

Religion of Generation Z defies easy categorization

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The religion of young people in Generation Z defies simple categories like “affiliated” and “unaffiliated,” a new study shows.

Like other research in recent years, the new study by the [Springtide Research Institute](#) points to a significant number of young people ages 13 to 25—close to 40 percent of those surveyed—who indicate they are religiously unaffiliated.

More than half of the young people surveyed identify with a particular religion, but they express little trust in organized religion—or most other institutions. Among the young people who consider themselves affiliated with a religion, nearly one-third say it is not important to have a faith community.

However, young people respond to “relational authority,” even if they don’t have confidence in hierarchy or institutions. A significant segment of Generation Z young people feel lonely and lacking in purpose, but that can change when trusted adults invest in their lives, the Springtide study reveals.

“[The State of Religion & Young People 2020](#)” explores the attitudes of teenagers and young adults up to age 25, particularly regarding issues of religion and spirituality.

Findings are based on quantitative surveys of more than 10,000 individuals in Generation Z, supplemented by qualitative interviews with 150 young people.

Gen Z religion: It's complicated

The Springtide study presents a complicated portrait of Generation Z's relationship to religion.

"The old labels are simply no longer meaningful for understanding the religious lives of young people—if they ever were," the Springtide report states.

The research reveals about 1 in 5 Generation Z young people who identify as "affiliated" with a particular religion also indicate they personally are "not religious."

At the same time, the study shows 60 percent of surveyed young people who are not involved with organized religion describe themselves as "spiritual," and nearly as many—19 percent—indicate they attend religious gatherings at least once a month.

"When we look closer at behaviors, beliefs and practices, we discover that affiliated young people aren't always doing the things traditionally associated with religion: attending services, living out particular values, or even trusting the institution they're part of," the Springtide report states.

"It's complex for unaffiliated young people too—some of whom do attend religious services or try to live out their religious values."

Relationships not institutions

While young people lack trust in institutions—including churches—they are interested in exploring issues of ultimate meaning with adults whom they trust, said Josh Packard, executive director of Springtide Research Institute.



Josh Packard

“There’s a narrative out there that says young people are not interested in conversations about religion. That’s just not the case,” Packard said in a phone interview. “They are interested in the conversations. They just are not driven to the institutions.”

Relationships are more revealing than religious affiliation when it comes to how Generation Z views ultimate meaning and purpose, the Springtide study reveals.

Nearly 7 out of 10 (69 percent) young people who were surveyed said they have three or fewer meaningful interactions per day. About 4 in 10 say they have nobody to talk to and nobody who really knows them well, at least some of the time.

Two in 10 young people (21 percent) with no meaningful interactions per day say they never feel like their life has meaning. But a single meaningful interaction reduces the number to 4 percent.

Trusted adults make a difference

An earlier study by Springtide Research showed about one-fourth (24 percent) of Generation Z young people who have no adult mentors never feel their life has meaning and purpose. But among those with even one

meaningful relationship with an adult, that number drops to 6 percent.

The greater the number of meaningful adults in a young person's life, the greater the likelihood the young person will report a sense of meaning and purpose, the latest survey reveals.

Seven out of 10 (69 percent) of surveyed Generation Z individuals who have one adult mentor report their life has meaning and purpose. But 85 percent who have two to four adult mentors and 91 percent of those who have five or more adult mentors say their life has meaning and purpose.

While "more is better" in terms of how many meaningful adults are in a young person's life, "five seems to be the magic number," Packard said.

A church should not feel responsibility for providing all five adults for each young person, recognizing parents, teachers, coaches and other trusted adults also have a part to play, he noted. By the same token, adults associated with religious communities can fill a vital role.

"Young people engage and thrive when they encounter trusted adults who care for, listen to, and guide them. Religious leaders are needed to meet young people amid the messiness of the present moment," the Springtide report states.

Relational authority takes time to build

Rather than authority based on position or credentials, researchers conclude, young people value relational authority based on five criteria—listening, transparency, integrity, care and expertise.

"Young people have a deep need for familiar connection amid a society increasingly glued together with impersonal, transactional exchanges. ...

The antidote to the transactional is the transformational. The antidote is relational authority, which is a dynamic exchange of shared experience and sympathetic expertise," the report states.

The Springtide study shows 83 percent of young people in Generation Z say they are more likely to take advice from someone who cares about them, while two-thirds (65 percent) say a person's expertise doesn't matter if the person doesn't care about them.

Church leaders can make a difference by recognizing the old metrics—the number of teenagers who attend Bible study on Sunday morning or a Wednesday evening event—do not accurately measure the impact on the lives of young people, Packard noted.

Instead, adults who work with youth can make a difference by building deep and meaningful relationships. They can invest time and build trust through genuine listening and authentic care, he asserted.

"Churches that bring the same dedication and innovation to relationship-based ministry that they have brought to program-based ministry will be fine," Packard said.