church leaders making it more challenging for some ministers to know how best to grow the young church. These findings might provide some relief. Ministry leaders I have spoken with have experienced these trends, noticing an uptick in young people coming back to church, expressing how hopeful it makes them feel. Yet, many young people are not practicing or engaging in their religious traditions in the same ways as generations before them, or as generations before them might expect people to. Only one-third of young adults noted they attend religious services at least monthly, however; as research and this report show, there is a positive correlation between those who are very religious and those who attend services more frequently, suggesting how important it is for the religious and spiritual lives of young people to be actively worshipping in a faith community¹.

Young people hunger for belonging, a deeper sense of self and purpose, and to be seen, known, and valued. What better place to feel belonging than in one's faith community? For previous generations, belonging to a faith community was almost expected, that it was obligatory that you come to mass at a Catholic Church each Sunday. That you received all your sacraments and lead a good, ethical life. As one ministry leader said to me, "You went to church because it is what you did." This no longer suffices for younger generations. They need connection, meaning, purpose, and a real sense of belonging. These are the marks of a truly synodal² church, one where the people of God walk with one another as their authentic selves, as friends and companions in life and faith, supporting and raising up one another for the benefit of God's Kin-dom. While faith communities in generations past may have done this in more implicit ways, today's young people need to feel and experience these connections more explicitly.

Opportunities and Challenges

The upward trend in religiosity with young people ages 13–25 might bring some ministry leaders to feel the tide is turning, that things are looking up. This can lead to a more comfortable or complacent perspective that if the statistics are turning around, we as a church are in better shape. This is not necessarily the case. We need to continually ask ourselves in our faith communities how we show up for our young

people, how we invite them into community, how they experience belonging and being seen, known, and loved by God, self and others. How do they describe the quality of their relationships with God, self, and others?

Statistics, polls, and other quantitative data can be great resources to show important trends in generations, and in society in general. Yet statistics cannot tell you what is on the hearts, minds, and souls of the young people in your communities. Only in listening to them, accompanying them, will we know how best to minister to and with youth and young adults. Second, quantitative data can help people focus on the majority figures, such as, “the majority of young people say they are religious or spiritual or both.” For example, “almost half (46%) say they are ‘very’ or ‘moderately’ religious” and about “half (50%) say they are ‘very’ or ‘moderately’ spiritual, and 29% say they are ‘slightly’ spiritual”³. But what about the other half? Church life can tend to focus a great deal on numbers, from our bishop, priest, or lay leader asking, “How many came to your youth event?” or “How many are in the program?” The questions we need to ask are: What is that young person’s story? What brought them here? How might they name God’s presence in their lives? What transformation have we seen as a result of our young people participating in our faith communities? So, while statistics can show us things we might not have previously considered or seen in our ministries, we need to then ask about the quality of the relationships our young people have with the church (the community, trusted adults, their faith, service and/or worship experiences, ministry leaders, etc).

Further, when people see a “majority” statistic it can be easy to focus on that group and feel hopeful that most young people are finding good fruits in their faith communities. What about the others, the “27% [who] say they are ‘slightly’ religious,” or the “17% of young people identify as not at all religious nor spiritual?” Jesus gave us so many examples and stories of reaching out to and accompanying individuals who feel lost, left out, excluded, or simply outside our communities (c.f., Luke 15:11–32, Luke 15:3–7 and Matthew 18:12–14). In what ways do our ministries with youth and young adults reach beyond the core group, beyond those who are “affiliated”? How are we continually inviting in lost sheep, and what does the invitation look like? My recommendation is that it be synodal, that we continually hold spaces where young people feel and are heard, where they can express what is on their hearts and minds with no pretense, no judgment, and where we engage in communal discernment as a community how we continue to be Christ with and for *all* people in and around our communities.

My advice is this, read these reports and ask yourself how they align with the young people in your community. Who, for example, is among the group that reports they are not religious or spiritual at all? What is the church or your ministry doing to reach out to them, and what does that invitation look and feel like to

the young people you hope to reach? Do you know who they are? Do other young people who are in your ministries know friends or others who are not religious or spiritual, and can they help with an invitation to get to know them better? It is by feeling seen, known, loved, and valued that people can better come to grow in the love and faith in a God who loves us without condition.

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1. Springtide Research Institute. *The Four Dimensions of Young People's Spiritual and Religious Lives*. Springtide Research Institute, 2025. <https://springtideresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/04/springtide-the-four-dimensions-pages.pdf>, 8–9.
2. Synodality is an expression used by the Catholic church to describe a way of being church, walking together, with the Holy Spirit, listening to all the baptized, discerning God's will.
3. Springtide, *The Four Dimensions*, 4.

Susan Fleming McGurgan, DMin

Forming Catholic Youth for Testimony: Pathways to Belonging, Engagement, and Leadership

In many corners of the Catholic Church, we have all but forgotten the compelling power of testimony, yet it is the oldest form of lay proclamation. The testimonies of men who threw aside crutches or guests nursing headaches after a wedding in Cana—these witnesses built the Church encounter by encounter, testimony by testimony. It was the rocket fuel launching a small group of frightened disciples: defeated, failed, lost in grief and self-pity, huddled in the darkness behind locked doors into a force that defied the Roman Empire. Today, testimony can be a dynamic pathway to engaging and empowering a new generation of Catholics.

Over the past two years, Marian University has equipped youth and young adults to share personal testimonies of faith. This experience has been transformative for the youth, their parents, adult coaches, and the larger community. At its heart, testimony is this: *I met Jesus, and this is what I believe about it*. God breaks into our experience in quiet or dramatic ways—overturning plans, changing the pre-sets, running riot through our carefully curated existence—and we bear witness to this astonishing event. Paul Ricoeur argues that testimony is *the* distinctly Christian way of speaking and knowing because Christianity exists within a hermeneutics of testimony.¹ Testimonial authority is powerful enough to topple empires, yet it is available to anyone bold enough to share a personal encounter with the holy.

Our experience shows that Catholic youth are eager to embrace this work because it uniquely fits their generational dynamics and deep spiritual longings. Sharing personal testimony is profoundly relational. It engages core beliefs, fosters a sense of belonging, identity, and mission, and invites new ways of seeing and being. When undertaken in peer groups with the support of family, testimony directly engages three key factors that anchor youth within religious organizations: parents, peers, and personal belief.² For ministers seeking to move youth from “attendance” to “involvement” and create multi-generational experiences that are inspiring, purpose driven, and deeply relational, empowering youth for testimony can be a game changer.

Research indicates that young people are profoundly lonely and participation in religious groups seems to have “virtually no protective effect against young people’s experience of loneliness.”³ Our society offers myriad opportunities to connect, but the devices that connect us also generate modern byproducts of disconnection, isolation, and distraction. Youth long to be heard and seen in a world drowning in noise, movement, and graphics.

Providing youth with the tools and confidence to share their testimonies creates a sacred space for listening, seeing, and engaging. Including parents and grandparents in the process of personal storytelling creates hallowed ground that transcends generational lines. Crafting personal testimony connects youth with core experiences and claims those as holy, even when they are painful or confusing. Testimony places lived experience into conversation with the Gospel and uses fruits of that conversation to foster a sense of belonging and purpose.

Adults “teach” testimony by sharing everyday stories of their own encounters with Christ. Reflection questions explored in small peer groups help connect personal stories to God’s story and surface insights and experiences that form the basis of testimony. In this process, participants will inevitably wrestle with parts of their story they do not like, and it is tempting to offer up an edited or curated version. To their surprise, they often discover it is the very parts they wanted to omit; the mistakes, the failures, the need for mercy, which make a story worth sharing. The power of testimony lies in naming an authentic experience, even when we cry ugly or forget to use our indoor voices. There is comfort in knowing we do not have to lead perfect lives to have perfect testimonies. When we take our stories into a wounded world, it is often those cracked, imperfect places that offer an entry point for someone else to encounter God. This is revelatory for youth who often feel overwhelming pressure to achieve perfection in grades, appearance, athletics, and social life.

When anchored in an atmosphere of inclusion and respect, formation for testimony acts as leaven, fostering belief, identity, the practice of faith, and a sense of community, thus directly impacting the four key dimensions of their spiritual lives.⁴ Youth participating in Marian’s initiative were asked to rank themselves from 0 to 100 before and after coaching:

- *I have gifts and skills for proclaiming Good News* rose from an average of 67 to 89.
- *I have something important to say to help others encounter God* rose from 70.60 to 96.50.
- *I feel called and equipped to preach* rose from 66.56 to 90.75.
- *I believe everyone has a testimony to share* rose from 80.40 to 94.25.

When young people share their testimony, they are invited to consider that the Church needs and wants their voices; that there is a valued place for them; that they can become leaders in mission. This addresses one of the key barriers to full participation in the institutional Church; the sense that the Church is not listening and is unaware of—even uninterested in—their struggles and dreams. Despite a generational tendency towards disconnection and institutional mistrust, Catholic youth are eager for demanding work. They long to be field tested in situations

that hold out the possibility of growth, leadership, and even risk. They thrive in peer groups anchored by skilled and caring adults who take their joys, concerns, and faith seriously enough to equip them to live bold, purpose-driven lives. Our youth have compelling messages of hope and redemption we need to hear, and their testimonies can become living stones in rebuilding the Church.

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1. Paul Ricoeur. *The Hermeneutics of Testimony*, Essays on Biblical Interpretation, ed. Lewis Mudge, (Fortress Press, 1980), 128.
2. Springtide Research Institute, *Parents, Peers, & Personal Belief: A Framework for Young People's Religious Involvement*, Springtide Research Institute, 2025. <https://springtideresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/04/springtide-parents-peers-personal-belief-pages.pdf>.
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4. Springtide Research Institute. *The Four Dimensions of Young People's Spiritual and Religious Lives*. Springtide Research Institute, 2025. <https://springtideresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/04/springtide-the-four-dimensions-pages.pdf>.

Brendan McInerney, PhD

Young People and Life in Christ

Writing from the vantage point of a theology teacher working in a Catholic high school, the recent findings of Springtide Research Institute on young people's religious and spiritual lives presents an opportunity for those called to instruct and form young people in faith to re-examine how they approach their work. The good news is that the data suggests many young people are "believers" of some type, much more religious than one might expect. For instance, 75% of young people are either certain a higher power exists or believe in a higher power more than they doubt, roughly 75% claim a religious identity, an additional 5% identify themselves as spiritual but not religious, and almost half say that religion is among the most important things in their lives. Given the long narrative that faith is on the decline, these numbers show it may be more durable than expected. Nevertheless, these numbers stand side-by-side with countervailing trends that suggest not all is well in the religious and spiritual lives of young people. For instance, 60% of young people attend religious services only once or twice a year or less. A similar proportion have never been, or no longer consider themselves to be, members of a religious community. Finally, only 26% say they are actively involved in a religious community even if they attend services. There is, it would seem, a significant gap between stated religious identity on the one hand and active involvement in a religious community on the other.

Practitioners of different religious traditions will respond to this data according to the lights of their own tradition. From my own Catholic perspective, the data presents a challenge centering on the question: What does it mean to be a person of faith? Or, more specifically: *Who is a Christian?* Only after answering that question can we begin to explore how to respond. Let me begin with a broad response: a Christian is one who *lives in Christ*. For the Catholic faith, this life in Christ—and therefore "Christian identity"—is first and foremost a sacramental-ecclesial reality. Through the sacraments of initiation, we enter into the mystery of Christ himself. Despite the indelible character of baptism, that it establishes the baptized in a permanent relationship with Christ, entering into the life of Christ should not result in *stasis*. It is renewed again and again in the Eucharist through which we are made members of what St. Augustine called the *totus Christus*, the Whole Christ. This life is further deepened and built up in a life of prayer and active love of neighbor as we mature.

For Catholics, then, the religious and spiritual lives of young people, as revealed in the Springtide study, pose an acute challenge because it is precisely the sacramental-ecclesial dimension of the life in Christ that appears to be weakest among young people. Meeting this challenge will require concerted and inventive efforts by the Church. I would propose three areas of discernment and action.

First, it is clear that parents and family serve as a crucial foundation for the faith of young people. Whether experienced positively or somewhat begrudgingly, young people themselves clearly recognize that without their parents, they most likely would not identify or practice as Catholics at all. Catholics are accustomed to speaking of the family as the “domestic Church,” but more could be done to help families truly *become* domestic churches. When young people experience communal ritual only in weekend liturgy, it is understandable that they would come to see it as an ancillary feature of their lives, even if they continue to identify themselves as Catholic. The elements of Catholic faith—prayer, service, fasting, and feasting—must take root in the home before it takes root in the hearts of young people. Parents, in particular, may benefit from assistance in this area.

Second, even as we develop ways to support the family, the Church needs to examine how she forms young people according to their particular moment in life. The current model, mirroring the structure and methods of school, is built to convey information about the Catholic faith mainly in preparation for confirmation. This model can unintentionally give the impression that what matters most is *knowing* certain things about the Catholic faith rather than *living* a certain way.

If we consider the age cohort of the study, a defining feature of their lives is the transition from adolescence to adulthood, beginning with the growing need for young people to define themselves in peer groups beyond the family and concluding with their setting out and living on their own. The goal of faith formation should be to accompany young people through this time of transition, helping them mature from childhood to adulthood in the life of Christ. Community, instruction, and service would be the three pillars of formation. As clear in the study, peer groups are key for young people to find their footing in religion and spiritual life. Faith formation could facilitate the forming of those peer groups, which could provide lifelong support in faith. Instruction could take the form of age-appropriate mystagogy, opening up for the young what has occurred to them in the sacraments, rather than focusing on sacramental preparation, which young adults can experience as signaling formation concludes with confirmation. Finally, faith formation would offer experiences of the liturgy, the habits and ways of Catholic prayer, and the direct care for others in preparation for the demands of adult faith.

Though I believe that the above proposals could go some way to address the discrepancies I see in the religious and spiritual lives of young people, it may be that it is necessary for the Church to respond to the signs of the times more radically. My final proposal is for the Church to consider restoring the ancient order of the sacraments of initiation: baptism, confirmation/chrismation, and concluding with first communion. It may seem overly bold or even rash, but it is the order of rites among Eastern Catholics and “adult” converts—including many children who were not baptized as infants. Restoring the ancient sequence would create

greater consistency not only in practice but also theology. More importantly, such a restoration would structurally reveal the true goal of initiation: the life in Christ, nourished by the Eucharist and lived out in the Church. It is this life in Christ which we hope we all live as people of faith. With discernment and a willingness to change, we have the opportunity to help young people grow in that life as well.

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John T. Noble, PhD

Framework: The first realization from these data is that the three main factors—parents, peers, personal belief—*all resonate very closely with my own religious experience*: my parents took me to church, I joined a community of other religious folk during college who helped give me a vision of what faith could look like among my peers, and then I’ve continued to pursue my own religious journey through a winding road of deconstruction and reconstruction, always adapting and incorporating what I have learned and experienced.

Considering the data, I’d surmise that young people who come from families with parents who took them to services and modeled lives of faith will not retain those faith commitments, on the whole, without an experience of peer-community as teens. This trajectory is reflected, perhaps, in the finding that young adults attend religious services less often than teens. I would want to know more about the peer-community experiences of those young adults who left. Did they have strong peer-communities of faith as teens? This strikes me as an important indicator of religious belief and practice in later life.

Re-shaping: The findings underscore how critical it is for young people to have a community with others who can foster mutual belonging. These communities give space for young people to model for one another what religious expression means and can look like. One thing I’ve noticed on our campus at Marian University Indianapolis, for instance, is the pinning of a baby sock to a student’s bookbag, signifying support for a pro-life stance in the Catholic community. Young people identify one another in this way for being mutually committed to this cause, and can show that they, too, belong to this community and care deeply about a specific religious issue. No doubt this has a strong effect in one’s own identity formation.

Challenge: When I think of my own children and their faith formation, I’m cognizant of the dearth of community opportunities available to them at our small local parish, which really doesn’t have a strong network for teens or young adults. (It’s possible to find other churches, of course, but I also believe in building up the church in one’s own neighborhood—“blooming where you’re planted,” as a mentor once expressed to me.) Extrapolating on this reflection, I know, too, that young adults after high school or college usually experience a fragmentation of community, and it’s no surprise that this age group experiences a decline in participation or involvement in religious services. It’s a lot to overcome for a young person to leave a church community, if they had one, and then to do the relational work of breaking into a new parish somewhere after they’ve begun a new life *on their own* elsewhere.

As an itinerant academic, in fact, I know this to be true for folks of all ages. In this sense, perhaps there's a causal relationship between declining religiosity and the way our society has abandoned the traditional habit of staying put in one's own place for a lifetime, *a la* Wendell Berry, such that people are displaced from the land and from the familial communities that once rooted them in place over centuries. If community is central to religious belonging and faith— isn't this what Paul teaches?— then how could our transitory society not do harm to our religion?

Sign of Hope: One thing that's working well at Marian is our San Damiano Scholars (SDS) program. For about 20 years now—starting with seed money from a Lilly grant—we've been offering scholarships to young people who want to form a student community centered around rebuilding the church, borrowing a phrase from the Franciscan tradition. One of the main reasons why we've been successful is because of the promise we make to high school students that they will find their people in our SDS program. We tell them that they will have their own tribe in college—perhaps for life—before classes even begin in the fall of freshman year because of the intentional community-building programming that happens in advance. This includes a summer high school formation camp called "Missionary Disciples Institute," from which many of the campers eventually enroll as SDS at Marian; we invite high school applicants to come to Marian for SDS group interviews, during which students hear testimonials from their peers about the importance of their faith and church communities; and we also have retreat programming during the week before school begins in the fall and throughout college for SDS to get to know each other and to practice spiritual disciplines in community. The success of the program and the growth of our SDS students is a direct result of the emphasis that the program's leaders have put on building community for these young adults during their college years.

One way that this study inspires me is to follow through on an idea that we've already discussed for some time, which is to include our SDS alumni in some of the formation opportunities happening on campus and maybe also in virtual spaces. If community is so vital for young people in maintaining their faith as young adults after college, then surely there are opportunities for us to follow up on this, at least to some extent.

Additional Reflections: One paradox I have pondered since coming to Marian and joining a community of Catholic educators pertains to our founding community of the Sisters of St. Francis of Oldenburg, IN. They are a religiously *astounding* group of women, characterized by ecumenism, social justice, and courage to act upon faith in ways that have had an enormous impact within their own corner of Indiana and in the broader community of Indianapolis. I find myself identifying and aligning with their vision of religion very closely. But the disappointment is that their community is disappearing, and despite Marian's success as an educational institution, the

sisters have not been able to draw religious young women to join their order. I have known a few young women at Marian University so far who have discerned religious vows and have asked them why they aren't attracted to the Sisters of St. Francis Oldenburg. The sense I've had is that this community just isn't religiously *intense* enough (my paraphrasing), too relaxed in their dress and in their emphasis on social matters, and, frankly, not quite conservative enough (my interpretation), or perhaps not demanding enough in their devotion somehow. As one young woman put it to me, "We want to join a movement that asks more of us, that calls us to be *all in*." The longing for serious commitment and religious dedication among our youth is arresting. Perhaps there is a need for stronger invitation along these lines.

Another reflection I've had over my years teaching theology in academic undergraduate settings ranging from Ivy League (New England secular) to evangelical (Midwest), to Marian University (Midwest catholic) relates to the religiosity that I observe among the students I teach. In many respects, to me, anecdotally, I perceive less of a range in religious interest/response than what I would've expected. Virtually none of these students have a deep knowledge of the Hebrew Bible, my main area of expertise, but the vast majority of them—even those claiming no religion—have some sympathy for proper interpretation and the relevance of this religious literature for addressing some of the more meaningful questions of life: what are human beings in relation to the sublime, what is it that we owe to one another, how should we pattern our lives, etc. In this respect, Ivy League students are not that different from evangelical students, who are not so unlike Marian students.

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Brenda Noriega-Flores, Ph.D.

Attendance Isn't Belonging

Springtide's survey of 2,977 US young people (ages 13–25) confirms a pattern many ministers recognize: religious presence can coexist with social non-belonging. Roughly 41% report attending services at least monthly. Yet when asked about membership in an organized religious/spiritual community, 974 say they have never been part of one, 863 say they used to be but are not now, and only 1,140 say they are currently part of one.

That gap is not explained by disinterest alone. About 70% agree they would join a group for activities they find compelling even if they didn't know anyone there. At the same time, nearly half report feeling scared or nervous about interacting with people in group settings.

Taken together, these findings invite a theological-pastoral claim: attendance is a weak proxy for communion. If young people are to be “at the center,” belonging must be received, practiced, and sustained—not presumed.

Catholic ecclesiology names the Church as “like a sacrament or as a sign and instrument both of a very closely knit union with God and of the unity of the whole human race” (Lumen Gentium, §1). Sacraments are not merely “events attended.” They are *encounters* that gather a people, form a body, and send that body in mission. Sacrosanctum Concilium calls the liturgy the “summit” and “font” of the Church's life (§10).

Still, the dataset suggests a pastoral gap between liturgy-as-event and church-as-communion. In the language of *koinonia*—communion—belonging is not simply being present. When young people can attend worship while remaining socially unintegrated, it is not only a “youth problem”; it is an ecclesial design question, *what signs of communion are we making visible?* Belonging becomes credible through concrete signs—being known and named, being welcomed into relationships, being given a place and a voice, being missed when absent. Worship is central, but communion is cultivated.

Why belonging carries high stakes (and high friction)

Developmental theory helps explain why “showing up” and “belonging” can diverge in adolescence and emerging adulthood. First, we must understand that identity formation is a primary developmental task. Erikson's psychosocial framework describes adolescence as a period marked by “identity versus role confusion,” where young people work to form a coherent sense of self.¹ Emerging adulthood (late teens through mid-twenties) is a stage of extended identity exploration. Scholars of developmental psychology describe ages roughly 18–25 as a

distinct period characterized by exploration, instability, feeling “in-between,” and high possibility.² Furthermore, research in adolescent development and social neuroscience consistently shows heightened sensitivity to social reward and peer dynamics during adolescence, while capacities related to planning and resisting peer influence continue maturing into late adolescence/early adulthood.³

This helps us read Springtide’s “paradox” (openness and nervousness) as developmental reality. Openness names readiness; nervousness names threshold friction. If belonging carries identity-level stakes, then group life requires more than hospitality; it requires psychologically and spiritually safe entry points.

“Attendance isn’t belonging” as a mystagogical diagnosis

In a classical sense, mystagogy teaches people to interpret experience—linking worship, meaning, relationships, and vocation over time. When attendance does not translate into communal belonging, we can name a mystagogical breakdown, ritual participation without a pathway into a community of meaning. Springtide’s excerpts point to the “after” of worship as a common failure point, when people “immediately go into their group” and newcomers cannot find an on-ramp.

The survey also names pragmatic obstacles like transportation, costs, schedules, fatigue, overwhelm, and difficulty finding a group that fits. These are not superficial “excuses” but concrete constraints. Ecclesiology becomes justice when we ask, *who gets excluded by the way we structure belonging?*

A pastoral implication: belonging is built through “low-pressure” responsibility and joy

Springtide also reports that self-described religiousness/spirituality is strongly linked with attendance. Among those who call themselves “very religious,” 78% attend at least monthly, compared to 9% among those “not at all religious.” A similar step pattern appears for spirituality (68% monthly+ among “very spiritual,” 10% among “not at all spiritual”). The implication for ministry is straightforward, when faith becomes personally meaningful and integrated, practice follows more often. The pastoral question is, *what helps meaning and belonging become real enough that practice can be sustained?*

One striking signal is what young people want from groups. In a “top 5 characteristics” question, “fun” (1,772) and “safe” (1,302) rise alongside descriptors such as inclusive, relational, inspirational, goal-oriented, and purpose-driven. Theologically, “fun” is not trivial. Joy is often the affective climate of trust—the felt sense that a community can receive others as gift. Joy lowers the social cost of showing up and makes room for spiritual meaning to emerge over time.

Belonging also becomes durable when young people are entrusted—not with immediate major roles, but with micro-responsibilities that communicate, “You matter here.” Low-pressure responsibility turns visitors into co-participants.

Concrete Ministry Design Moves

If attendance isn't belonging, then the pastoral task is to build pathways—not just programs—converting contact into communion through practices that are theologically coherent and developmentally realistic.

1. **Create “threshold communities.”** *Offer activity-based entry points where participation precedes disclosure and relationships can grow organically.*
2. **Design nervous-system-friendly hospitality.** *Use predictable rhythms, explicit introductions, peer greeters, and low-stakes participation so anxious newcomers are not left to decode unwritten rules.*
3. **Build a bridge from liturgy to table.** *Engineer the “after” of worship with clear invitations, visible hosts, and a concrete next step into groups. This is not marketing; it is ecclesial recognition that shifts the burden of connection from the newcomer to the community.*
4. **Honor constraints as a justice issue.** *Treat transportation, cost, and schedule barriers as part of pastoral care, not optional logistics.*

The data suggest a narrative of thresholds, not simply decline: openness, anxiety, and constraint shape whether contact becomes communion. Many can attend worship without finding a social home. The theological invitation is to reimagine church less as a place young people visit and more as a communion they can enter—gradually, safely, and meaningfully—until “attendance” becomes participation in Christ's body.

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Jill E. Olds, DMin, MDiv, MA

A Mosaic of Belonging

When I was eight years old, my family took a trip to Europe, and I recall visiting Pompeii, Italy. Once a site of a bustling, flourishing community, Pompeii was ravaged by the volcanic eruption of Mount Vesuvius in the year 79 CE. In less than 24 hours, everyday life was frozen, an eerie but pristinely preserved snapshot into the past. Pompeii lay mostly undisturbed for hundreds of years, until excavators and archeologists began to unveil what lay underneath the blanket of hardened ash.

The image of Pompeii that fascinated me most as a child were the mosaics. Intricately crafted on floors, walls, and ceilings of this once-wealthy city, these creations use tiny bits of glass and stone to depict art, tell stories, and convey religious beliefs and expressions. Each dot of color was necessary to the work; together, they speak through the centuries of a life now gone.

The research conducted by Springtide regarding the religiosity of youth is vast in its learnings and potential takeaways for youth ministry practitioners. But one particular finding caught my eye: youth and young adults who remain connected to a faith community speak repeatedly of a *sense of belonging*. They know they have a place in their faith setting, a place that feels safe and comfortable and welcoming. This *sense of belonging* carried many youth through their upbringing and into young adulthood, and it is one of the components that keeps them coming back to faith communities.

I am further persuaded by the notion that belonging does not simply mean providing a safe and welcoming space (though that is important, and foundational in any vibrant youth ministry setting). But *belonging* asks for something more. Each child should feel not just as though they fit in, but as though they are *indispensable*. They are the bits of color that make up the entire mosaic that is a faith community. In short: The youth need to believe that their setting would not be the same if they were not there. That is the essence of true *belonging*.

This desire for *belonging* begs the question: what can youth ministry leaders do to foster this more fully for the young people under their care?

In my role as a youth ministry educator, I talk about leadership development often. Contrary to how some faith communities tend to work, leadership development is not an effort at funneling young people into preconceived ministries. Leadership development involves identifying and honoring the unique gifts, talents, and color each young person brings to the space, and then expanding that space to work for them.

A challenge with this reframing is that it carries with it loss, specifically a willingness to let go of our preconceived notions of what youth ministry has to include. To this point, I would gently suggest that the loss is already there. The Springtide research shows that, of the almost 3,000 youth and young adults interviewed, 60% of them attend religious services a few times a year or less. Our youth have become increasingly disenchanted and disengaged with how we older folks have structured, experienced, and led worship. At the same time, there is hope to be found in the research too: 75% of young people say they believe in a higher power, and 80% would consider themselves at least slightly spiritual. These numbers speak to a hunger for meaning, for faith, and for understanding. For this hunger to be met, deep listening and a comfort level with trying and failing is called for.

Relatedly, there is an element of holy release in youth leadership development. It requires an embrace of the unknown as our youth develop into whom they have been created to be, and a willingness to hold more lightly what we have envisioned our faith community to be. We adult leaders may have games and crafts in mind, when the youth are passionate about service work instead. We may plan a Bible study, while the youth are more excited about listening to songs and exploring the lyrics as a sacred practice. Our task as leadership developers is to dig under the surface, to mine for the gems that our young people have protected within their shells, and allow all of those little bits to shine together in one collective effort.

If youth practitioners take this to heart, it will lead to a seismic shift in their organizational efforts, a focus less on the ashes of what has been in our faith community, and more on the color peeking out from below the death. This would include intentionality around representation—perhaps all boards (and not just the youth committee) should have younger members—but it would encapsulate more than just having youth present. Programming would be based upon what gifts and skills are to be found within the gathered community. I once had a youth in my congregation who was not comfortable speaking in front of a worshipping community. But she was an incredible artist, and happily drew a picture for our bulletin covers for our Youth Sunday service (which, kudos to that church, was used several times beyond that tokenized Sunday). I have had other youth in my church serve as deacons, greeters, tech support, Sunday school teachers, childcare workers, bakers, coffee hour coordinators, and missionaries to other youth as they spread the word of God's fierce love for them. Just as the adults bring with them a variety of life experiences and gifts, so too do our youth. All should be allowed to shine and contribute to a new mosaic, reflecting a new picture of what the faith community can be.

The ground of youth ministry in these days is shaky, and some former things should be allowed to pass away and be buried. But other attributes—gifts, talents, approaches, hopes, dreams—are lingering just below the surface, waiting to be unearthed. May we have the courage to respond to the needs and wishes of our young people, and dig them up.

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Kara Powell, PhD

“I’m tired of the church answering questions I’m not asking.”

This poignant reflection from a 15-year-old to his youth pastor is part of what fuels the Fuller Youth Institute’s search to identify young people’s biggest questions. For the last eight years, we have wondered: In the midst of all that young people are navigating—from mental health challenges and immigration uncertainty to final exams and social media—what underlying hungers shape young people’s actions and attitudes?

Based on in-depth interviews with 27 diverse US teenagers and over 2,000 additional focus groups, interviews, and surveys, we have landed on three big questions.

1. *Identity*, or who am I?
2. *Belonging*, or where do I fit?
3. And *purpose*, or what difference can I make?

These questions aren’t percolating in young people only. They are part of adult daily realities, too. While they might be on a low simmer for adults, they are at a rolling boil for adolescents navigating new relationships and possibilities.

These three questions also map well onto Springtide’s *Four Dimensions of Young People’s Spiritual and Religious Lives*. Both Springtide and the Fuller Youth Institute see the importance of “identity” and name it as such, and what we label as belonging and purpose have significant overlap with Springtide’s “community” and “practice.”

While each young person navigates these questions of identity, belonging, and purpose differently, there are some commonalities—especially when we look at generational cohorts. In an effort to understand how Generation Alpha (which we define as those born after 2010) navigate faith, identity, belonging, and purpose, we recently conducted online nationwide surveys with 2,800 13- to 17-year-olds (both those who are right on the boundary between Generation Z and Alpha, as well as the oldest members of Alpha). Our initial findings offer an important complement to Springtide’s paradigm and recent data and can also improve our efforts to effectively form the faith of today’s teenagers.

The Youth Group Adults Gen Alpha Wants

In Springtide’s 2025 survey of 2,977 13- to 25-year-olds, both those who were involved in a religious group as well as those who were not overlapped on their top responses to this question: “In your opinion, what are the top 5 most essential characteristics that a group/club/team should have?” Unsurprisingly, the top answer was “fun.”

Perhaps more intriguingly, the second answer was “safe.” That likely includes physical safety, but that’s almost certainly not what beats at the heart of a teenager’s hunger for a group that’s “safe.” It’s much more about emotional and relational safety.

Feeling safe is one of the great spiritual and relational hungers for all generations. In this polarized and fractured world, having a place—whether it be a religious setting or other context—where we can let down our guard and be ourselves is both rare and treasured.¹

That’s especially true for teenagers. In an era where they feel pressure about what to post on social media—and perhaps more importantly, what *not* to post—because of what others may think, young people need youth group to be a criticism-free refuge.

Just as young people want a safe religious group, they also want safe religious adults. When we asked Gen Alpha young people what they’re looking for, they told us that they would love more mentors and guides who are *trustworthy*. Across every racial subgroup, at the top of their definition of what makes a mentor trustworthy was that they “listen without judging.” That answer was followed by the idea that they “respect my views” and “follow through” on what they say, and that their “actions match” their values.²

Furthermore, when we asked Gen Alpha “what could faith communities do more of to connect better with teens?,” the top three answers were “be more welcoming and less judgmental,” “listen to young people’s questions,” and “talk openly about tough issues.” This top three list is consistent in our sample across Christians, Nones (those unaffiliated with any religious tradition), older teens, younger teens, race, and family types.³

Four Nonjudgmental Practices for You and Other Adults

In your ministry efforts to become—and equip others to be—the safe, nonjudgmental adults young people crave, you might consider the following four simple practices

- 1. Reflect back what you hear** so young people feel understood rather than analyzed. Phrases like “It sounds like...” signal presence, not pressure.
- 2. Ask curious—not corrective—questions**, the kind that invite stories instead of shame.
- 3. Hold the space without hurrying to solve**, letting silence breathe and asking, “Do you want ideas, or do you just want me to listen?”
- 4. Empathize and empower simultaneously** through phrases like “That sounds really tough; what do you think you might do?,” or “No wonder you’re stressed; how can I help you figure out your best next steps?”

These practices aren’t complicated, but they are powerful. They create conversational and ministry ground where teenagers and young adults feel safe, heard, and hopeful—exactly what young people crave from religious communities and mentors who help them answer the questions they’re *really* asking.

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1. Adapted from Kara Powell and Brad M. Griffin, *3 Big Questions That Shape Every Teenager* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2021).
2. Fuller Youth Institute, *The FYI Report on Gen Alpha & Faith, Part 1: Insights on an Emerging Generation*, 2026. <https://fulleryouthinstitute.org/gen-alpha>.
3. Fuller, *The FYI Report on Gen Alpha & Faith*.

Shannon Wimp Schmidt, MA

For the past decade or so, we have seen a decline in religious identification and participation in faith communities for young people. At the same time, the recent Springtide reports, *The Four Dimensions of Young People's Spiritual and Religious Lives* and *Parents, Peers, & Personal Belief: A Framework for Young People's Religious Involvement*, reveal a hopeful picture of the reality of young people's spiritual lives and prospective avenues for ministry leaders to invite youth into lifelong faith.

The Four Dimensions of Young People's Spiritual and Religious Lives shows that the majority of young people identify as both spiritual and religious.¹ Seventy-five percent believe in a higher power² and almost half say religion has a significant place in their lives.³ Most are likely to still identify with their religious tradition as they age,⁴ even if they don't attend services weekly.⁵ And the more they attend weekly services, the more likely they are to self-identify as spiritual.⁶

For those of us hoping to develop lifelong faith in young people, this is encouraging data. There seems to be a recognition that religious practice is an important part of one's spirituality and also a willingness to engage with religion as part of their spiritual development. For youth already present within our faith communities, incorporating more spiritual practices within faith formation could deepen this connection. Spiritual practices such as ritual, informal prayer, silent meditation, fasting, journaling, etc., can help young people process their religious experiences and help them create meaning and identity. Looking at the data, one might even draw the conclusion that spiritual practices are an essential entry point into religious identity for this generation.

As we think about how to deepen lifelong faith within religious traditions, another intriguing finding in *The Four Dimensions* comes to the forefront. The study notes that young people who are religious are generally attending weekly services, but not necessarily participating in other activities within a faith community.⁷ So it's more likely that the young people in our congregations are coming for corporate worship, rather than participating in things like scripture study, community service, or prayer groups.

These observations should prompt us to consider how our weekly services impact young people. As their main connection point to our faith communities, it is our biggest opportunity to connect with them on a regular basis. Is that reflected in the way our communities plan, teach, and pray within worship? If not, what might need to change in the preparation for and activities during weekly worship? Also, how is worship inviting young people to connect further with our communities, not just for involvement, but also to incorporate their faith into their everyday lives?

The Four Dimensions of Young People's Spiritual and Religious Lives also shows opportunities for impact with youth who self-identify as non-religious during their teenage years. While religiously affiliated youth are unlikely to abandon religion

(even though they may move to a new religious tradition), about 11% of non-religious teenagers will identify with a religious tradition when they are young adults.⁸ This should be encouraging to faith communities that want to outreach to young people in their communities. Not every young person may end up joining our faith communities when we do, but there are a significant number of them who might be transformed by outreach and commit to living faith as adults.

Insights from *Parents, Peers, & Personal Belief: A Framework for Young People's Religious Involvement* point us to how to support that transformation and increase religious involvement from youth. The study looks at what factors help young people become involved in religious practice, pointing to three key pillars: parents, peers, and personal belief.

Families have always been a primary factor of young people's faith practice. *Parents, Peers and Personal Beliefs* shows that almost two-thirds of young people still identify with the religious tradition of their parents and grandparents and cite their families as one of the most important influences on their religious involvement.⁹ Ministry leaders should consider how families are supported in forming the faith of their children, as well as how we might incorporate families into our own efforts. Families are far more likely to have lasting impact on the faith of young people than the next programs and processes we might create.

Young people also cite peers as a central factor in their sense of belonging and interest in religion involvement.¹⁰ Of course, this includes games, service opportunities, small groups, and methods we have been using in youth ministry for years. But we should also consider how young people minister to each other and support each other in their burgeoning faith. How might they share their stories, offer each other wisdom, and empower each other? Where can they collaborate across their gifts and talents to discover purpose and engage in shared leadership? How might they teach each other about faith and draw each other further into our religious tradition?

Young people cite religious participation as a way to express and deepen their own beliefs, as well as to connect with their personal identity and purpose.¹¹ As ministry leaders, we should not underestimate the importance of personal commitment and growth in young people's lives. They often participate in our faith communities because of their own convictions, hopes, and choices. While other's influence is central to their faith practice, ultimately young people are the protagonists of their own faith journey. Our role as ministers is to encourage them in their growing faith and help them develop their own agency as believers.

And ultimately, this is why we all do what we do. We want to see young people transformed and thriving as adults. It's not only to see them stay in our congregations. Young people's lives can flourish through faith and truly change the world. And, as adults who love them, we have a great opportunity to help that life become their reality.

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11. Springtide, *Parents, Peers, & Personal Belief*, 6.

Adam P. Setmeyer

In reviewing *The Four Dimensions of Young People's Spiritual Lives*, I was reminded how Charles Taylor in his pivotal book, *The Secular Age*, demonstrates the uniqueness of our current epoch. For virtually all of human history, according to Taylor, the religious outlook was assumed, but that no longer is the case in our current age. *The Four Dimensions of Young People's Spiritual Lives* builds upon his claim when stating, "These differences reveal that young people may understand involvement in religious or spiritual communities as distinct from attending worship services."¹ This reinforces a concept initially articulated by Springtide Research in their 2021 study, *Navigating Uncertainty*, under the title *Faith Unbundled*. In that document, the researchers note, "In other words, young people who identify as 'religious' don't necessarily participate in religion in the traditional sense."² This same phenomenon has been explored by others under the keyword "fragmentation."

Though not the first to raise concern over the issue, fragmentation is a subtle but important theme found throughout the writings of the late Pope Francis. First appearing in *Lumen Fidei*³ (written jointly with the late Pope Benedict XVI), the theme grew and matured throughout his pontificate—arguably reaching its crescendo in *Laudato Si*.⁴ That encyclical, commonly referred to as "Pope Francis' document about the environment, is indeed about the environment," but, also, so much more. At a more fundamental level, *Laudato Si* is an encyclical about relationships: the relationship between humanity and our Creator, humanity and creation, and the relationships among human beings.⁵ According to Pope Francis, each of our relationships were created interrelated and any isolation of one from the other is problematic and can lead to damaging results. This, he believes, is exactly what has happened as a result of the "technocratic paradigm," which causes "environmental degradation, anxiety, a loss of the purpose of life and of community living."⁷ To be clear, the technocratic paradigm is not simply about having or using technology, as if all technology were harmful or, even, evil. While not being naïve about the negative effects of technology or some corporations, Pope Francis, again, is leading us to consider something deeper—that technology conditions our lifestyle. Even when pitched as something to bring us closer together as a human family, as in social media, technology often fragments and causes isolation.⁸ To combat the technocratic paradigm and alleviate its fragmenting effects, Pope Francis calls for a "new way of looking at things," that help us see and regain a view of the whole once again.⁹

Pope Francis' understanding of relationship and fragmentation as articulated in *Laudato Si* provides a helpful framework for thinking about the recent findings of Springtide Research Institute. The document, itself, provides a new way of looking at the current spiritual lives of young people.

First, *Laudato Si* reminds the reader of the data to give thanks for God's goodness. It is worth noting that the title of *Laudato Si* comes from the opening lines of Saint Francis' *Canticle of Creatures* in which the saint proclaims, "Praised be You, my Lord." It is a profound statement of joy and gratitude. Therefore, while mindful of the negative results of fragmentation, it is important to highlight the good news found in the research. From the perspective of one who believes unashamedly that we have been created by a loving God, as I do, and one who has based his entire life on faith in Jesus Christ, as I have, it is incredibly edifying to read that the majority of young people "believe in a higher power to some degree," and "say they are spiritual or religious or both."¹⁰ This reminds me of Saint Augustine's statement that "our hearts are restless until they rest," in God.¹¹ Despite global turmoil, the failings of religious leaders, and any negative encounter a young person might have had with a local community, they still believe. As Pope Francis writes, "No system can completely suppress our openness to what is good, true and beautiful, or our God-given ability to respond to his grace at work deep in our hearts."¹² Springtide's data quantifiably reinforces that young people remain open to faith.

Second, *Laudato Si* invites us to name what is troubling and ask penetrating questions. From the perspective of one who has found deep renewal and daily support from religious worship and profound support from a religious community, as I have, the results are also concerning. This is a particularly difficult piece of evidence to digest in the Catholic tradition, which views both the celebration of the Eucharist liturgy and the life of the Christian community as paramount *and* completely interrelated. As a Catholic minister, this data raises a number of difficult questions: If so many young people believe in a higher power, why are religious services not accessed as a means to deepen one's faith? Have worship services, including the Catholic Mass, lost the sense of being something done as a community?¹³ Is worship now seen as passive act, such as attending a movie, and therefore there is no need to get to know those around me? Why, even when attended, are young people not experiencing a sense of community in worship?¹⁴

Third, *Laudato Si* calls those of us who work with young people to address the real and not just theoretical or theological issue at hand. Pope Francis' analysis in *Laudato Si* shows how our breakdown in relationships (with God, each other, and creation) is not a result of a conscious choice, but a result of our daily habits shaped, often carried out unconsciously. Therefore, while I have focused on major concerns such as participation in religious services, following the logic of *Laudato Si*, ministers should consider focusing on smaller aspects of spiritual formation among young people first. This is the insight of the popular self-help book *Atomic Habits* in which James Clear writes, "Habits are the bridge between goals and accomplishments," and it is supported by Carter's testimony in *Parents, Peers, & Personal Belief*.¹⁵ This idea is further supported by the long tradition of reflection in the Catholic Church on spiritual habits, which are often connected virtues. One sees that in the writings

of the medieval theologians Bonaventure and Aquinas, religious rules, and we have even used the term to describe religious clothing. The Catholic tradition is well aware of the power of small behaviors in shaping life, and those of us who work with young people would be wise to follow in this tradition. Perhaps, in addition to larger focused programmatic events, the evidence presented by the Springtide Research Institute is calling ministers to focus on coaching young people in forming spiritual habits that increase the horizon of their spiritual vision and help them discover ancient wisdom within religious traditions that support their innate sense of the divine. Likewise, habits and practices that remind young people of their interconnectedness with their local community may increase the desire to worship actively in a local community.

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Blair Trygstad Stowe, ABD

Belief Inside Out

Cyprian famously claimed “*extra ecclesiam nulla salus*,” “outside the church there is no salvation.”¹ The catechism and dogma of many Christian denominations maintain that position to this day. But other strands of Christianity have questioned the necessity of the church for salvation and even basic belief for over half a century. In the 1960s, ecumenical missiologist Hans Hoekendijk proposed the need for an “open ecclesiology” in response to the evidence of God’s movement in the world and the many failures of the institutional church in perpetuating colonial and cultural violence. Whereas the dogma had been God’s saving grace flowed from God, through the church, and into the world, Hoekendijk and many ecumenical/conciliar theologians accepted that the order may in fact be God-World-Church. Open ecclesiology called for the church to reconsider itself as a necessary conduit of contact for believers as the sole mediator of salvation, and to instead pursue the presence of Christ’s saving work already evident in spaces of hope and resurrection across the globe.²

Sixty years later pastors and theologians continue to consider this question: Is the church necessary for people to form the belief and belonging that leads to salvation? Recent data from Springtide indicates that young people may be finding both belief and flourishing without the church, but that there are still benefits from belonging to a faith community.

The Divide Between Belief and Belonging

The majority of young people today carry some kind of belief. In Springtide’s survey of nearly 3000 young people ages 13 to 25, 72% of respondents indicated they are at least slightly religious and 80% indicated they are at least slightly spiritual. Young people’s confidence in the existence of a divine power is also strong—75% of respondents shared they believe a higher power exists, and 44% expressed no doubt in the existence of a higher power. 64% of respondents identify with some branch of Christianity.

But significantly fewer young people report participation in faith communities. According to Springtide’s data, only 47% of teens and 35% of young adults attend religious services at least monthly. And of those who attend religious services regularly, many don’t describe themselves as *belonging* to those communities of faith. Of young people who said they attend religious services at least monthly, a third say they “never have been or currently are not part of a religious community,” and only a quarter describe themselves as “involved in a faith-based organization or place of worship.” This indicates that belief in God has become at least partially uncoupled from participation in church for young people, especially among those 18–25.

Despite this disconnect between belief and belonging as it relates to the church, the data does not show young people to be lacking in purpose, meaning, and the experience of belonging more broadly. As it relates to belonging, 77% of young people indicated their “social relationships are supportive and rewarding,” and 78% believe they “actively contribute to the happiness and well-being of others.” Absence from church does not prevent powerful meaning making and morality, as 98% of young people indicate they “lead a purposeful and meaningful life” and 85% at least slightly agree “I am a good person and live a good life.”

Some interview responses support this disconnect between belief and belonging to the institutional church. A 20-year-old respondent, Salma, who identifies as “spiritual but not religious” described her own strength of faith with or without the church. She said,

As long as you know you're protected by God and your faith is there for God, that's all that matters. You're not praying to the pastor, you're not praying to the [priest] . . . God is using this vessel, whether good or bad, to preach to you. And that's it. The priest doesn't make it all holy. At the end of the day, my father is God, not the priest.

Appreciating Church

But the disconnect does not necessarily imply an outright rejection of the church by young people. Some respondents who did not identify as Christian maintained a positive perspective of the church. Chris, a 25-year-old who identifies as agnostic, shared his appreciation for church youth group. He said,

With youth group, everyone is a young follower of Jesus, and everyone wants to share in their faith with other young followers of Jesus. Having something that can kind of tie everyone together is really important. It does a good job of giving intentionality to the time that you're spending together, [and] it gives everyone something to circle back to. It gives everyone a lens at which they're looking through the world and looking through their relationships at.

Avery, a 14-year-old who said she is unsure about her religious affiliation, shared that she appreciates the community aspects she sees in church communities. She said,

My interest in [religion] is seeing all these videos of communities and churches getting together and actually enjoying each other's company. And that's important for me, having someone to talk to. . . . When you join a church, you get to experience that a lot, and they have these fun little cookouts and stuff, and I was like, “Hmm, maybe I really wanna join something in the future.”

The survey data affirms Hoekendijk's predictions that people would increasingly find connection to God beyond the institutional church, but it also does not seem to imply that there is no appreciation or an outright rejection of the church as an institution that is beneficial for both belief and belonging. How can churches and pastors begin to bridge the gap between belief and belonging for young people?

Embrace Public Theology

Clergy and religious leaders should no longer assume the church will be the first stop for young people who have questions about faith and spirituality. One question not answered by the recent data is with so many young people still claiming belief in God, where are they accessing information about these beliefs if not in church? Where are they going to learn about religion and spirituality?

The most likely place is the internet. As AI search engines and social media have democratized information, young people have easy access to more experts and sources than ever before. But this democratization of information can also lead to misinformation, as well as a shallow or incomplete understanding of the complexity and depth of religious belief. The Church can speak strongly and clearly into the online cacophony in a way that sets its witness apart from influencers and modern day snake oil salesmen. But in order to be effective, the church will need to become attuned to how new media is experienced and consumed, and adapt our teaching processes to work in the space of Tiktok, Youtube, and podcasts, rather than Bible Studies and sermons. Institutional history does not guarantee virality, but it can provide some level of legitimacy in a system that lacks any other kind of credentialing. Clergy and people of faith should embrace these new modes of communication and bring resources for theological and spiritual formation into the marketplace of ideas that young people are already accessing regularly.

Create Points of Connection

Public theology can also create pathways for genuine growth and connection. The survey data also showed that young people are open to spiritual practices, with 46% of respondents claiming they pray at least weekly, and 27% claiming they meditate regularly. New media can be a space for distributing spiritual resources that young people actually use. And as they come to affiliate useful spiritual resources with particular congregations, thinkers, or denominations, it can open the door for further exploration. Short form media offerings provide a way for young people to test out a community before committing to the often uncomfortable experience of visiting a new church. If the church or clergy person has proven themselves to be reliable, accessible, and relevant online, it can build the trust young people need to overcome their anxiety and try out worship or other community offerings.

Build Intentional Relationships

Finally, the church needs to be prepared with pathways of welcome for young people. Researchers noted a trend of “missed connections” in the interview responses with those who do attend church. Young people named several things that made it difficult to connect with a local congregation and feel like they really belonged. Reasons offered included a difference in life stage with the majority of other congregants, differences in culture or race, or an unspoken script of cliques within the church that made it difficult to fit in. Young people also express a relatively high level of anxiety, and many name it as social anxiety. Churches need to be intentional about greeting and including young people and providing non-anxious pathways of relationship building within the existing congregation, rather than assuming young people want to or know how to fit into the culture of the congregation without some level of orientation.

The church needs to be willing to open itself to better understand and resource the strong belief that young people already carry, by creating bridges between the wisdom of historic religious traditions and spaces of new knowledge formation. The good news is that bridge has two ends, and that as the church pours out in authentic and intentional ways beyond itself, the gifts of young people will likely make their way back into the churches. We need to be ready to receive them, learn from them, and grow with them when they arrive.

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1. Cyprian of Carthage, Epistle 72, “To Jubaianus, Concerning the Baptism of Heretics,” <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/050672.html>

2. Johannes Hoekendijk, *The Church Inside Out*, (Westminster Press: London), 1966.



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