

“Nones” and “Somethings” Youth Who Stay Religious

According to a recent article in the *LATimes* (2/22/10), a survey conducted by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life found that more than a quarter of Americans age 18-29 claim no religious preference or affiliation, and less than twenty percent attend religious services regularly. This category, the so-called “nones,” has grown steadily over the past two and half decades. Their non-affiliation, however, doesn’t automatically mean they are atheists. Many of them who no longer “belong” still “believe” in God and the power of prayer.

The “nones” are a fascinating group. But there is another group, also about a quarter of that same generation, which is also fascinating—the group of young people who have remained connected to their religious congregations. Let’s call them the “Somethings.” Members of that group could actually grow if more congregations paid proper attention to them. These people are believers who continue to belong. We learned a lot about this group from studies we’ve done. Here’s what we learned.

We sent out a team of researchers—Jewish, Christian and Muslim—to visit synagogues, congregations (Catholic and Protestant) and mosques across the United States that successfully connected with these young people, and spend some time talking with them. The researchers attended their services and conducted extended interviews with them. They discovered that successful religious communities—this is not “rocket science”—valued the presence of young people, created a sense of ownership among them by giving them responsibilities, recognized that their interests in religion were multi-faceted, met them where they were without judging them, offered opportunities for them to be emotionally touched through their services, and acknowledged that there are many ways to God (consigning to hell other folks who believe differently doesn’t fly with them).

We also organized a conference at USC where Jewish, Christian and Muslim scholars and pastors shared their best practices for working with young adults. A rabbi from New York, a Catholic monk from the monastery of Taizé in France, a Muslim who ministers to students at Johns Hopkins, and many others made it clear that it was possible to keep vital religious contact with young people. There is no need to pander or dumb-down services. During the summer months, a monastic community in France, which draws as many as 5,000 young adults a week, doesn’t design special services for youth. Instead, it invites them to join them, the monks, in their prayer and chanting of psalms, to study Scripture and to enter long periods of silent reflection. A rabbi in New York City leads not by reading prayers but by visibly praying in a way that affects the whole congregation—a congregation which itself is deeply involved in works of social justice and inclusion, welcoming members single and divorced, gay and straight, young and old. An imam in Detroit deals with the difficult transition from first and to second generation Muslims by opening the mosque as a place of gathering, where young men and women enjoy pizza, open conversation, midnight basketball, and a chance to learn how to interpret the Qur’an for Muslims living in a pluralistic and democratic society. In all these congregations, most of their youth were not interested in strictly defined

orthodoxies. Rather, they sought community, an experience of prayer and often found centuries-tested spiritual wisdom that drew them to embrace communal practices that drew them out of themselves and increased their outreach and community service. These vital religious communities all found ways to connect with youth.

Instead of lamenting over the growing number of “nones,” religious leaders should learn from those who have connected with their youth, the “somethings.”

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