

Twentysomethings Struggle to Find Their Place in Christian Churches

the Barna Research Group

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From age 20 to 29, most individuals face many life-shaping decisions: whether to finish college; what career to pursue; where to live; whether or not to get married; who to marry; if and when to have children – among many other crucial choices. In our culture of hyper-individualism, those decisions are being increasingly shaped by people's desire to determine their own personal fulfillment and purpose in life. For many twentysomethings, allegiance to Christian churches is a casualty of their efforts to "create their own version of fulfillment."

A new study from the Barna Research Group of Ventura, California shows that millions of twentysomething Americans – many of whom were active in churches during their teens – pass through their most formative adult decade while putting Christianity on the backburner. The research, conducted with 2,660 twentysomethings, shows that Americans in their twenties are significantly less likely than any other age group to attend church services, to donate to churches, to be absolutely committed to Christianity, to read the Bible, or to serve as a volunteer or lay leader in churches.

Church-Going Softens

Perhaps the most striking reality of twentysomething's faith is their relative absence from Christian churches. Only 3 out of 10 twentysomethings (31%) attend church in a typical week, compared to 4 out of 10 of those in their 30s (42%) and nearly half of all adults age 40 and older (49%).

The low level of twentysomething church attendance is not just due to the "college years," when many young adults may not have easy access to a church. The research shows that church attendance bottoms out during the late 20s when the vast majority of students have transitioned from education to the workforce. Just 22% of those ages 25 to 29 attended church in the last week.

Many twentysomethings are reversing course after having been active church attenders during their teenage years. As teenagers, more than half attended church each week and more than 4 out of 5 (81%) had ever gone to a Christian church. That means that from high school graduation to age 25 there is a 42% drop in weekly church attendance and a 58% decline from age 18 to age 29. That represents about 8,000,000 twentysomethings alive today who were active church-goers as teenagers but who will no longer be active in a church by their 30th birthday.

Other Signs of Struggle

Two other religious activities take significant hits during the young adult years: donating to churches and Bible reading. Only 3 out of 10 twentysomethings donated to a church

in the past year, which is half the proportion of older adults (30% to 61%). (While twentysomethings generally have smaller income levels than their older counterparts, this measure has nothing to do with how much the person donates, but whether they contribute financially at all to churches.) This reluctance to commit financially suggests that churches attracting an exclusively young adult audience will be especially hard-pressed to raise sufficient funds for ministry.

Likewise, Bible reading levels are about 33% less among twentysomethings than among older adults. Overall, only 30% of twentysomethings have read the Bible in the past week, compared to 37% of those in their 30s; 44% of fortysomethings; 47% of adults in their 50s; and 55% of those age 60 and above. David Kinnaman, Vice President of the Barna Research Group, and the director of the study, pointed out that twentysomethings are one of the first age cohorts to widely embrace postmodern philosophy. "Since the postmodern viewpoint emphasizes that an individual's experience and personal insight are the prime sources of determining what's important in life," Kinnaman said, "the decline in Bible usage is another sign that many twentysomethings are trying to make sense of life without traditional sources of Christian input."

Aside from religious activities, the research points out that young adults are also re-thinking the depth of their commitment to Christianity. Just one-third of twentysomethings (34%) claims to be absolutely committed to Christianity. That compares to more than half – 54% – of all older adults who claim such absolute devotion, including more than 6 out of 10 adults who are age 50 and older.

Missing Leadership Link?

One of the reasons that many twentysomethings struggle to find their place in churches is that many young people may feel overlooked as potential leaders. The study showed that just 4% of young adults currently serve as a lay leader at their church; only 12% have been a leader at any time in the past two years. Older adults are three to four times more likely to serve as church leaders. The age group with the greatest number of church leaders are those in their 50s.

Despite that, young people do not lack confidence in their leadership capabilities. The study showed that people in their 20s and early 30s are actually more likely than are older adults to think of themselves as leaders – and they are much more likely than mature generations to want additional training to become better leaders. Yet, young leaders were also the least aware of any leadership training opportunities provided by their congregation. Nevertheless, young leaders are a challenging target for leadership preparation since they are busy, skeptical of churches, and often unwilling to commit to such development, especially to classroom-style training without hands-on leadership opportunities. The research points out that mentoring is the most appealing form of leadership development for young adults.

Twentysomething Spirituality

While young adults are re-thinking their allegiance to the Christian faith, those in their 20s have certainly not discarded all traces of spirituality and faith. Instead, personal faith is but one of multiple sources of input which young people combine to create their own definition of personal fulfillment and meaning. More than 8 out of 10 twentysomethings

(80%) said that their religious faith is very important in their life and nearly 6 out of 10 (57%) claimed to have made a personal commitment to Jesus Christ that is still important in their life.

The study also showed that young adults are only slightly less likely than older adults to pray, which reflects their appetite for personal spiritual experience. Three-quarters of young adults in their 20s (75%) said they had prayed to God in the past week.

Reactions to the Findings

Kinnaman pushed for a realistic view of the research implications. “Christianity is not going to wither away among twentysomethings – more than 10 million are active church-goers and very committed to the Christian faith. But the real issue is how churches will respond to the faithquakes that are reverberating through our nation’s young adults. The notion that these people will return to the church when they get older or once they become parents is only true in a minority of cases. More importantly, that reasoning ignores the real issue: millions of twentysomethings are crystallizing their views of life without the input of church leaders, the Bible, or other mature Christians. If we simply wait for them to come back to church later in adulthood, not only will most of those people never return, but also we would miss the chance to alter their life trajectory during a critical phase. And, besides, what church couldn’t use the infusion of energy, ideas, and leadership that young adults can bring to the table?”

“Although it may come across as unwarranted skepticism, young adults are questioning their church experience in some legitimate ways,” Kinnaman said. “Their disenchantment has raised questions for churches related to relevance, discipleship, authenticity, the use of art and technology in ministry, relationships, music, learning styles and teaching, teamwork, leadership hierarchy, stewardship, and much more. On the flip side of the coin, young adults – many who have grown up in unhealthy families – struggle with character issues, with relational isolation brought on by their hyper-individualism, with Bible familiarity, and with being over-critical of their elders. Consequently, many of the legitimate questions young leaders ask get lost in the jumble of generational warfare.”

David Kinnaman – a twentysomething himself – has been a Barna researcher since 1995. He speaks and writes about the postmodern ministry environment, teenagers, and young leaders.

Research Source and Methodology

The data described above are from telephone interviews with several nationwide random samples of adults conducted from January 2000 through May 2003. In total 14,091 adults were interviewed in studies that explored church attendance, spiritual beliefs and practices, and demographic correlates. The sample of twentysomethings included 2,660 adults ages 20 to 29.

The maximum margin of sampling error associated with the aggregate sample is ± 1.0 percentage point at the 95% confidence level; the maximum sampling error for the subgroup of twentysomethings is ± 2.0 percentage points. All of the interviews were conducted from the Barna Research Group telephone interviewing facility in Ventura,

CA. Adults in the 48 continental states were eligible to be interviewed and the distribution of respondents coincided with the geographic dispersion of the U.S. adult population. Multiple callbacks were used to increase the probability of including a reliable distribution of adults.

“Theographics” refers to the spiritual practices, beliefs and self-identification of individuals.

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You have opened the research archive relating to the latest findings on teens and their faith. The statistics and analysis in this archive come from national surveys conducted by Barna Research. Click the subcategories on the side menu to automatically scroll to specific sections in this archive.

For more information about teens, be sure to check out the related resources and news releases featured on this page. Also, watch for new information to be added to this archive in the months to come.

Music

- Peers are the most common source of teenagers' information about CD copying (32%) as well as about music downloading (28%). Other sources of information related to CD copying included teachers (13%), parents (11%), newscasters (9%), other people on TV (4%), siblings (2%), TV commercials (1%), radio DJs (1%), MTV (1%), newspapers (1%), and the police (1%).
- The sources of information for the morality of downloading music are: peers (28%), teachers (13%), parents (11%), newscasters (9%), musician/artist (8%), other people on TV (4%), TV commercials (3%), pastor (3%), newspapers (2%), youth pastors (2%), siblings (1%), and radio DJs (1%).
- 86% of teens believes that music piracy – including copying a CD for a friend or downloading non-promotional music online for free – either is morally acceptable or is not even a moral issue. 8% claim that such activities are morally wrong. (2004)
- 21% of teens said that both CD burning and downloading are morally okay. (2004)
- 65% of teenagers believe music piracy is not a moral issue. (2004)
- Just 10% of Christian teens believe that copying CDs for friends and unauthorized music downloading are morally wrong, compared to 6% of non-born agians (the four-point difference barely qualified as statistically significant). (2004)
- 64% of born again Christian teens believe that copying CDs for friends and unauthorized music is not a moral issue, compared with 66% of non-Christians. (2004)

- 4 out of every 5 teenagers (80%) have engaged in some type of music piracy in the past six months – including making copies of CDs for other people, downloading free music (other than promotions or giveaways), or uploading their own music files to the Internet to share with others. (2004)
- Active church attenders (78%) were just as likely as non-attenders (81%) to engage in piracy; born again Christians (77%) were just as likely as non-born again Christians (81%). (2004)
- 84% of teenagers said they had purchased a CD or cassette from a music store in the past six months. (2004)
- Only 48% of teenagers have ever heard anyone discuss the morality of music downloading. (2004)

Family

- 57% of teens live in the same home with both of their natural parents. (1999)
- 43% talk to family or friends about religious matters in a typical day. (1998)
- 41% talk to family or friends about politics in a typical day. (1998)
- 70% of teens have daily conversations with their mothers about an important issue in their life, compared to the 53% of teens who have a similar type of conversation with their fathers. (1998)

Adults and Teens

- Teens describe themselves as “happy” (92%); “responsible” (91%); “self reliant” (86%); “optimistic about my future” (82%); “trusting of other people” (80%); “very intelligent” (79%); and “physically attractive” (74%). (1998)
- Teens believe adults would describe young people as "lazy" (84%); "rude" (91%); "sloppy" (70%); "dishonest" (65%); and violent (57%). "Friendly" (63%) and "intelligent" (58%) also were chosen by a majority of teens. (1998)
- 47% say their parents have the greatest influence on their spiritual development; 16% listed their church; 8% named peers; 4% said relatives (1998)
- 85% say their parents approve of all or most of their close friends (1998)
- 82% say their parents have been good role models of how to be a person of strong and meaningful faith. (2000)

The Future

Desires teens hold for their future: (1998)

- having a college degree (88%)
- having a comfortable lifestyle (83%)
- having one marriage partner for life (82%)
- having close personal friendships (84%)
- having good physical health (87%)
- having a clear purpose for living (77%)
- living with a high degree of integrity (71%)
- having a close relationship with God (66%)
- influencing other people's lives (56%)
- making a difference in the world (56%)
- having a satisfying sex life with their marriage partner (55%)

- working in a high paying job (55%)
- having children (54%)
- being deeply committed to the Christian faith (50%)
- living close to family and relatives (49%)
- being personally active in a church (43%)
- owning a large home (28%)
- owning the latest household technology and electronic equipment (27%)
- achieving fame or public recognition (18%)

Spirituality

- One-third of all teenagers (34%) as born again – unchanged in several years. (2000)
- The most common church affiliations among teenagers were Catholic (22%), Baptist (16%), and mainline Protestant (19%). Only 4% usually attend a charismatic or Pentecostal church. (2000)
- In 1997, 88% of teens say they are Christian. This number dropped to 82% in 1999.
- Of those who call themselves Christians, 26% said they are “absolutely committed” and 57% said that they were “moderately committed” to the Christian faith. (1999)
- Almost two-thirds of teens (62%) believe that the Bible is totally accurate in all of its teachings. (2000)
- Almost two-thirds describe themselves as “religious” (64%). (1999)
- Three out of every five call themselves “spiritual” (60%). (1999)
- Three out of five say they are “committed Christians” (60%). (1999)
- One out of every three teens (33%) is born again. (1999)
- Only 4% of U.S. teens are evangelicals (1999)
- 28% of teens feel a personal responsibility to tell others about their religious beliefs (56% of born again Christian teens feel this way). (1999)
- 56% of teens feel that their religious faith is very important in their life. (1999)
- Two out of three teens (65%) say that the devil, or Satan, is not a living being but is a symbol of evil. (2000)
- Three out of five teens (61%) agree that “if a person is generally good, or does enough good things for others during their life, they will earn a place in Heaven. (2000)
- Slightly more than half (53%) say that Jesus committed sins while He was on earth. (2000)
- 30% of teens believe that all religions are really praying to the same God, they are just using different names for God. (1999)
- In total, 83% of teens maintain that moral truth depends on the circumstances, and only 6% believe that moral truth is absolute. (2001)
- When it comes to believing in absolute truth, only 9% of born again teens believe in moral absolutes and just 4% of the non-born again teens believe that there are moral absolutes. (2001) *(For more information about the held perspectives on moral truth, see the February 12, 2002 Press Release article titled "Americans Are Most Likely to Base Truth on Feelings." You can access this article on this site, by clicking the respective link on the right-hand side of this page.)*

Religious Activities

- Nearly 9 out of 10 (89%) teens pray weekly. (1999)
- Over half of teens (56%) attend church on a given Sunday. (1999)
- 38% of teens donate some of their own money to a church in a given week. (1999)
- 35% of teens attend Sunday school in a given week. (1999)
- 35% of teens read the Bible each week, not including when they are in church. (1999)
- More than seven out of ten teens are engaged in some church-related effort in a typical week: attending worship services, Sunday school, a church youth group or a small group. (1999)
- 32% of teens attend youth group, other than a small group or Sunday school, each week. (1999)
- 29% of teens attend a small group each week that meets regularly for Bible study, prayer or Christian fellowship, not including Sunday school or a 12-step group. (1999)
- 18% read from a sacred text other than the Bible in a given week. (1999)

Another surprise is that Catholics, whose doctrine defines absence from weekly church services to be a sin, are more likely than Protestants to stray from church events. Some of that gap is attributable to the above average percentage of Hispanics who have dropped out of the local church (41% of them are unchurched).

Young adults are more resistant to church life than are people from older generations. In fact, an analysis of church attendance data covering the past two decades indicates that the two younger generations are more resistant to church life than the Baby Boomers were at a similar point in their development.

Surprisingly, “downscale” individuals (i.e., no college degree, below average household income) also are much more likely than their “upscale” counterparts (i.e., college graduates with above-average household income levels) to stay away from local churches