



2021

The State of Religion & Young People

**NAVIGATING
UNCERTAINTY**

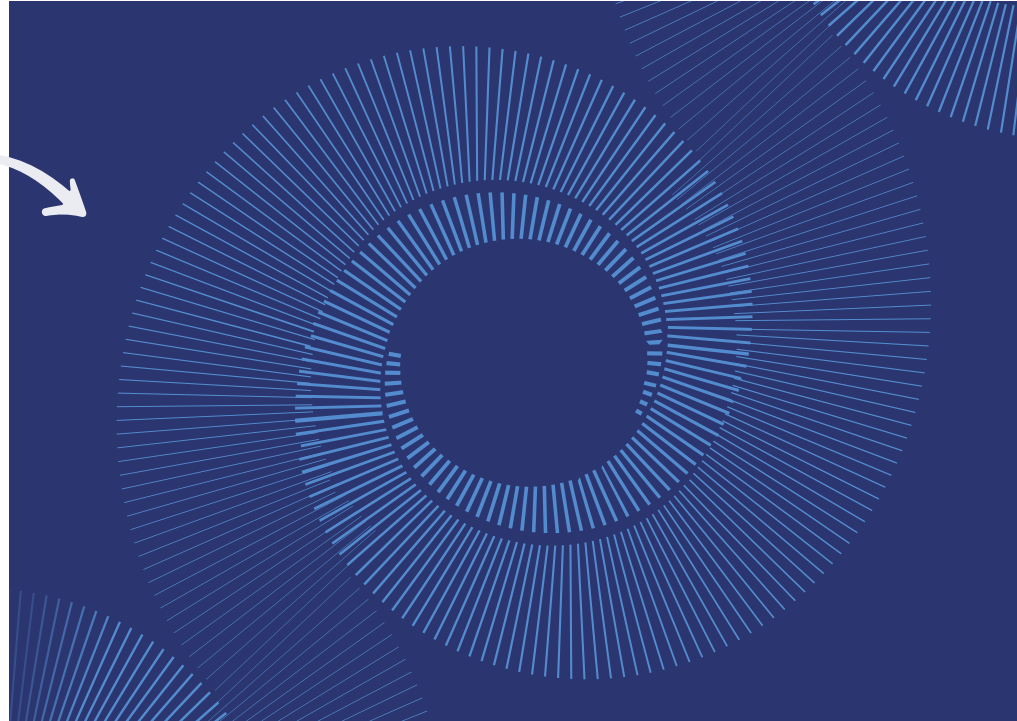
CATHOLIC EDITION

Springtide[®]
RESEARCH INSTITUTE



A note about the cover:

The cover illustrates the feeling of “spiraling” we often colloquially associate with experiences of uncertainty or doubt in life. But for young people, these uncertainties—these spirals—do not indicate doom or dread; they are, like our cover, just the backdrop to daily life. In addition to a symbol of uncertainty, we were inspired by the way spirals represent a kind of unbounded circle. A spiral moves away from its initial, closed form as a circle and toward a freer structure, one that nonetheless takes inspiration from that original shape. It echoes the way young people increasingly resist closed systems of meaning for something more free-flowing and organic. In short, the spiral reminds us of what we call “Faith Unbundled,” a new way of thinking about this generation’s approach to faith that includes making space for variation, personalization, and uncertainty as they journey through their lives.



RESOURCES

All the resources referenced in numbered marginal notes throughout this Catholic edition are compiled in a list both at the end of this book and at springtideresearch.org/ts21-ce-resources. These resources include podcasts and blog posts from young people, conversations Springtide is having with outside experts, deep dives with Dr. Josh Packard, and more.



Mission

Compelled by the urgent desire to listen and attend to the lives of young people (ages 13 to 25), Springtide Research Institute is committed to understanding the distinct ways new generations experience and express community, identity, and meaning.

We exist at the intersection of religious and human experience in the lives of young people. And we're here to listen.

We combine quantitative and qualitative research to reflect and amplify the lived realities of young people as they navigate shifting social, cultural, and religious landscapes. Delivering fresh data and actionable insights, we equip those who care about young people to care better.



A Springtide Tribute.

A Promise. A Pledge.



TO YOU

. . . who are young, full of wonder and possibility. You who are navigating some of life's most important questions and most tumultuous waters. You who are sometimes flourishing and sometimes floundering and oftentimes both. You who are at once being and becoming.

We dedicate our work to your thriving.

We dedicate ourselves to understanding your inner and outer lives.



TO YOU

. . . who are fiercely devoted to young people. You who advocate for and walk alongside young people with steadiness. You who are unwavering amid the waves.

We offer our research as an aid to the role you already play.

We offer ourselves as allies in accompaniment.



AND TO

. . . the waves that crash, the currents that bend and beckon, the dark depths, and the effervescent crests. To this all-important period of life: worthy of considered listening and faithful retelling, worthy of companionship, worthy of care.

We situate our work at this intersection of human and religious experience in the lives of young people: a space of ebb and flow, of calm and chaos, of clear and murky moments.

A space we are dedicated to exploring and engaging



WITH YOU.

1

SAP Dedication

Watch how members of our Springtide Ambassadors Program bring our Springtide Tribute to life with their creative interpretation and filmmaking skills.

springtideresearch.org/ts21-ce-resources

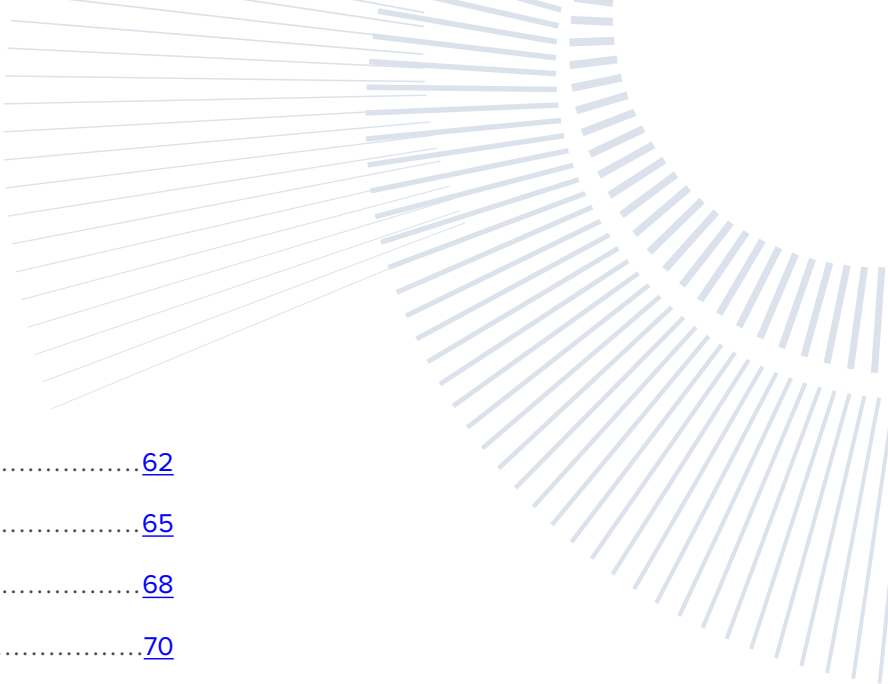
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Now is a time for generosity and creativity. If we're willing to listen, young people's faith can guide us to new ministries that we never expected.

—Katherine Angulo V.

Foreword

What are you discussing as you walk along?

This is the question Jesus poses to the two men on the road to Emmaus.

The State of Religion & Young People 2021, Catholic Edition: Navigating Uncertainty makes clear that young people desire to be listened to. And if we look to Jesus' example on the road to Emmaus, we see that listening can be the beginning of our ministry too.

Christ's model in this story is what young people say they need. In fact, this report makes clear that what they say helps most when going through a difficult time is not advice, answers, or apologetics—it's the presence of someone who *cares to listen*.

Like Jesus' listening on the road, our listening as teachers and ministers must take place on the roads young people are traveling. We must go out to them. We must ask questions first, and then we must be prepared to answer the questions young people will inevitably ask us: *Why do you stay? Why do you still believe?*

When I receive these questions, I have the chance to convey my joy, my gratitude, my sense of service, my sense of fulfillment. I can share the history of God's action in my life—not just salvation history, but family history, the stories of my community, and the ways God is alive.

This report provides clues about why young people don't stay or join or believe. We see that young people feel their doubt is not welcome in places of faith. We see that they don't feel free to ask questions, despite having so many. And every Catholic contributor to this edition—particularly in reflecting on the hallmarks of Faith Unbundled—emphasizes the need to create spaces where doubt or questions or curiosity are not treated as threats to faith but as opportunities to rediscover the richness of our faith. The need is urgent.

It is urgent for young people *and* for us, as ministers and leaders. To refuse to go out of our spaces *and into their spaces* is to risk undermining our calling. Catholics are called to live their faith outside the walls of churches. The COVID-19 pandemic has made responding to this call more urgent than ever.

I know Catholic ministers feel exhausted today. Many are struggling in the face of declining religious affiliation, a lack of resources, and burnout. But these realities are not unique to Catholics. And it is in the hardest moments—which is the kind of moment we are in right now—that saints emerge.

Young people need something new. Now is not the time to keep doing things as usual. It's the time to talk about what young people need to talk about.

We are not here to “win” their membership; this is not a competition. These are their hearts and their lives—and ours. This is our calling. We need a sincere intent to get messy, to walk with them, and to share with them openly how God has touched our hearts.

Now is a time for generosity and creativity. If we're willing to listen, young people's faith can guide us to new ministries that we never expected.

We can begin by asking, ***What are you discussing as you walk along?***



Katherine Angulo V. is the Program Director of the Thriving in Ministry Initiative at the McGrath Institute at the University of Notre Dame, where she works to prepare pastoral leaders for long-term ministry in the Church and directs the Bishop John M. D'Arcy Program in Priestly Renewal. Born in Mexico and raised in Colombia, Katherine has a bachelor's degree in modern languages and a master's degree in pastoral ministries. Before coming to the McGrath Institute, she spent more than two decades in youth ministry, including serving as the Associate Director of Youth Ministry at the Office of Formation and Discipleship for the Archdiocese of Atlanta for four years.

From Springtide's Executive Director

In the 2020 article “Science Explains Why Uncertainty Is So Hard on Our Brains,” Markham Heid discusses the science behind uncertainty, explaining that it is at the source of anxiety disorders and panic attacks and may even be the basis of fear. Heid interviews psychologist Jack Nitschke who puts it plainly: “Uncertainty lays the groundwork for anxiety because anxiety is always future-oriented.”

Uncertainty and change are hallmarks of being young—so much lies ahead, so many decisions are faced for the first time—but this past year has brought unprecedented challenges. Uncertainty has been the air we breathe. For young people, the already-uncertain aspects of life have been amplified. Heid notes that “uncertainty acts like rocket fuel for worry; it causes people to see threats everywhere they look, and . . . it makes them more likely to react emotionally in response to those threats.”

At Springtide, we listen to young people, ages 13 to 25, and amplify their voices through quantitative and qualitative sociological research. This year we knew we had to focus on uncertainty, including the role it plays in faith

and the ways and extent to which young people dealing with uncertainty or difficulty turn to faith or religion. **This special edition of *The State of Religion & Young People 2021: Navigating Uncertainty* highlights the stories, voices, and data of Catholic young people and compares this demographic with the general population of young people Springtide reported on in the original edition of this report.** So who do young people, including Catholic young people, turn to in times of stress or difficulty?

Spoiler alert: Young people in general aren't turning to religion, at least not in the traditional sense. But the majority of young people nonetheless tell us they are religious. And our data suggest good news: Religious young people are faring better than the nonreligious in all aspects of their well-being, including when navigating uncertainty.

And although the majority of all young people Springtide surveyed consider themselves at least slightly religious (71%) or spiritual (78%), most of the general population isn't turning to religious institutions in times of difficulty. This is despite the fact that these institutions across

the board have rituals, beliefs, practices, and communities that aim, in part, to help humans cope with uncertainty.

Why, at this highly uncertain time in history, are young people bypassing religious institutions for other ways of coping amid uncertainty? What is the reason for this disconnect, what can be done to bridge the divide, and how might communities (religious or not) adapt and grow to better serve the needs of today's young people?

Young people are increasingly less likely to be engaged with institutional forms of religious expression. Decades-long trends continue: for a large and growing segment of young people, religiosity is increasingly decoupled from institutions, even as they express high levels of religious belief, practice, and identity. This is true among young Catholics as well. Forty-four percent of young people who identify as Catholic also say they are not a member of a religious or spiritual community. Over 40% don't think they need a spiritual community at all.

Faith Unbundled, a concept we explore in this report, describes the way young people are constructing the elements of faith by turning to many religious and nonreligious sources. For the original report, we asked expert practitioners—religious, secular, and

spiritual—committed to the flourishing of young people to weigh in on best practices for supporting this emerging, unbundled path of religious exploration. For this special edition, we've added commentary from four Catholic practitioners.

The State of Religion & Young People 2021, Catholic Edition: Navigating Uncertainty explores reasons for the disconnect between young people and religious institutions in times of uncertainty. A lot has shifted in the religious, cultural, and social landscape. We have studied the landscape, listened closely to the experiences of young people, and integrated the perspectives of practitioners.

One thing is abundantly clear. This youngest generation, Gen Z, is pressing forward, exploring the boundaries of their faith, constructing meaning, navigating uncertainty, and encountering the divine in new ways. The only question that remains is whether you'll be there to guide them.



Josh Packard, PhD

As you read, connect with us [@WeAreSpringtide](#) on Facebook, Instagram, or Twitter, sign up for our e-newsletter at springtideresearch.org, or send us an email to let us know how you're helping young people navigate uncertainty.





Introduction

Welcome to *The State of Religion & Young People 2021, Catholic Edition: Navigating Uncertainty*.

This Catholic edition builds on *The State of Religion & Young People 2021: Navigating Uncertainty*, a report based on a full year of research, over 10,000 surveys featuring questions about all young people's beliefs, practices, behaviors, relationships, and this year's focus: ways young people are navigating uncertainty. In addition to surveying, we conducted qualitative interviews with young people along the same themes, listening for the nuance that emerges only through conversation. In the Catholic edition, we highlight the voices, stories, and data representing Catholic young people ages 13 to 25, as well as the contributions of experts and practitioners who offer their wisdom on the care of young Catholics.

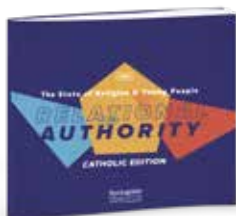
Our passion for listening to young people extends beyond quantitative and qualitative research. We invite more young people to participate in our work and weigh in on our research. Our Springtide Ambassadors Program brings a cohort of young people together with the Springtide team to discuss their lived experience in light of reports, to formulate research questions, to interpret and discuss data, and to provide insight, often in unforeseen ways, through wide-ranging conversations.

To learn more about our research methodology, turn to page 98 in the appendix of this report.

METHODOLOGY

We release a season of our *Voices of Young People Podcast* to augment each report with reflections from young people. Finally, Springtide interns, who serve in many areas—research, publicity, publishing, and community engagement—help us assess our work as an institute, and they contribute their own insights and wisdom to this endeavor. This combination of data and lived experiences enriches everything you read from Springtide.

Last year we published the first of these reports, *The State of Religion & Young People 2020: Relational Authority*, and shortly after, we released the Catholic edition of that 2020 report. In those reports, we introduced the concept of Relational Authority, a framework for building bonds of trust amid new cultural, social, and religious realities. We recognize the continued importance of this framework, especially the need for adults in the lives of young people to practice integrity, transparency, listening, care, and expertise in a year in which so many young people expressed broken trust, political polarization, a sense of isolation, and more. The 2021 reports—the original and Catholic editions—build on that framework.



› Learn more about Relational Authority by downloading the free report at springtideresearch.org/research/the-state-of-religion-young-catholics.

After the turmoil and tensions brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, the murder of George Floyd and the global protests that followed, and the lead-up and aftermath of the 2020 US presidential election (to name a few issues), Springtide knew there was a need for a better understanding about how young people, including Catholic young people, navigate and cope with uncertainty. How can trusted adults—including ministers, teachers, diocesan leaders, and parents—support young people during times of uncertainty, whether that uncertainty is brief or long-term? Note that we say it's the trusted adults' role to *support*: not fix, not solve, not force certainty where uncertainty arises.

We highlight Springtide resources throughout this report—the kind that young people create and contribute to in podcasts and blog posts—as well as conversations we're having with outside experts, deep dives with Dr. Josh Packard, and more. All the resources referenced in numbered marginal notes throughout this report are compiled in a list both at the end of this book and at

springtideresearch.org/ts21-ce-resources.

RESOURCES

Over and over in our surveys, interviews, and even in our reading and conversations within the wider social sciences, we see that young people, even Catholic young people, aren't looking for quick fixes to complex issues. They don't necessarily expect immediate resolution or certainty. Colette, a young mother who identifies as Baptist, told Springtide how she responds to overwhelming, difficult, or uncertain experiences:



I like to shut everything off for a moment. So I'll either meditate, I'll do yoga, I'll listen to music, like self-care, maybe take a bath, or just go on a walk, anything to stop thinking about whatever stressed me out. I know that doesn't fix the problem, but it does help momentarily.

—Colette, 23

2

Watch Dr. Josh Packard and Ryan Burge discuss the “nones” of religion, and young people who are growing into religion.

springtideresearch.org/ts21-ce-resources

WATCH

Like Colette, many young people don't feel the need to “fix the problem” immediately. Sometimes they just need to bear the problem, breathe deeply, or take a walk during a difficult time. A little over half (54%) of Catholic young people ages 13 to 25 tell us, “I am comfortable with not having all the answers.” Sometimes they are just trying to endure the uncertainty if it's not possible to escape or resolve it right away; often it's not. And for many young people, this insight is the first clue about *why* they don't turn to religion when navigating uncertain or difficult times:

52% of **young Catholics** ages 13 to 25 told us,

58% of **young people** ages 13 to 25 told us,

“I do not like to be told answers about faith and religion; I'd rather discover my own answers.”

48% of **young Catholics** ages 13 to 25 told us,

54% of **young people** ages 13 to 25 told us,

“Religious communities try to fix my problem, instead of just being there for me.”

They aren't looking for a solution to uncertainty, which is not only a fact of life but also a fact of adolescence and young adulthood, as well as a vivid fact of our current cultural moment. Young people are looking for relationships built on presence and listening, not advice and fixing. About half of young people (51% of all young people surveyed and 47% of the Catholics surveyed) told us that the most useful or important thing a person did to help them during uncertainty was to “just let [them] talk.” Ally, a high school senior and a nondenominational Christian, has several adults she can talk to. At the heart of these relationships is wholehearted trust:

I talked to my mom about it. I talked to my therapist. I talked to my college counselor and some advisors at my school that I trust wholeheartedly. I just, I try to talk to people who I know have the best interest for me when it comes to, like, my future, because sometimes making decisions by yourself is hard. With these kinds of decisions, no one can make them for me, but I like having feedback from others who care.

—Ally, 17

Instead of people who make the decision for them, young people look for people with whom they can discuss big decisions and feel empowered to make the right one. Instead of solutions, they look for relationships with people who will see them through to the other side of uncertainty, whatever that other side looks like.

Religious leaders often already know what this kind of presence amid uncertainty can and does look like: think of the ministry of accompaniment in the Christian tradition, the work of Muslim chaplains in hospital, university, or military settings, or the Jewish practice of sitting shiva with the bereaved. These types of rituals or practices are embedded deep within all kinds of traditions. Often they just need to be accessed and offered in new ways. On page 22, we highlight an innovative approach to campus ministry called culturally informed ministry, as just one example of many ways Catholics are taking seriously this practice of presence—and the ways they are meeting Gen Z where they're at in their spiritual journeys.

To be effective, trusted guides will do well to understand and honor the new ways Gen Z is navigating questions of uncertainty, specifically the way many young people's religious seeking is unbundled.

3

Watch Dr. Josh Packard explain why a sociological approach is needed to navigate religious identity among young people.

springtideresearch.org/ts21-ce-resources

WATCH

A CLOSER LOOK

In this report, you'll find three special features, called "A Closer Look," that dive deeper into young people's experience of the COVID-19 pandemic, the disconnect between religious institutions and young people, and some thinkers' engagement with the concept of an "unbundled" faith.

A CATHOLIC LOOK

Throughout this Catholic edition, you'll find data, voices, stories, and insights from Catholic young people as well as Catholic practitioners and experts.

In Part I of *The State of Religion & Young People 2021, Catholic Edition*

we explore the disconnect between young people and religious institutions, even amid times of uncertainty. This means investigating the experience of uncertainty *and* the ways young people, even Catholic young people, are already responding to those experiences. In order to better understand this disconnect, we look at the reasons young people report *not* turning to religious institutions during difficult times, and also examples of the times they *do* depend on their religious faith, communities, identity, or practices. **Throughout Part 1, we report data from young people in general as well as Catholics in particular, out of which a portrait emerges of a new type of faith, one that is not bound to one tradition or institution or community but is unbundled.**

In Part II, we explore Faith Unbundled: what it is, how it relates to uncertainty, and why it matters for religious leaders today. *Curiosity*, *wholeness*, *connection*, and *flexibility* are the hallmarks of Faith Unbundled—that is, they are the qualities that guide how young people, even Catholic young people, are pursuing and discerning religious questions.

Part II presents reflections from experts who witness and respond to Faith Unbundled in their own contexts:

CURIOSITY

Insights from Rev. Sumi Loundon Kim
A Catholic Look from Dr. Natalia Imperatori-Lee

WHOLENESS

Insights from Nima Dahir
A Catholic Look from Steven Ellair

CONNECTION

Insights from Chris Stedman
A Catholic Look from Br. Armand Alcazar, FSC, PhD

FLEXIBILITY

Insights from Rabbi Joshua Stanton
A Catholic Look from Becca Meager

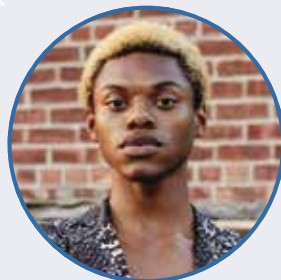
Each of these eight experts offers insights rooted in expertise and experience about how best to serve young people in light of this emerging spirituality.

Season 5: *The Voices of Young People Podcast*

Season 5 of *The Voices of Young People Podcast* features ten young people, more than half with Catholic backgrounds, telling us about their experiences of faith, doubt, and uncertainty. Listen to the episodes at springtideresearch.org/podcast.



Abby, 24, Michigan



Amethyst, 23, Illinois



Christian, 22, Pennsylvania



Daniel, 22, North Carolina



Elyse, 15, Massachusetts



Josué, 25, California



Lily, 15, Minnesota



Lucy, 21, Pennsylvania



Saad, 26, Illinois



Zaina, 16, Massachusetts

In this season, we invited young people to tell us what “faith” means to them, including why or whether they would use that term to describe their inner life. We asked where they feel most connected to their center of meaning, why and how they’ve come to identify with this faith or set of values, and the ways they’ve relied on it as they navigate life’s joys, difficulties, and uncertainties.



PART I

NAVIGATING UNCERTAINTY







Facing Life's Biggest Questions

Young people are facing some of life's biggest questions: Who am I? What should I do with my life? What commitments do I want to make now that could alter the course of my life: commitments to another person, a school program, a career path, a new city? Young people deal daily with questions about how and who to be, where and to what to belong, how and whether to believe—in Sikhism or socialism, Tik Tok influencers or media talking heads. They are perpetually navigating major decisions, and with each decision they are building the persons they will become. But even once a young person begins to feel settled about who they are or what they believe, they feel additional pressure about whether to show that to the world. Elsa, a young Hindu woman in her senior year of high school, offers an enlightening observation:

Everyone is just trying to live their lives to show a certain face out to the world, not who they truly are or their personality. They can be battling a million different things and nobody will know, and they don't want to show anyone because they want to keep a certain persona up to the entire world.

—Elsa, 18



Young Catholics mirror their peers in this regard. Many of the major questions they're asking have uncertainty at their heart. Indeed, adolescence and young adulthood are marked by transitions and changes, a perpetual state of not knowing what's next. This uncertainty was even more pronounced in the past year. As we wrote in *The New Normal: 8 Ways to Care for Gen Z in a Post-Pandemic World*: "For young people between the ages of 13 and 25, it's not uncommon for every year to be different from the next. There's no 'normal' to return to. [In 2020,] their world turned upside down just as they were starting to find their footing."

Elsa, the young woman quoted on the previous page, wonders if faith anchors other young people who might feel lost when navigating such major questions or feeling pressure to keep up a persona:

I feel like having a faith or having something that can ground them to earth and to the very ground that they're standing on can help them get through a lot of things. And if they really believe that doing something with their faith works, maybe it can help them get through a lot of dark times.

—Elsa, 18

But our data show that even though the majority of young people in general identify as religious (71%) or spiritual (78%), most aren't turning to religion—whether religious communities, leaders, practices, or beliefs—to help guide them in moments of uncertainty. This is true even of the young people who tell us they attend, believe in, or identify with a particular religious tradition. Of the young people in general who identified as "very religious," less than half (40%) told us they found connecting with their faith community helpful during challenging or uncertain times; only 23% of those who consider themselves moderately religious found this helpful. Only 1 in 5 young people in general agree with the statement "I use faith as a guide when I am confused about things."

4

Watch some of Springtide's ambassadors discuss returning to campus in the fall and what the pandemic has meant for them.

springtideresearch.org/ts21-ce-resources

WATCH



87%

of young Catholics say they are **religious**.



85%

of young Catholics say they are **spiritual**.

ONLY
26%

of young Catholics agree with the statement "***I use faith as a guide when I am confused about things.***"

A CATHOLIC LOOK

Exploring Effective Ministries for Young Catholic Latines

Young Latines are increasing in both number and importance among Catholics in the United States. Sixteen million US-born Latine Catholics live in the United States currently. Among second-generation Latines, only 6% are Spanish-dominant when it comes to language. That number drops to virtually zero among third-generation Latines. This tells us that much like the rest of their Gen Z counterparts (the “most diverse” generation in history), Latine young people are greatly diverse as well—a reality that calls for an equally nuanced approach to ministry if their needs are to be met.

In 2021, Springtide undertook a joint project with John DeCostanza, Director of University Ministry at Dominican University, to better understand the needs of young Latine Catholics on college campuses. John and his team are pioneering an innovative approach to creating belonging, which they call *culturally informed ministry*. They asked us to help them understand any important cultural nuances that might show up in our *Noticed-Named-Known* framework for creating belonging, a framework we first uncovered and outlined in our 2020 report *Belonging: Reconnecting America’s Loneliest Generation*. A full report of our joint findings with Dominican University will be available in 2022, but we offer a sneak peek at three key insights here.

KEY INSIGHT—ONE

For young Latines, relating to others based on shared experiences and values fosters a greater sense of belonging than does shared ethnicity.

Predominantly Latine spaces can actually feel quite alienating, particularly for second-generation Latines who do not speak Spanish or do not strongly identify with their parents’ country of origin.

Young Latines feel more welcome in spaces comprised of people with similar experiences and values as them, rather than spaces comprised of people of the same ethnicity or race alone. For example, in our surveys and interviews, young people told us they feel welcome in second-generation spaces, regardless of the ethnicities represented in those spaces, because other second-generation young people can relate to their experiences of trying to speak their parents' native language, translating documents for their parents, and feeling “*ni de aquí ni de allá*” (“*neither from here nor from there*”), which is an experience common among second-generation young people, not unique to just young Latines.

Young Latines also feel more welcome in spaces made up of people with whom they are politically and socially aligned. For example, one interviewee, a 22-year-old student named Sara, stated that she didn't enjoy being in predominantly Latine spaces because she valued a greater diversity of perspectives. Yet she stated: “There is a line between having people from different backgrounds who respect each other and then having people from very contrasting backgrounds that clash. Those are also very difficult spaces to be in.” Many other participants echoed this sentiment, stating that more than shared ethnorace, shared social and political values are precursors to belonging.

KEY INSIGHT—TWO

Spaces intentionally created for young Latines by predominantly white leaders can feel symbolic rather than genuine when institutional support does not lead to substantive and meaningful change.

All the young Latines we interviewed reported experiencing prejudice or discrimination because of their ethnoracial identity. Because of that, they generally feel wary and weary of efforts by predominantly white leaders to serve Latine youth.

Season 6: *Latine Voices*

Season 6 of *The Voices of Young People Podcast* features five Latine young people. Listen to the episodes at springtideresearch.org/podcast.



Blanca, 20,
California



Brian, 22,
California



Destina, 25,
Utah



Gabriela, 24,
California



Ryan, 22,
New York



Enjoy this bonus season of our podcast with the release of *The State of Religion & Young People, Catholic Edition: Navigating Uncertainty*.

For example, Sara, the 22-year-old student quoted in Key Insight—one, stated: “If an institution tried to make things bilingual or speak Spanish, *I would wonder why*. If it was done at my school, where everyone is predominantly white and predominantly English-speaking, I would really question if there is a **demonstrated need** for this. So, what is the real reasoning? And if it’s because you want to seem more inclusive and multicultural, *I think there are more pressing changes, like curriculum.*”

When we asked young Latines about institutional actions that make them feel genuinely supported, four characteristics emerged:

- 🌀 Responds to **demonstrated needs**
- 🌀 Leads to **meaningful** change
- 🌀 Assumes **diverse** experiences
- 🌀 Aligns with personal **values**

🌀 KEY INSIGHT—THREE

Young Latines associate belonging with people rather than institutions. Being known and accepted by the people who make up those institutions is key.

When we asked young Latines how institutions inform their sense of belonging, many stated that belonging is not about an institution at all, but rather is about the relationships they have. In this, Latines are the same as other demographic groups. But unlike other young people, Latines’ sense of belonging correlates positively with participation in religious gatherings. When we distinguished between young Latines who go to church weekly, monthly, and never, we saw that social isolation decreases as participation in religious gatherings increases. For example, 58% of young Latines feel as if no one understands them. This drops 9 percentage points, to 49%, among those who go to Mass once a month, and 14 percentage points, to 44%, among young Latines who go to Mass once a week.

However, while 77% of young Latines state they are at least slightly religious, only 30% attend religious gatherings regularly. And while many Latines—both affiliated and unaffiliated—engage in

personal religious or spiritual activities, like art, meditation, and prayer, over half (54%) say they feel they don't need a religious or spiritual community.



77% of young Catholic Latines state they are **at least slightly religious**. **Only 30%** attend religious gatherings regularly.

So, what would it take for young Latines to feel welcome in a religious or spiritual space? When we asked this question, we heard that acceptance is key. For example, Mari, 19, told us she stopped going to church as soon as she came out as gay to her mom. Her mom told her she would no longer force her into a space in which Mari is not accepted.

Fernanda, 18, told us that simply being invited and going to church regularly wouldn't make her feel more connected. Instead, she told us that she would feel welcome in a religious or spiritual community that "allowed everyone the space and respect to believe as much as they want to and to transition into that space at their own pace."



This joint study, undertaken collaboratively with Dominican University's campus ministry program and Springtide Research Institute, is supported with funding from a private foundation. The insights named here are a small part of the full findings and frameworks, which will be published in 2022.

For more information about this forthcoming report and the corresponding season of The Voices of Young People Podcast, visit springtideresearch.org/cultural-bounds-belonging.

NOTE

As meaning and understanding evolve over time, the language we use evolves too. In the past 20 years, many terms have been used to describe a person of Latin American descent, including *Latino*, *Latin@*, *Latinx*, and, more recently, *Latine*. Like all new words, these terms are contested. At Springtide we are committed to using the terms that reflect young people's values or that they themselves prefer. In this report, we use *Latine*, a gender-neutral term for a person of Latin American descent, because it is inclusive of all young people regardless of gender identity and works well with the Spanish, Portuguese, and English languages. There are other ways of naming this demographic, even in the context of this report, as our work as researchers also relies on certain standardized terms when it comes to collecting demographic information through surveys.

Of the young Catholics who identified as “very religious,” **only 31%** told us they found connecting with their faith community helpful.

Only 20% of young Catholics who identified as “moderately religious” found this helpful.

Only 10% of young people ages 13 to 25 told us that a faith leader reached out to them personally during the pandemic.

For young Catholics, that number was even lower: **only 6%** of young Catholics say a faith leader reached out to them during the pandemic.

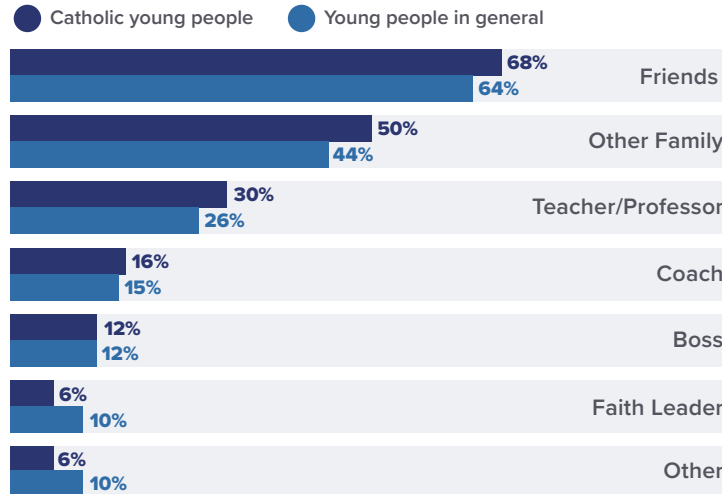


Of the young people who identified as “very religious,” **less than half (40%)** told us they found connecting with their faith community helpful during challenging or uncertain times.

By and large, young people, even young Catholics who describe themselves as “very religious,” aren’t turning to religious institutions, practices, services, or leaders in times of uncertainty. And whether or not religious leaders are *trying* to reach young people, our data show that they aren’t reaching them. When we asked young people about their experience one year into the pandemic, only 10% of young people ages 13 to 25 told us that a faith leader reached out to them personally during the year.


If anyone outside of your home has reached out to you personally, who was it?

Respondents could select more than one option.



Percentages are approximate due to rounding.

Our data show a clear disconnect between young people and religious institutions. But even with this disconnect, our data don't reveal a loss of interest in spiritual and religious questions among young people, or even a loss of faith.



Religious traditions have long-established ways of dealing with uncertainty and upheaval. Perhaps more than any other modern institution, religion is unafraid of life's biggest questions; indeed, many religious traditions, rituals, beliefs, and practices face these questions head-on. Faith is, in a sense, a way of responding to the experience of not knowing what comes next, in both big and small matters. And yet, young people (even those who identify as religious or spiritual) are *not* turning to those traditions and rituals during personal times of uncertainty.

In *The State of Religion & Young People 2020, Catholic Edition: Relational Authority*, we reported that programs alone—even highly engaging and well-attended programs—are not enough to give young people a sense of trust or belonging within an organization. Young people need trusted mentors who practice listening, integrity, transparency, care, and expertise. Our *New Normal* guide makes it clear that young people dealing with adolescence and young adulthood amid an unprecedented pandemic didn't turn to religion to help navigate pressing questions or concerns. **Sixteen percent of young people in general reported turning to “no one” when feeling overwhelmed or unsure about something. Young people in general reported turning to “someone from [their] faith community” at the same low rate (16%).**

Nearly 1 in 5 young people in general (18%) told Springtide they lost the practice of attending religious or spiritual services during the pandemic, and about the same percentage of respondents (20%) said they were happy that this connection was lost. Though half of young Catholics say they watched at least one religious or spiritual service online (50%), very few young Catholics say they found joy (2%) or hope (6%) in these services. Just 4% say they hope virtual services continue after the pandemic.

5

Watch Dr. Josh Packard and Derrick Scott III talk about how non-white and queer young people are navigating church.

springtideresearch.org/ts21-ce-resources

WATCH

18% of young Catholics say **they turned to someone in [their] faith community**, while **14%** say they “**turned to no one.**”

24% of young Catholics told Springtide they **lost the practice of attending religious or spiritual services during the pandemic.**

20% of young Catholics said they **were happy this connection was lost.**

A CLOSER LOOK COVID-19

The uncertainty and instability brought on by the pandemic hit many young people hard. It was not just a road bump on an otherwise mapped-out route, but an abrupt detour that upended their expectations and plans.

Many young people have missed out on developmental markers and moments that are both formative and singular; once missed, they're gone.


6

Read about these findings in our Social Distance Study.

springtideresearch.org/ts21-ce-resources



READ



Almost 3 out of 5 (57% of young people in general; 58% of Catholics) told us, **“When the pandemic is over, I expect a lot will be different, in mostly disappointing ways.”**

In April 2020, as the spread of COVID-19 was causing increasing disruption in the United States, Springtide conducted research that demonstrated, even early on, the difficulties young people faced due to social distancing and sheltering in place.

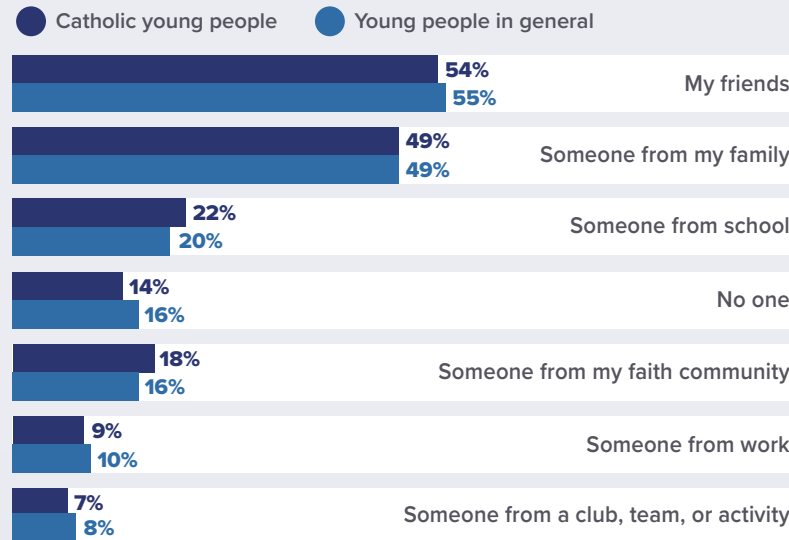
Nearly a year later, in February 2021, and nearly a year into living with varying degrees of restriction, Springtide spoke with and surveyed young people again, this time about living in and emerging from the pandemic.

The cost of the COVID-19 pandemic on relationships—with both people and institutions—was hard on young people.

A large proportion of young people in general (42%) say no one outside their home reached out to them to see if they were alright, leaving nearly half feeling isolated (47%) and without anyone to talk to about how they were feeling or what they were going through (47%). Though many young people spent lots of time at home around family members and roommates, 59% said that even while living with others, they still felt alone.

When you have felt overwhelmed and didn't know what to do about something, who did you turn to for help?

Respondents could select more than one option.



Percentages approximate due to rounding.

Nearly 70% (66% of young people in general and 68% of young Catholics in particular) tell us that after the pandemic they “won’t take for granted relationships and opportunities the way [they] did before.”

> **38%** of young Catholics say **no one outside their home reached out to them to see if they were alright.**

50% felt isolated and almost as many (**49%**) were **without someone to talk to.**

62% of young Catholics said that **even while living with others, they still felt alone.**

59%

of young Catholics
**didn't feel the government
 did its best to protect people
 during the pandemic.**

Young Catholics had low
 confidence about **feeling safe
 in church (23%)** and at
spiritual gatherings (11%).

64%

of young Catholics say
**it will take time to rebuild
 trust where it was lost.**



Download the free report:
[springtideresearch.org/
 research/the-new-normal](https://springtideresearch.org/research/the-new-normal)



A majority of young people in general (65%) didn't feel the government did its best to protect people during the pandemic. Young people had low confidence about feeling safe in church (18%) and spiritual gatherings (11%) during the pandemic. Over half (57%) of young people say it will take time to rebuild trust where it was lost.

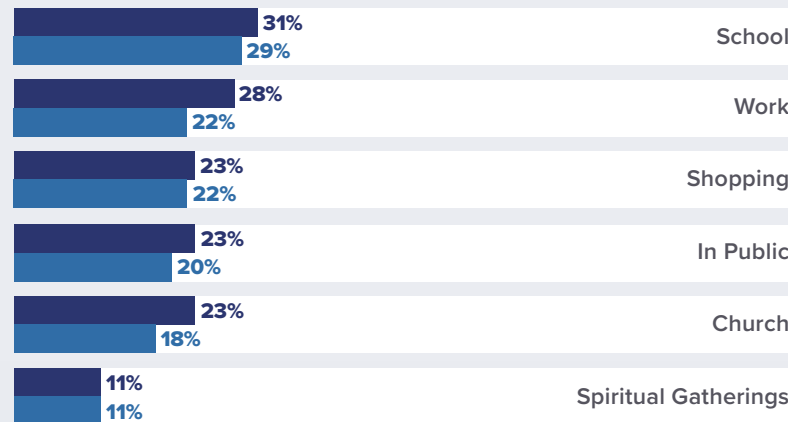


Over half (57%) of young people in general
 say **it will take time to rebuild trust where it was lost.**

Spaces where young people say they feel safe during the pandemic:

Respondents could select more than one option.

● Catholic young people ● Young people in general



Percentages are approximate due to rounding.

Trusted guides can help young people make sense of their pandemic experiences and adjust to life after the pandemic. In *The New Normal: 8 Ways to Care for Gen Z in a Post-Pandemic World*, we offer eight research-informed ways that caring adults can help young people emerge from this season of upheaval and uncertainty.

The pandemic prompted Springtide's initial look at the way young people navigate uncertainty, and we've continued to explore this theme. We recognize that uncertainty is at the heart of adolescence and young adulthood, and also that responding to uncertainty is at the heart of many religions.

What does Springtide mean by *religious*?

For Springtide, the term *religious* is not a reference to a particular creed, code, or system, but rather a term that captures and categorizes a wide array of diverse impulses, questions, and connections. These are the impulses that inspire young people to pursue community, identity, meaning, and various practices. And we recognize that these impulses are increasingly finding expression in ways that may not seem overtly religious because they are not connected directly to a specific tradition or institution. Instead, the desire for meaning may show up in careers, club sports, or creative hobbies. Young people find outlets for justice, faith, or purpose in politics, volunteering, nature, and close relationships.

While we see the value in any activity that promotes the flourishing of young people, we also recognize the unique value traditional religion often can and does offer. From a sociological standpoint (as opposed to a theological one), we see the way religions, across creed and culture, can offer frames for living well, with careful consideration for congruence between the inner and outer life. We acknowledge the historical significance of religion for navigating times of uncertainty as well as questions of meaning, identity, and community, and it is from this starting point that we begin thinking about the ways young people are (or are not) engaging religion today.

At Springtide, we recognize the natural ways traditional religious institutions might be able to show up for young people in these seasons of upheaval. But we also know only 29% of young people in general who tell us they are actively part of a spiritual community also reached out to that community during a difficulty.

Why aren't young people, even Catholic young people, turning to traditional religious rituals, practices, and communities when they navigate difficult or uncertain times?



Only 21%

of Catholic young people who tell us **they are actively part of a spiritual community also reached out to that community during a difficulty.**

A CLOSER LOOK

The Disconnect

We wanted to find out why young people, even religious and spiritual young people, aren't turning to religion or traditional religious practices, beliefs, or communities when navigating difficulties. So we asked them: Why not?

Why, when facing uncertain and difficult times, do you not participate in religious practices or turn to religious communities?

Percentage of young people who agreed with each statement:

● Catholic young people ● Young people in general

"I don't believe some of the things I hear talked about at religious gatherings."



"I do not like to be told answers about faith and religion. I'd rather discover my own answers."



"I don't feel like I can be my full self in a religious organization."



"I'm not sure how to get connected to a new faith community."



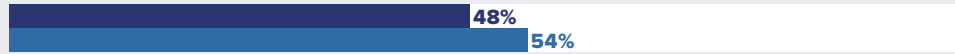
"Religion, faith, or religious leaders will try to give me answers, but I am looking for something else."



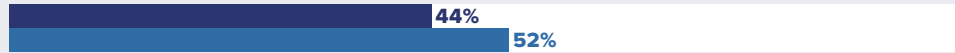
"Because other things help me find meaning in my life, I don't need a faith community."



“Religious communities try to fix my problem instead of just being there for me.”



“Religious communities are rigid and restrictive, and that’s not helpful to me.”



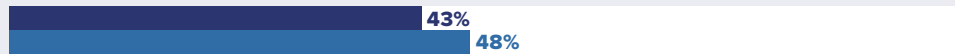
“Because I have other communities, I don’t need a faith community.”



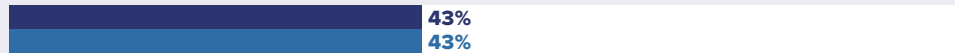
“Religion is about certainty and doesn’t welcome uncertainty, doubt, or asking questions.”



“Religious gatherings focus on topics that make me uncomfortable.”



“I don’t feel close enough to anyone that has a religion or faith to ask about it or share my thoughts.”



“I don’t trust religion, faith, or religious leaders in those kinds of organizations.”



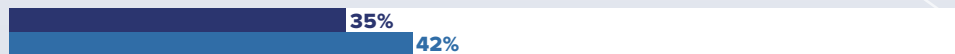
“I don’t feel safe within religious or faith institutions.”



“I don’t think religion, faith, or religious leaders will care about the things I want to talk about or bring up during times of uncertainty.”



“I did not do anything with religion as a child.”



Percentages are approximate due to rounding.

By no means is this list exhaustive, but it begins to demonstrate the complex and nuanced discernment behind young people’s reluctance to seek out traditional religious responses when faced with uncertainty—even for those young people who identify as Catholic. While it is tempting to assume the reason for the disconnect is as simple as assuming young people find worship services boring, in reality young people are taking seriously the weight of belief, the kind of response they receive when asking questions or expressing doubt, the example set by other people in the community, the difficulty of forging deep connections with a new community, and more.

More data can help unpack the list of reasons above.

50%

of young Catholics say they **don’t know how to get connected to a faith community even if they’d like to.**



51% of young people in general say they **don’t know how to get connected to a faith community even if they’d like to.**



Religion is something to help manage stress and uncertainty. Well, I guess it hasn’t really been that for me because I don’t have, or I haven’t found, a church that I like. But for my brother, religion has really helped him with everything. Like, he loves hearing that people have been praying for him and stuff, and it makes him feel a lot better. So I feel like religion definitely helps some people in tough times, but I just haven’t found that yet.

—Jesse, 18

Only 16% of young Catholics say they trust organized religion completely. That’s only a 2% higher rate of trust than the general population of young people (14%), which includes atheists, agnostics, and young people who identify as “nothing in particular.” Our 2020 report on Relational Authority shows that a lack of integrity in relationships diminishes trust, and the same theme emerged in our 2021 interviews.

ALMOST
50% of young people in general tell us they don’t turn to faith communities due to lack of trust in the people, beliefs, and systems of organized religion.



I think I’m farther away from a religious faith because I don’t . . . I guess I just didn’t like how my mom used it as a way to not take responsibility for her actions.

—Desiree, 22

Viola is a young Christian woman who nonetheless recognizes the way religion can harm instead of help. With 39% of young people in general telling us they’ve been harmed by religion, and 45% telling us they don’t feel safe when it comes to religion, this is a significant experience among today’s young people, even today’s religious young people.



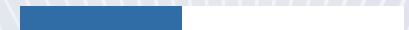
I have been exposed to people who’ve completely left the church because they’ve been hurt by it. And I’ve also visited some churches that I have really, really loved and resonated with, but I’ve also been really hurt by some, some churches as a whole, not just people and some of the basic beliefs that exclude other people or don’t necessarily teach love. So I’ve had a really hard time with the Christian church, but I also really see the importance of having a congregation of people that all believe we originated from the same place and have the same love and spirituality.

—Viola, 17

> **42%** of young Catholics tell us they **don’t turn to faith communities due to a lack of trust in the people, beliefs, and systems of organized religion.**



> **38%** of young Catholics say **they’ve been harmed by religion**, and **42%** say **they don’t feel safe when it comes to religion.**

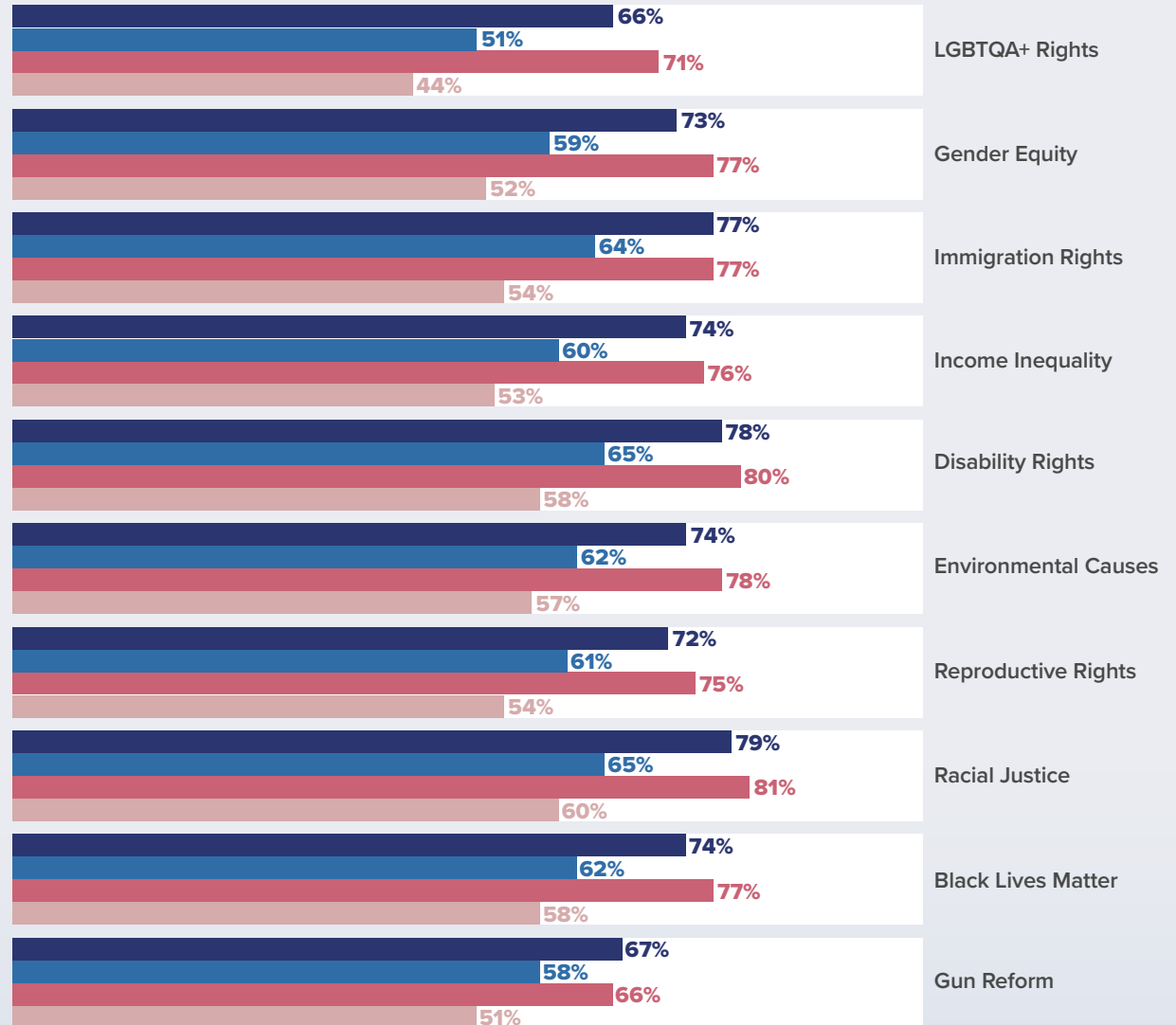


The Values Gap

Many young people don't think religious or faith communities care about the issues they care about.

Catholic young people: ● I care ● They care | Young people in general: ● I care ● They care

ISSUES I CARE ABOUT...



When it comes to shared values, half of all young people don't think religious institutions care about the things that matter most to young people. We wanted to dig deeper into this observation, so we asked young people: How much do you care about this issue? And then we asked them how much they think religious communities with which they are familiar care about the same issue.


Nearly half (44%)

of young Catholics don't think religious institutions care about the things that matter most to young people.

Overall, atheists report the greatest percentage differential between their personal deep caring and their perception of how deeply faith communities care. That is, they care the most about these social concerns and are most likely to believe that religious institutions do not care much at all. Young Catholics, on average, believe they care more about these issues than their church or faith community does, but the disparity between the two is smaller than the national population. That is, young Catholics seem to care more about these issues, but many still sense that their church cares too.

Almost 4 out of 5 young people in general expressed care for environmental causes (about the same as young Catholics in particular), and more than half of all young people (and 44% of Catholics) tell us that going into nature is a religious experience for them. But there is a disparity between how much they care about the environment and how much they perceive religious organizations care, especially when looking at the whole population of young people.

For religious young people in particular—not just Catholics, but any young person who identifies as religious—this sense of disconnect in shared values can be the issue that determines whether they will stay with a religious organization or not. Ethan is a young gay man raised in the Catholic Church and still wrestling with how and whether he can remain connected to it. More than any other issue, young people in general perceive a dramatic disconnect in values over the rights of LGBTQA+ people. Similarly, LGBTQA+ rights and issues of income inequality admit the highest disparity between what young Catholics value and what they believe their church values.



I'm gay. And I know that the conservative Christian community doesn't necessarily support people who are LGBTQ+. And a lot of the beliefs were written by members of the religion who don't necessarily respect these people. And so it's made me question to what extent can I really trust that this is what I should believe, that it is ethical or proper. And for that reason, I've kind of lost faith because I just feel like there's not a lot of trust I can place in the religion when there's a lot of hypocrisy and contradiction.

—Ethan, 21

Without a shared sense about what issues matter in the world, what precedent is there for believing that religious institutions will be a worthwhile guide in other areas of life?



KEY FINDINGS

What Young People Are Telling Us

In 2021, we asked young people in general about particular crossroads that can evoke uncertainty: making decisions about the future; sudden events like death or disease; relationship transitions like breakups, divorce, or new partnerships; major events like graduating, moving, or starting a career. We asked the degree to which young people felt stressed, anxious, worried, confused, or scared when navigating uncertain circumstances, but we also asked whether they felt calm, confident, excited, or positive about whatever was coming next. We learned that young people are experiencing uncertainty right now.



40% say they have experienced trauma.

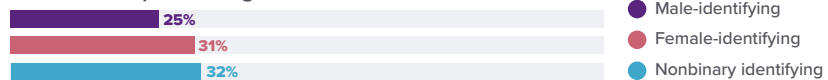


62% say they have experienced emotional distress as a result of a challenging event.




28% reported experiencing a challenging event that was causing uncertainty or making them feel unsettled, uncomfortable, or stressed at the time of completing the survey.

"Yes, I am experiencing this now."



Through survey data gathered over the course of a year, nearly 1 in 3 young people told us they are *currently* experiencing a challenging event. That means nearly 1 in every 3 young people in your life or care probably feels the same.


Despite this constant backdrop of uncertainty in young people’s lived experience, a portrait of their resilience emerges.



I feel like I’m a little more optimistic and positive than I would have been before because of experiences that I’ve gone through already. I feel like there’s nothing that can affect me as bad or, like, be as detrimental than what I’ve already experienced.

—Lilly, 22

We know that the majority of young people consider themselves religious or spiritual. “Religious” can mean a range of things. It does not necessarily mean the whole package of religious beliefs, practices, or commitments to community.



I’m not deeply religious, but I guess for me, religion is just something that kind of helps me when I’m feeling like I’m . . . like I need to believe in something. It can be calming, like when I pray.

—Rene, 18

So we are not only interested in their experience of and responses to uncertainty but also in the role religion—the unique ways they are approaching beliefs, practices, identity, and community—plays as young people navigate uncertain times.





KEY FINDINGS

What You'll Find

On the following pages, we present a lot of data. We want you to emerge from our Key Findings with a sense of the big picture—large trends at work in the religious lives of all young people as they navigate uncertainty. The final spread of data features “A Catholic Look,” insights and findings that focus on the Catholic experience of uncertainty and the ways young Catholics, compared to the general population of young people represented through Key Findings, are navigating life’s biggest questions.



KEY FINDINGS—ONE

Young People & Uncertainty

Young people are experiencing uncertainty right now about a range of events and realities they’re facing. They are coping by turning to trusted relationships. By and large, those relationships don’t include faith leaders.



KEY FINDINGS—TWO

Religious Identity & Uncertainty

A growing percentage of young people identify as “just Christian,” a term that suggests a sense of being religious without being part of a particular tradition. Across the board, young people who tell us they are religious also tell us they are flourishing at higher rates in every aspect of their well-being and relationships.



KEY FINDINGS—THREE

Religious Beliefs & Uncertainty

What do religious and/or spiritual young people believe, exactly? We asked about a range of things: connection to nature, God, and others; doubt and trust in a higher power. More young people feel connected to nature than to God. Twice as many young people believe in a higher power’s existence than doubt it.

KEY FINDINGS—FOUR

Religious Practices & Uncertainty

Just as being religious doesn't necessarily mean believing certain things or identifying with a specific tradition, it also doesn't mean maintaining a prescribed set of practices. Young people turn to a variety of practices they deem religious.

KEY FINDINGS—FIVE

Relationships & Uncertainty

A fifth of young people say they aren't flourishing in their closest relationships, and many young people who identify as religious tell us they are not members of a religious community. But these types of relationships are the first place they think to turn in times of need—meaning 20% of young people don't necessarily have that help when facing life's biggest questions.

KEY FINDINGS—SIX

A Catholic Look

Our data on young Catholics confirm trends at work in the larger population of young people. Catholics are experiencing uncertainty at similar rates, those who are religious are flourishing at higher rates, and their understanding of a higher power differs by only a few percentage points from their non-Catholic peers. Like the general population, young Catholics of color are more likely to be committed members of a religious or spiritual community.

In Part II, we explore a concept called Faith Unbundled. Our data throughout Key Findings reveal that young people's religious identities are not necessarily tied to formal institutions' beliefs, practices, and communities. In other words, young people combine the elements of beliefs, practices, identity, and community from numerous sources, rather than from one, bundled-up tradition.

DATA

The following pages contain a lot of data. For additional breakdowns of data based on race, gender, present religion, and region, go to springtideresearch.org/ts21-ce-resources.



KEY FINDINGS—ONE

Young People & Uncertainty

Young people are experiencing uncertainty right now about a range of events and realities they're facing. They are coping by turning to trusted relationships. By and large, those relationships don't include faith leaders.



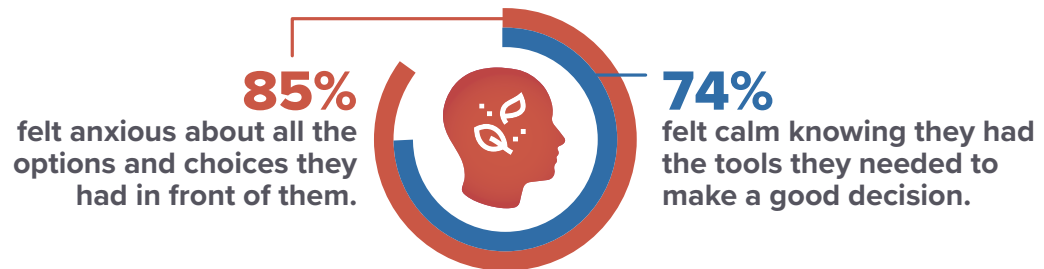
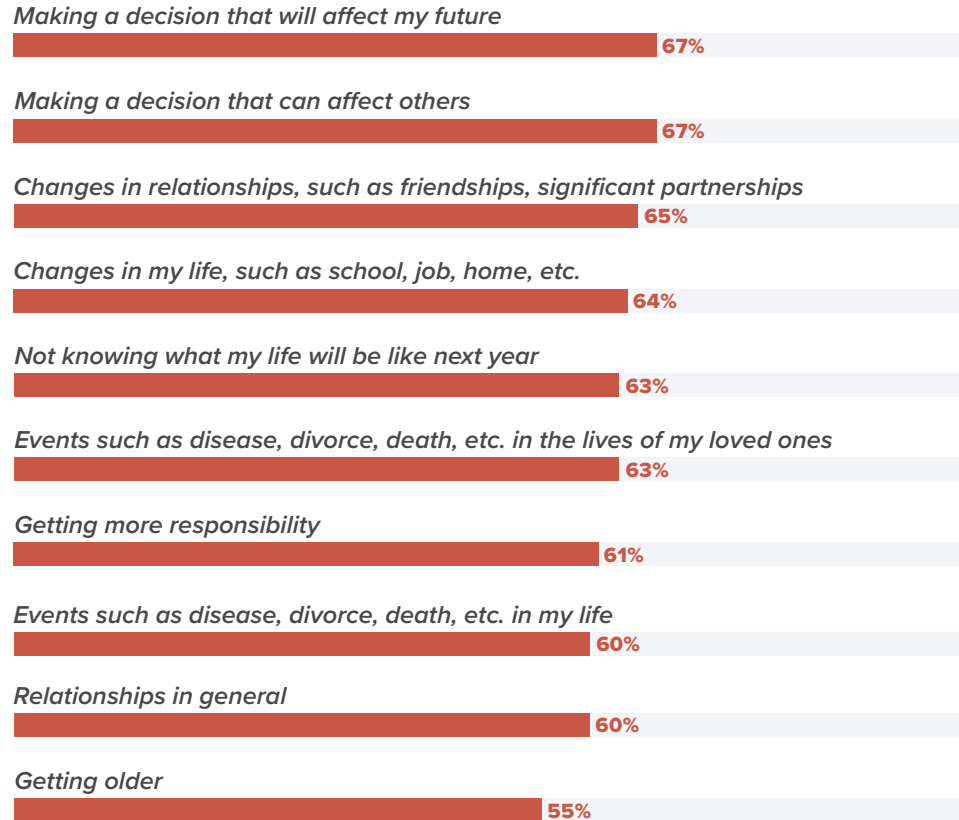
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What's causing uncertainty?

What makes you feel unsettled, uncomfortable, or stressed?

Respondents could select more than one answer.



What are young people looking for when trusted friends, mentors, guides, and relatives reach out in support?

What were the most useful or important things someone did to help during this challenging time?

Respondents could select more than one answer.

“Just let me talk to them”

51%

“Helped me see the positive side”

37%

“Helped me identify potential outcomes”

28%

By a significant margin, young people found that a person being present and listening was the most helpful type of response they could receive from a friend, relative, or trusted adult in a time of challenge or difficulty.

Despite feeling uncertain, stressed, or anxious, they are confident they’ll get through the difficulty.



Ananya, a Sikh college student, captures this sense of both anxiety and confidence well, us in an interview:



When I go to an event or meet someone I don’t know, I feel very overwhelmed, but then, I’ve just got to remind myself that it’s okay to feel overwhelmed. It’s not a big deal and it will be okay.

—Ananya, 22

But how do they get through it? Where, to what, and to whom do they turn to cope?

Trusted relationships stand out as the top choice for young people who reach out for help during a difficult time. And despite the majority of young people telling us they are religious or spiritual, it’s clear that faith leaders are not among those trusted bonds. Young people turned to “no one” in times of uncertainty as frequently as they turned to someone in their faith community.

Who did you turn to for help when you felt overwhelmed and didn’t know what to do about something?

Respondents could select more than one answer.

My friends

55%

Someone from my family

49%

Someone from school

20%

Someone from my faith community

16%

No one

16%

For more data on who young people turn to when coping with uncertainty, see graph on page 29.



KEY FINDINGS—TWO

Religious Identity & Uncertainty

A growing percentage of young people identify as just Christian, a term that suggests a sense of being “religious” without being part of a particular tradition. Across the board, young people who tell us they are religious also tell us they are flourishing at higher rates in every aspect of their well-being and relationships.

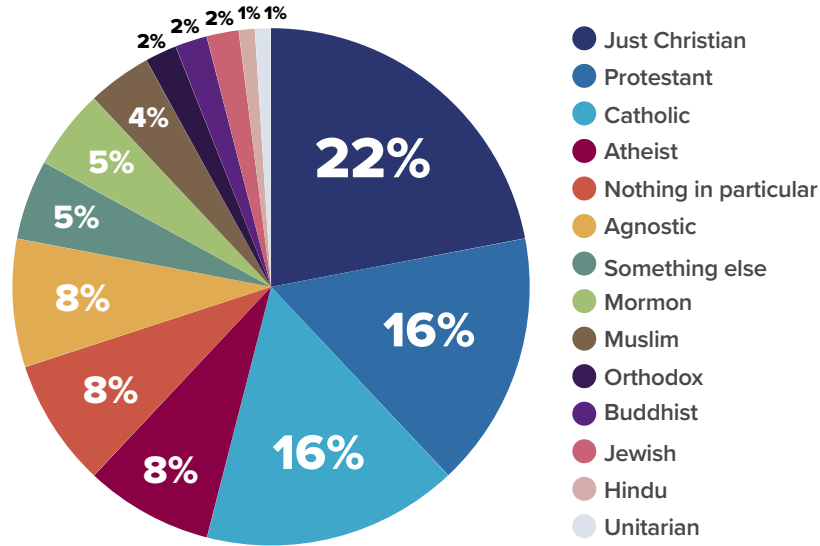


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The majority of young people consider themselves religious or spiritual.

What is your present religion?



Percentages are approximate due to rounding.

A plurality of young people say their faith remained steady during the pandemic (47%). While 27% say they are doubting their faith more or lost their faith completely, nearly the same percentage (26%) say their faith has gotten stronger during the pandemic.

The group identifying as “just Christian” suggests an emerging trend: many young people may be considering themselves religious but not part of a religious institution.



I’m not really into religion anymore. I just don’t like it. Over the summer and last year, I built up a relationship with God. I don’t like to attach any religion to it because I just don’t have good experiences with things that are, that are said within Christianity and stuff like that. But after I build up, well, as I continue to build up a relationship with God, it’s about just believing what God shares with me every day.

—Lauren, 18

Religious young people are faring better.

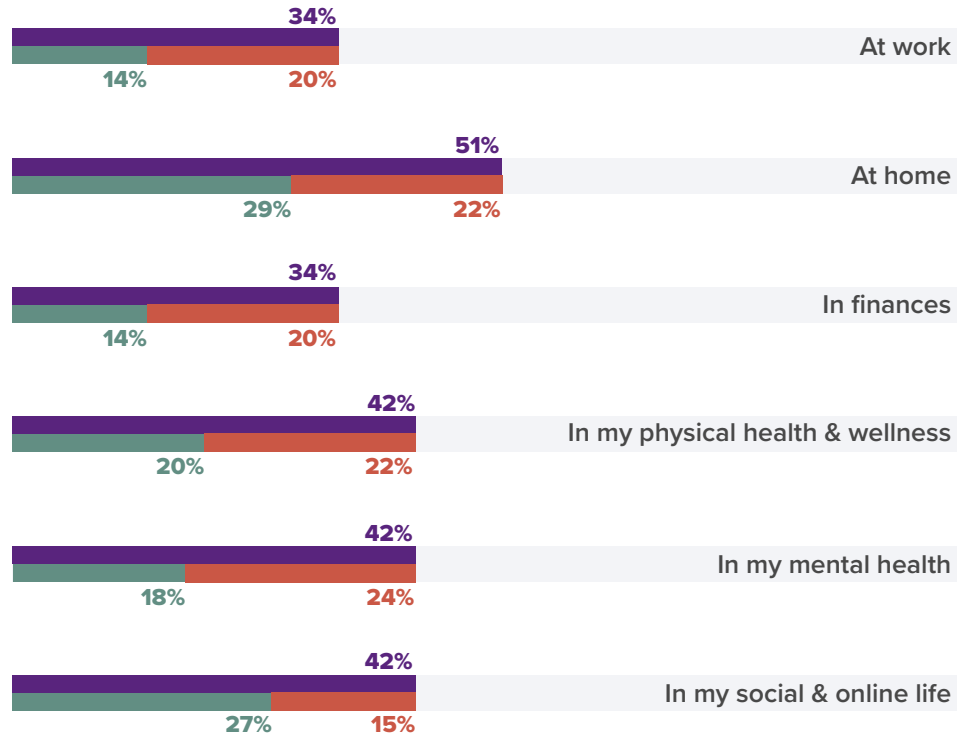
Even without turning to religious practices or communities in times of uncertainty, young people who tell us they are religious are still faring better than their “not religious” counterparts.



The extent to which a young person says they are religious correlates with the extent to which they say they are flourishing. *This is true for every single indicator of well-being.*

Young people who tell us, “I am flourishing a lot . . .”

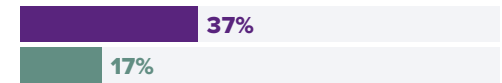
● Very Religious ● Not Religious ● Disparity



“I generally feel that what I do in my life is valuable and worthwhile.”

● Very Religious ● Not Religious

Strongly agree



Young people who are very religious are more than twice as likely to say they feel their life is valuable and worthwhile than those who are not religious at all.

Unlike levels of flourishing, young people who tell us they are “very religious” and those who tell us they are “not religious at all” experience similar levels of uncertainty: 55% (not religious) and 54% (very religious) tell us they have experienced uncertainty before.

While they may experience uncertainty at the same rates, they don’t experience negative consequences associated with uncertainty the same. Of the young people who told us that they have experienced a challenging event in their lives that caused the feeling of being unsettled, uncomfortable, or stressed, only 14% say they are “very religious,” compared to 30% who are “not religious at all.” Simply put, this means that even though religious and nonreligious young people are experiencing uncertainty at the same rates, religious young people are not as negatively affected by it.



KEY FINDINGS

Young people identifying as religious but not necessarily identifying with a religious institution isn't just a Christian trend.

It's notable among young people of many religious backgrounds.

“Well, religion in general is a really complicated topic for me. Because, I mean, yeah, I’m Muslim. But then I feel I’m more like culturally Muslim because I don’t really believe in any sort of “religion,” I guess. I think a lot of people my age share my opinion about organized religions and churches and things like that—how harmful those can be. For older generations, it was like you *had* to be part of a church or some sort of organization in order to be a faithful kind of person. And I think my generation is kind of changing that narrative, and we can kind of believe whatever we want and still consider ourselves good people.”

—Amira, 15

“ [Faith] teaches you that no matter what happens, everything’s gonna be okay, and faith itself can really pull you through. And it gives us something to look forward to, a destination. And I just feel like it’s very, very important.”

—Yadi, 20

Yadi, a young Catholic, affirms the importance of having faith in something. But what beliefs do young people hold in light of an unbundled approach to faith?



KEY FINDINGS—THREE

Religious Beliefs & Uncertainty

What do religious and/or spiritual young people believe, exactly? We asked about a range of things: connection to nature, God, and others; doubt and trust in a higher power. More young people feel connected to nature than to God. Twice as many young people believe in a higher power's existence than doubt it.

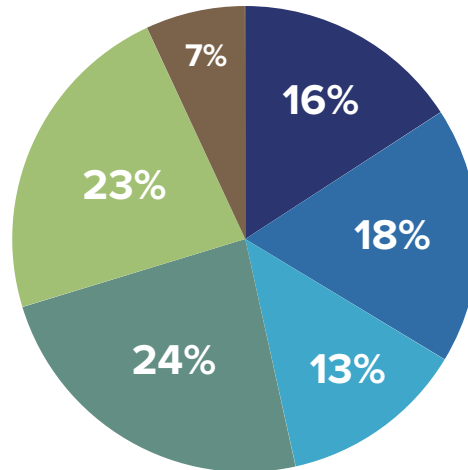


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The majority of young people are religious or spiritual. *But what do they believe?*

“Which statement comes closest to expressing what you believe about a higher power—whether it be God, gods, or some other divine source of universal energy?”



- I don't believe in a higher power.
- I don't know whether there is a higher power, and I don't believe there is any way to find out.
- I doubt a higher power's existence more than I believe.
- I believe in a higher power's existence more than I doubt.
- I believe a higher power exists, and I have no doubts about it.
- I don't know.

Percentages are approximate due to rounding.

A Catholic young woman reflects on how doubt and faith are not mutually exclusive:

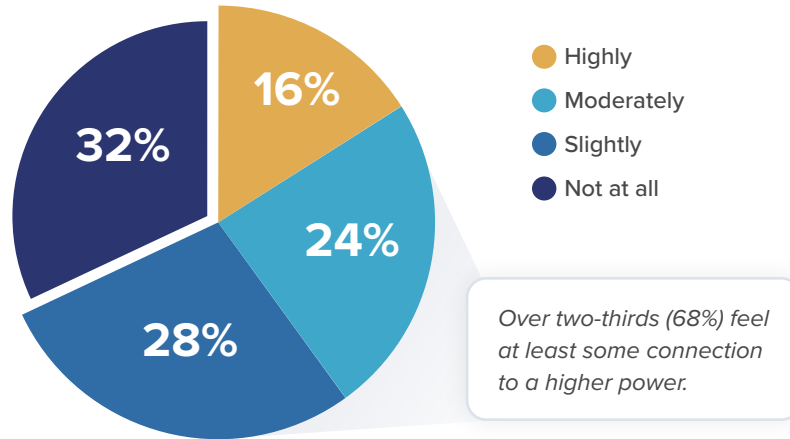


I mostly went to see my friends, but I guess the faith aspect of these retreats was part of it. Like, struggling with the idea of even believing in God and knowing what or what not to believe. . . . That's something we talked about in these groups. It actually made me feel a little bit better. It's like, *oh, like we can have doubts*. We can struggle with these feelings and they're still, we're still valid, you know? So that was actually kind of refreshing.

—Milly, 25

For young people, believing that a higher power may exist is *not* synonymous with feeling connected to that higher power.

To what extent do you feel connected to a higher power?



Personal beliefs don't necessarily affect how young people go through the rest of life.

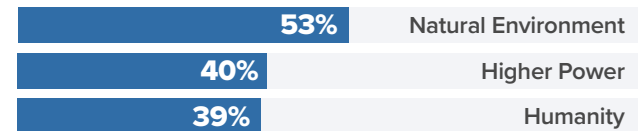
"I try hard to carry my religious beliefs over into all my other dealings in life."



Spiritual and religious young people don't *just* believe in a higher power. Among other things, an *unbundled faith* means young people don't turn only to traditional religious institutions for the elements of faith, but to several sources, including nature and relationships.

How connected do you feel to each of the following?

Young people who responded "moderately" or "high":



A CLOSER LOOK

More young people feel connected to the natural environment than to all humanity or to a higher power. As reported in "A Closer Look: The Disconnect" (page 32), young people value caring for the environment, but they don't think religious institutions value it as much.



KEY FINDINGS—FOUR

Religious Practices & Uncertainty

Just as we know being religious doesn't necessarily mean believing certain things or identifying with a specific tradition, it also doesn't mean maintaining a prescribed set of practices. Young people turn to a variety of practices they deem religious, just as they turn to a variety of diverse practices when coping with uncertainty.

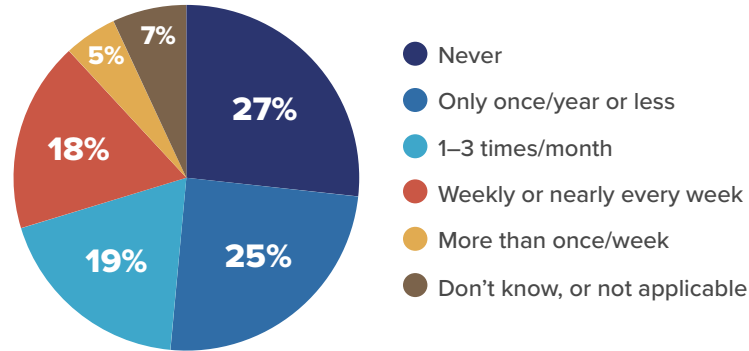


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Identifying with a particular religion or spirituality doesn't automatically mean doing certain practices.

How often do you attend religious services (i.e., at a church, synagogue, mosque, temple, or other type of religious gathering place)?

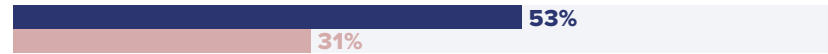


Percentages are approximate due to rounding.

How often do you engage in the following activity as a spiritual or religious practice?

● Weekly or more often ● Daily

Engage in art (singing, painting, listening to music)



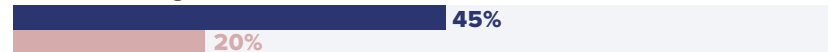
Pray



Read



Practice "being in nature"



Engage in yoga, martial arts, or other physical activity



Carry, a young Catholic, emphasizes the way her religious identity and practices don't always conform to traditional ways of living out her faith.



I think I can still believe in God without having to go to church all the time. I don't think going to church is a bad thing, but I don't think it's like the end all be all.

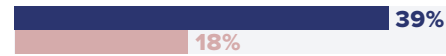
—Carry, 15

For young people, religious and spiritual practices are not *just* attendance at explicitly religious or spiritual services.

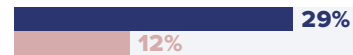
How often do you engage in the following activity as a spiritual or religious practice? (continued)

● Weekly or more often ● Daily

Write



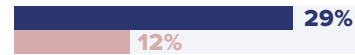
Meditate



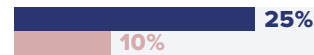
Study a religious text



Do acts of service



Attend religious or spiritual groups (not services)



For most activities, the category of respondents with the highest percentage are those who report more doubt than belief in a higher power. They may not be finding religious practices helpful within traditional institutional religion, but they are taking up religious practices at the highest rate.

Fewer than 1 in 4 young people selected “daily” or “weekly” for the handful of additional responses, which included making donations, fasting, honoring ancestors, reading tarot cards/fortune-telling, teaching, and participating in acts of protest.

“My teacher introduced the class to something called mindfulness. And that is when you feel stressed and you take some time out of your day to just breathe in and out and not think about the past or the present, just focus on *the now* and the things that are around you that would help you release stress. So I tried that, and I really liked it. So if someone asked me to try, like, maybe yoga, I’d be open to it, to other kinds of practices. I joined one of the workshops, and I found it to be really fun. So yeah, I want to try things.”

—Tyler, 18

Coping with Uncertainty

What were some of the things you did that helped you cope during a challenging or difficult time?

Respondents could select more than one answer.

Talked to friends



Did hobbies (baking, painting, sports, music, etc.)



Played video games/watched shows or movies



Talked to loved ones



Talked to a trusted adult



Prayed



Stayed home and did nothing



Took time in nature



Connected with my faith community



Worked more hours



Went to a spiritual or religious gathering or service



Read sacred text



Helped others



Connecting with a religious community (19%) was a more common way to cope in times of uncertainty than turning to a particular person from one’s faith community (16%), which was reported on page 27.



KEY FINDINGS

Liliana, a Catholic college student, discusses how music is a religious practice for her.

“As a musician, even if I’m not actively involved in composing and singing or playing or anything like that, just *listening* to songs about God—or not even necessarily about God, but certain beautiful orchestral songs—they will hit me in a certain way. And I just feel God’s presence, I guess. And I just feel way more connected with not only God but my surroundings. And it helps me ground myself more. And if I’m feeling sad, it will also calm me down and make me feel better.”

—Liliana, 21

“Aside from a couple friends, I have my grandmother, who is very religious. I speak to her about it sometimes, but she has a very old-school mindset to where if I want to talk about a topic of LGBTQ+, it would be suppressed very easily and so on and so forth. I don’t have a community. I . . . I know my university provides them, but also I’ve struggled with a bunch of classism in my university. So I kind of haven’t been exposed to something like that.”

—Christopher, 18

When facing uncertainty or difficulty, young people turn to close relationships more than anything else. Christopher, who is Catholic, explains who he feels he can turn to for various conversations.



KEY FINDINGS—FIVE

Relationships & Uncertainty

Many young people who identify as religious are not members of any religious communities. A fifth of young people say they aren't flourishing in their closest relationships, but these types of relationships are the first place they think to turn in times of need—meaning 20% of young people don't necessarily have that help when facing life's biggest questions.



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Flourishing or floundering in relationships



Almost 1 in 5 report “not flourishing” in relationships with friends and family.

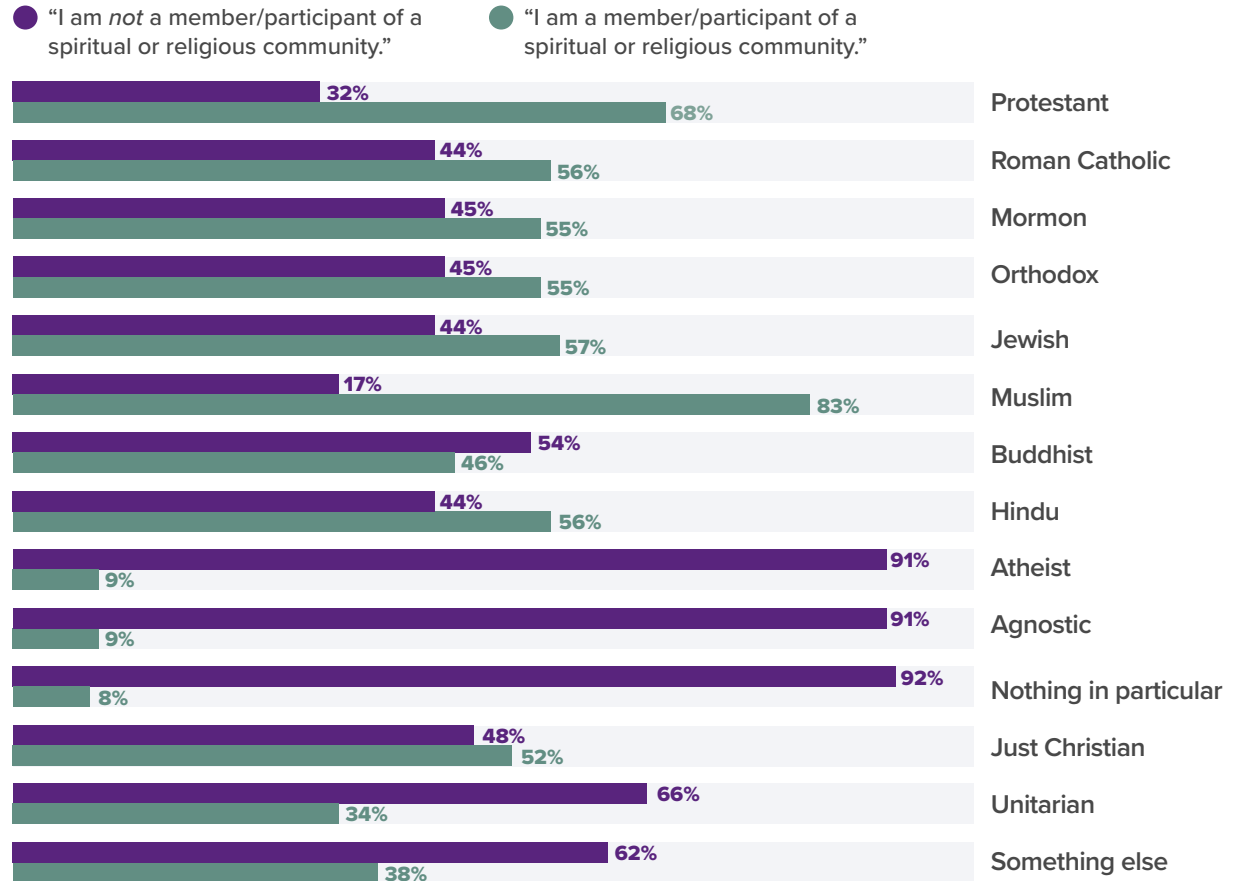


3 in 10 report “not flourishing” in relationships with trusted adults.



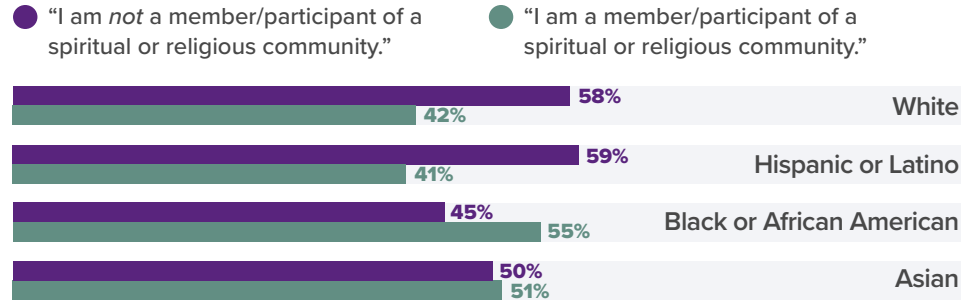
Almost 1 in 5 report that they do *not* have someone in their life who really cares about them.

Many young people who identify with a religion are not members of a spiritual or religious community.

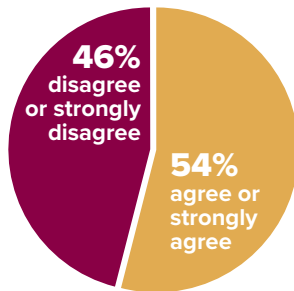


19% of those who say they are “very religious” say they are *not interested in being part of a faith community at all*.

Black or African American young people consider themselves committed to a religious or spiritual community at higher rates than any other young people.



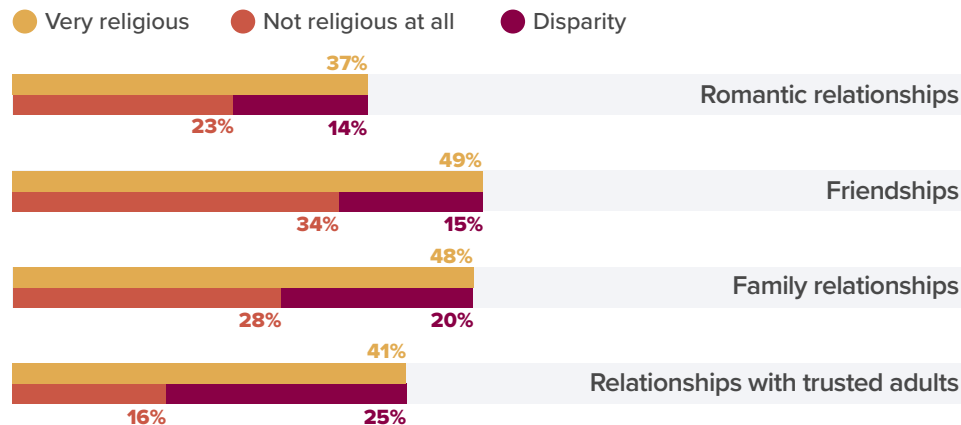
But young people across the board don't necessarily see community commitments affecting their beliefs.



"I would not have the beliefs that I do without my community."

Even if they aren't embedded in religious communities, young people who are "very religious" report flourishing in their relationships at higher rates than those who say they are "not religious at all."

Young people who say they are "flourishing a lot" in . . .



A CLOSER LOOK

Though those surveyed turn to close relationships, they don't reach out to faith leaders at very high rates. There are many reasons for this disconnect (see "A Closer Look: The Disconnect" on page 32), but looking at the times they do connect reveals what's needed to bridge that gap.

If you turn to a religious community, your faith, or a religious mentor when experiencing something uncertain, unknown, difficult, or new, why do you turn to them?

I feel comfortable with that community because I've been there since I was a child.



I have friends there.



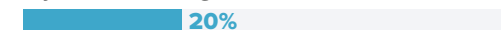
I trust the leader of the community.



They help me give back to the community.



I don't turn to a religious community, my faith, or a religious mentor.



(All other responses were selected by fewer than 20% of respondents.)



KEY FINDINGS—SIX

A Catholic Look

Our data on young Catholics confirm trends at work in the larger population of young people. Catholics are experiencing uncertainty at similar rates, those who are religious are flourishing at higher rates, and their understanding of a higher power differs by only a few percentage points from their non-Catholic peers. Like the general population, young Catholics of color are more likely to be committed members of a religious or spiritual community.



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Young Catholics are experiencing uncertainty.



31% of young Catholics say they have experienced trauma.



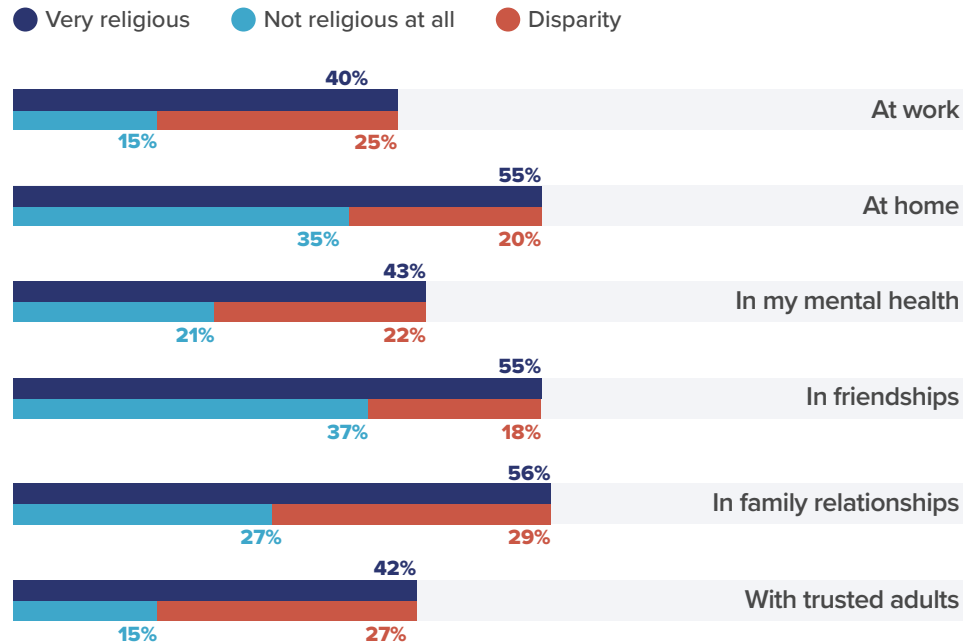
58% say they have experienced emotional distress as a result of a challenging event.



27% reported experiencing a challenging event that was causing uncertainty or making them feel unsettled, uncomfortable, or stressed at the time of completing the survey.

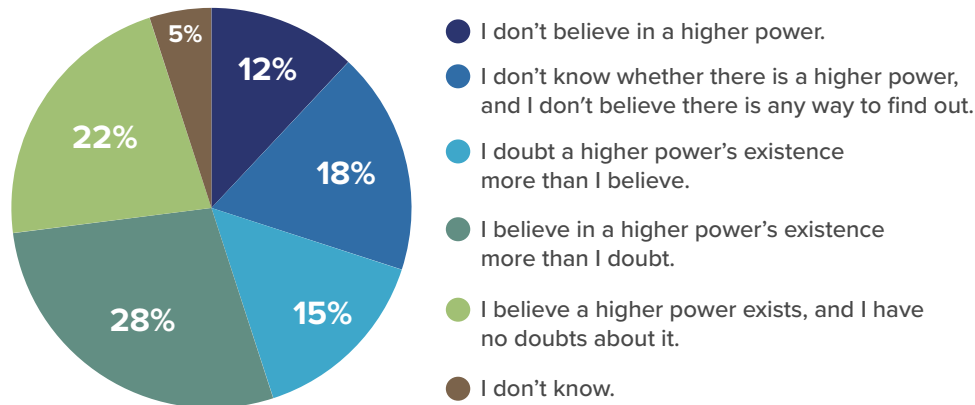
“Very religious” Catholics are “flourishing a lot” at higher rates than the nonreligious.

Mirroring the data for all young people, young Catholics who report being “very religious” say they are “flourishing a lot” at higher rates than young Catholics who report being “not religious at all.”



What do young Catholics believe?

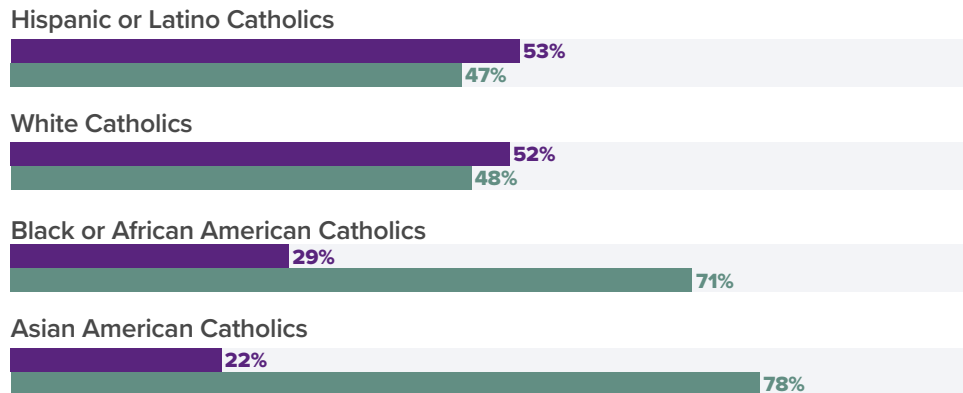
“Which statement comes closest to expressing what you believe about a higher power—whether it be God, gods, or some other divine source of universal energy?”



Percentages are approximate due to rounding.

Black or African American and Asian American Catholics are more likely to consider themselves committed members of a spiritual or religious community than white and Hispanic or Latino Catholics.

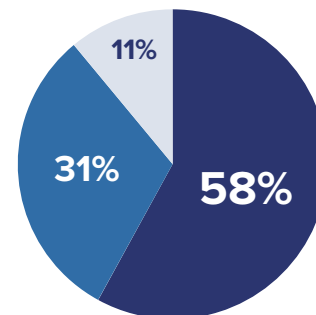
- “I am *not* a member/participant of a spiritual or religious community.”
- “I am a member/participant of a spiritual or religious community.”



Personal beliefs don't necessarily affect how young Catholics go through the rest of life.

“I try hard to carry my religious beliefs into all my other dealings in life.”

- Disagree
- Agree
- Don't know





KEY FINDINGS

Takeaways & Insights

1 Young People Are Uncertain.

Almost 3 out of 10 young people report experiencing a challenging event that is causing uncertainty, discomfort, or stress in this moment. Twice as many young people turn to family (49%) and friends (55%) in times of need as they do to any other relationship. When they turn to that trusted person, the thing they want most, the thing that they say is most helpful, is the chance to just talk and be heard. Our data show that this description applies to Catholic young people as well.

2 They Aren't Turning to Religion.

Young people said they turned to “no one” in a time of uncertainty as often as they turned to someone from a religious community (only 16%). This disconnect is a two-way street: young people report not reaching out to religious leaders in times of uncertainty and not being reached out to. Only 10% of young people in general heard from a faith leader or religious community during the COVID-19 pandemic. This number drops to 6% for young Catholics.

3 **But They Are Religious.**

Despite not turning to religious leaders, communities, practices, or beliefs in times of uncertainty or difficulty, the majority of young people identify as religious or spiritual. In other words, young people, including Catholics, who identify as “religious” don’t necessarily participate in religion in the traditional sense. The majority are not accepting the whole “bundle” of rituals, practices, and beliefs that religious institutions offer.

4 **Those Who Are Religious Are Flourishing.**

Young people who identify as “religious”—Catholics and others alike—are more likely to report that they are flourishing in nearly every area of their health, well-being, and relationships. So whatever they’re doing in this unbundled approach to faith seems to be working for their well-being.

➤ *This trend is worth a closer look by religious leaders caring for the inner and outer lives of young people.*

PART II
FAITH
UNBUNDLED







What Is Faith Unbundled?

Our data are clear: young people are not turning to religious leaders, communities, practices, or beliefs in times of uncertainty or difficulty, though the majority of young people nonetheless identify as religious or spiritual. Springtide data show that Catholics are no exception to this trend.

In other words, young people who identify as “religious” don’t necessarily participate in religion in the traditional sense. The majority are not accepting the whole “bundle” of rituals, practices, and beliefs that religious institutions offer.

Faith, or “being religious,” among the youngest generations is more “unbundled” and worth a close look, especially because our data show that young people who identify as “religious” also report that in almost every facet of their lives they are flourishing more than young people who identify as “not religious.”

So what is Faith Unbundled?

When we speak of faith in the report, we mean a person’s beliefs about the self, others, nature, and the transcendent, along with the practices and rituals that express belief.

When we describe faith as unbundled, we mean that religious young people are not relying on a single religious tradition or organization to form and inform their beliefs and practices. Instead, they mix together things from various traditions, religious and otherwise.



Faith Unbundled is a term that describes the way young people increasingly construct their faith by combining elements such as beliefs, identity, practices, and community from a variety of religious and nonreligious sources, rather than receiving all these things from a single, intact system or tradition.

An analogy may help to illustrate Faith Unbundled. Think of how music streaming services like Pandora or Spotify unbundle albums: a person can enjoy specific tracks without buying the whole album. Someone can create their own playlists by “unbundling” a variety of albums and “bundling” songs from these many albums and artists to their liking rather than the musician’s original grouping. In essence, young people with unbundled faith will partake in religion, including practices, beliefs, and communities, to the degree that suits them, with no formal or permanent commitment.

To make this analogy more accurate, however, we’d have to imagine a way to add nonmusical tracks to this personally constructed playlist. Young people aren’t *just* turning to religious institutions to construct the elements of faith. Our data show that they are turning to nature, pets, music, friends, and more.

A CATHOLIC LOOK

Springtide approaches faith from a sociological perspective—that is, by asking, What are the behaviors and identifiable trends that help a young person face and make sense of life’s big questions. As sociologists, we don’t wade into theological or doctrinal definitions of faith, though we recognize the value of those definitions and the role they can and should play in how Catholic practitioners digest the findings in this report. We hope our sociology and your theology can be in conversation when it comes to the religious lives and needs of young people today.

7

Watch Dr. Josh Packard talk with Crystal Chiang and Brett Ryan Talley about youth ministry and Gen Z.

springtideresearch.org/ts21-ce-resources

WATCH

8

Read, in our Voices of Young People blog, about how seven student filmmakers turned to art to process the pandemic.

springtideresearch.org/ts21-ce-resources

READ

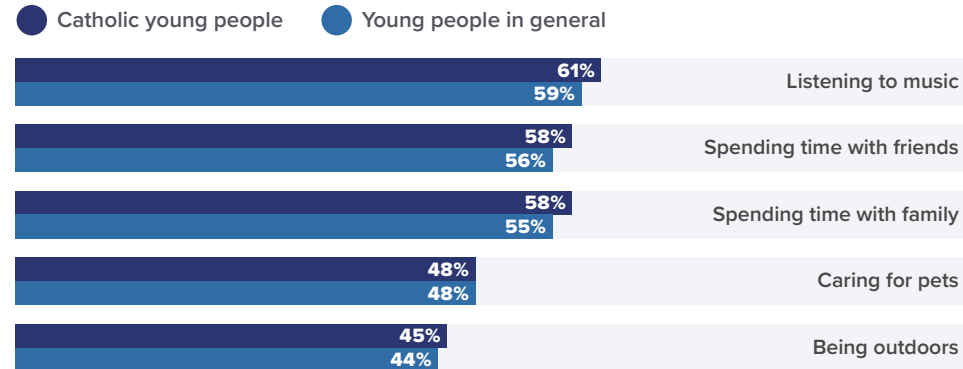
60% of young Catholics say, “I agree with some, but not all, of the things my religion teaches,”

and **52%** say, “I don’t feel like I need to be connected to a specific religion.”



Over half of young Catholics **(55%)** say, “I feel like I could fit in with many different religions.”

The top five most meaningful activities that young people say bring fulfillment to their lives.



Only 27% of young Catholics said their religious faith provides fulfillment to their lives.

Because terms like *religious life*, *inner life*, and *spirituality* are commonly used interchangeably by those exploring faith, we use them similarly when talking about Faith Unbundled. This is an effort to better reflect the conversations happening among young people as well as practitioners and religious leaders.

Understanding the Unbundling

Springtide sees the phenomenon of Faith Unbundled expressed clearly in our data: young people who identify with a particular religion but adopt few or none of its practices; young people who attend religious services regularly but consider themselves agnostic, atheist, or nothing in particular; young people who are more than twice as likely to practice the arts as a “religious or spiritual practice” than attend weekly faith groups.

Young people are turning to a wide range of traditions, practices, and beliefs when asking and answering important questions about their faith: What do I believe? Who am I? What is my purpose in the world? What practices have value?

A CLOSER LOOK

Unbundling & the Role of Religion

The first observation of this trend toward the unbundling of religious practices, beliefs, identity, and communities arose in the work of scholars Angie Thurston, Casper ter Kuile, and Sue Phillips. In their report *Care of Souls*, the authors write, “Unbundling is the process of separating elements of value from a single collection of offerings.” This unbundling is evidenced, they say, in the act of meaning-making: “Fifty years ago, most people in the United States relied on a single religious community to conduct spiritual practices, ritualize life moments, foster healing, connect to lineage, inspire morality, house transcendent experience, mark holidays, support family, serve the needy, work for justice, and—through art, song, text, and speech—tell and retell a common story to bind them together.” Today, young people no longer rely on a single institution to make sense of their identity, engage a community, outline the boundaries of belief, or offer practices that mark significant life moments.

Others have noted this trend as well, including Ilia Delio, a Catholic Franciscan sister and professor of theology. She captures some of this novel way of approaching questions of faith, spirituality, and religion in a 2018 article for *Global Sisters Report*: “The 21st-century religious seeker is not bound to a rigid paradigm of ideas but is just that, a seeker or a quester, one in search of meaning, community, identity, wholeness: essentially, God.”



Delio writes, “The well-known phrase ‘spiritual but not religious’ captures this emerging [sense of faith,] where religion is not a closed system, but an open system that flows into and out of other systems such as science, ecology, socialization, and politics; that is, religion flows through relationships.” Delio captures the way young people deliberately avoid closed systems of meaning in favor of something more “open,” which is another way of describing “unbundled.”

In addition to scholars like Thurston, ter Kuile, and Phillips, Catholic nuns like Delio, and sociological institutes like Springtide, His Holiness the Dalai Lama has written on this unbundling of meaning, community, and identity from organized religion.

In his book *Beyond Religion: Ethics for a Whole World*, the Dalai Lama acknowledges the social and cultural shifts that have an impact on the role religion can and does play in the lives of many, noting that “many people in the world no longer follow any particular religion,” and that “as people of the world become ever more closely interconnected in an age of globalization and in multicultural societies, ethics based on any one religion would only appeal to some of us; it would not be meaningful for all.”

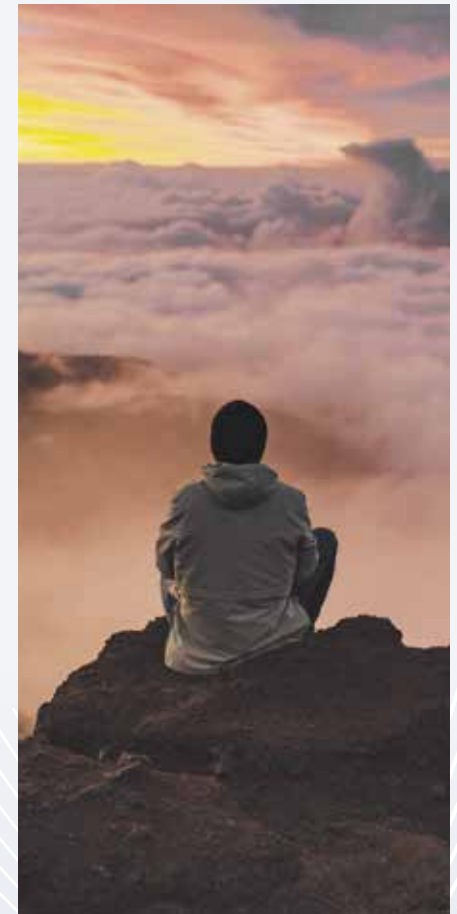
Globalization and interconnection make sense of this unbundling trend. He goes on: “In the past, when peoples lived in relative isolation from one another—as we Tibetans lived quite happily for many centuries behind our wall of mountains—the fact that groups pursued their own religiously based approaches to ethics posed no difficulties.” But today, because we don’t live cut off from other systems of belief, we need “an approach to ethics which makes no recourse to religion and can be equally acceptable to those with faith and those without: a secular ethics.”

The Dalai Lama echoes what we see at work in the religious behaviors of young people. A question arises amid this data: How do religious leaders attend to the inner life of young people in their communities when most young people no longer depend exclusively on a common commitment to a single organized religion?

Springtide data allow us to dive deeper into the quality of this emerging norm and identify and define key hallmarks of Faith Unbundled. We invited practitioners who are already responding to this trend, from both within and outside of religious institutions, to offer some best practices for engaging with young people of unbundled faith.

In *Christus Vivit*, Pope Francis says this to young people, while quoting himself: “Dear young people, my joyful hope is to see you keep running the race before you, outstripping all those who are slow or fearful. Keep running. . . . The Church needs your momentum, your intuitions, your faith. We need them! And when you arrive where we have not yet reached, have the patience to wait for us” (299). While Pope Francis, the leader of a vast organized religion, is surely not encouraging a faith completely unbundled from institutions, he nonetheless seems to understand that something *good* is at work in the new religious expressions and experiences of today’s young people, and he encourages leaders and ministers to take note and follow the momentum.

The hallmarks of Faith Unbundled are Springtide’s contribution to a wider conversation about the state of religion and young people in 2021.





The Hallmarks of Faith Unbundled

Springtide wants to do more than just note the trend of unbundled faith among young people. We want to help religious and cultural leaders understand this unbundled faith so that they can better serve the needs of today's young people.

We are specifically interested in these spheres of beliefs, identity, practices, *and* community, *and* the religious or non-religious sources to which young people are turning to navigate within these spheres. As sociologists, we are watching behaviors. How does Faith Unbundled look in the lives of young people?

Faith Unbundled

describes the way young people increasingly construct their faith by combining elements such as beliefs, identity, practices, and community from a variety of religious and nonreligious sources rather than receiving all these things from a single, intact system or tradition.

DEFINITION



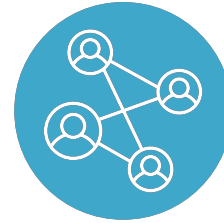
What does it look like to unbundle **belief** from a single source or system?

It looks like young people who turn to many or various sources when making meaning and discerning what to believe about right and wrong, purpose and calling, salvation and suffering, and more. It looks like **curiosity**.



What does it look like to unbundle **identity** from a single source or system?

It looks like young people who are unwilling to shed parts of themselves to fit into a prescribed narrative about who and how to be in the world. It looks like a commitment to **wholeness**.



What does it look like to unbundle **community** from a single source or system?

It looks like young people who show up where trusted personal relationships exist or new ones seem possible, young people who are willing to forgo participation in communities lacking these qualities, even if they have had long-term associations with these communities. It looks like **connection**.



What does it look like to unbundle **practices** from a single source or system?

It looks like young people who blend and adapt various rituals and behaviors to suit and make sense of the current questions they're facing. It looks like **flexibility**.

We see the hallmarks of curiosity, wholeness, connection, and flexibility in our data and in our conversations with young people, practitioners, and experts.

In this part of the report, we share the reflections of eight practitioners and experts on how they encourage the flourishing of young people in light of—not in spite of—this unbundled approach to the questions and concerns of their faith. Our four primary experts derive their insights from their own direct work with young people, as well as their diverse traditions: Buddhism, Islam, Humanism, and Judaism. As the Catholic edition reports, young Catholics follow the same trends as their non-Catholic peers. Listening to the wisdom from those who minister to all types of young people is important for Catholic leaders hoping to better serve young Catholic. To that end, we’ve also invited Catholic practitioners to comment and reflect on the hallmarks of Faith Unbundled, helping make its relevance come alive for those serving young Catholics in particular. From their insights, we draw practical tips in conversation with our qualitative and quantitative data.

BELIEFS UNBUNDLED

Curiosity Is the Vehicle

Insights from Rev. Sumi Loundon Kim

As a university chaplain, I usually have students come to me with one of four major issues: matters of stress, suffering, salvation, and existential questions. While on the one hand they’re seeking concrete answers and a feeling of certainty about who they are, where they’re going, and the meaning of life, they’re driven by intense curiosity and an openness to learning beyond what they currently know.

My response to the curiosity that I witness in young adults depends on who walks through my door. I would say that there are three types of seekers, and each merits a different type of guidance.

First, there are young people who are completely unchurched. “Unchurched” is probably too generous of a characterization because “church” or anything like it isn’t even in their vocabulary or map of the world. These individuals often don’t know the difference between the words *atheist* and *agnostic*, nor know anything about religion

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Watch Dr. Josh Packard interview Harrison Blum and Rev. Sumi Kim on what attracts Gen Z to Buddhism.

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WATCH



CURIOSITY

or even spirituality. But they are searching for *something*, and they have a sense that there's more to life than education, family, and work. My response is to offer them some basic orientation and skills in beginning a spiritual path. *Here's how to sit still and listen to that small, inner voice; here's what a religious text looks like; these are the reasons we need friendship and community.*

If they have a religious heritage from their family of origin—which might need to be traced to grandparents or earlier—I invite them to learn more about that, as well. In essence, they need a starting point, and I try to help them find one.

Second, there are young people who were raised in a particular tradition but are starting to question or move away from it. Perhaps the faith of their childhood was presented with simpler ideas and they are starting to find those don't work when facing the complexities of adulthood or the uncertainties that the past year posed. I often affirm the richness and depth of what they were raised with, because they can get very disillusioned with their home faith traditions. But I suggest two things. First, I suggest that they may need to relearn their tradition's teachings with the adult mind they now have. And second, I encourage them to explore other religions, including Buddhism. For those who've come from a stricter or narrower background, sometimes that permission to explore is revelatory. Churched students also tend to assume that in attending a Buddhist group, they'll need to convert or "subscribe" to the whole thing. I say, no, just explore, come for meditation, learn about the Buddhist perspective, and if it works for you, then keep coming. No expectations on

attendance or commitment; we hold this lightly and loosely. This type of young adult is often surprised that I'm not trying to recruit them and that someone from outside their religion sees its value.

Third, I see young people walk through my door who are in a process that is between an unchurched person just starting to figure out a spiritual path and a heavily churched person who's clearly rejecting their childhood faith tradition and thinking Buddhism is a good, new possibility for them. They may have been raised with a tradition that they've already started to move away from or question, or they may have had some exposure to religion through occasional participation in church as a child but do not feel strongly influenced or identified with it. They may identify as atheist or agnostic. Often these young people are serious with their questions and have started reading books or taking philosophy courses. Their questions are astute and sharp, and their curiosity is intense and pointed. My response to these young people is to help them broaden beyond philosophical or intellectual inquiry to show that a spiritual path is also comprised of practices, community, service, emotional health, rituals, and so on. I try to point their intellectual curiosity toward including these other facets of a spiritual life, and to balance the headspace with a heartspace so that both are involved in answering their questions.

For all three of these types, what they often don't know they're missing (yet so desperately need) is a community where they feel like they belong. In these young adult years, the need to belong to a group is intense because that chosen group serves as a transition from the family of origin to the wider world.

In that regard, the Buddhist community in a university serves as a space for belonging, allowing different types of young seekers driven by curiosity to be with one another.



Rev. Sumi Loundon Kim is the Buddhist chaplain at Yale University and served in the same capacity at Duke University. She is the author of *Blue Jean Buddha: Voices of Young Buddhists* and its sequel, *The Buddha's Apprentices*, among other books.



52% of young Catholics tell us, **“I do not like to be told answers about faith and religions; I’d rather discover my own answers.”**



83% of young Catholics say they **love learning new things.**



Rebundling Belief through Curiosity

A core reality of this unbundling approach to faith is not feeling bound to a single institution, system, or tradition. Fifty-eight percent of young people tell us, “I do not like to be told answers about faith and religions; I’d rather discover my own answers.” Eighty-two percent of young people (the same percent of young Catholics in particular) say they love learning new things. Sam’s curiosity about contemplative practices opened a door to exploring several religious traditions, even as a Catholic:



I regularly practice centering prayer and was involved in a centering prayer group, which wasn’t technically Catholic, but just kind of general. But through that, I discovered a lot of other kinds of inner spiritual traditions. I like to say, when you’re finding God in silence, it doesn’t really matter what you call God: it’s the same God. The Sufi tradition in Islam, I find, resonates with my experiences. Also, the contemplative tradition and different Indian practices of nonduality and mindfulness, Buddhism, all these things.

—Sam, 18



A reason behind this trend is that Gen Z has not necessarily “inherited” one single, coherent religious or spiritual system from their parents or mentors. When asked about reasons for turning (or not) to a religion in times of uncertainty, 42% of young people told us, “I did not do anything with religion as a child,” and 39% said, “I would not even think to go to a faith community because it is not something I’ve ever gone to before.” But young Americans are not simply “unchurched” or “unmosqued.” They are, as Rev. Sumi notes, religiously illiterate, or naïve.

Young people raised without a faith tradition don’t feel tension when looking to many sources for meaning. Even those young people raised in a single tradition, like Catholicism, are no doubt influenced by access to information about all kinds of religions as well as the spiritual journeys of their friends who may not strictly adhere to a single tradition. This is the context in which young Catholics, even the most committed of Catholics, are also navigating life’s biggest questions. This is why, whether turning to the rituals of various religious traditions, the advice of good friends, the subtle bloom of spring flowers, the *aha*’s that emerge from self-reflection, or the perspective that comes from praying to a higher power or reading sacred texts, young people whose faith is unbundled are not guided so much by an institution as by their personal sense of curiosity.

Tide-Turning Tip

Realize that curiosity is the vehicle for young people to work out what they believe about suffering, stress, salvation, existence, and more. We know from our data that they will turn to trusted relationships when they have questions or concerns about how to live a meaningful life or navigate an uncertain time. Rev. Sumi builds these relationships of trust by noticing where their curiosity has taken them in their religious question-asking: Are they just beginning to face some of life’s biggest questions? Are they already sharply curious? Do they need permission to explore without recruitment, or a conversation about the goals of such curious seeking?

> **35%**

of young Catholics say **they don’t turn to religion because they didn’t do anything with religion as a child.**

34% of young Catholics say **they wouldn’t think to go to a faith community in times of uncertainty because it’s not something they’ve done before.**

Curiosity is a driving characteristic of this emerging kind of faith that may transcend traditional boundaries. Some of the great mystics, prophets, and founders of religions also transcended the prescribed boundaries of their traditions at the time. Young people may be curious about the traditions that have shaped your beliefs and practices; when you share, you provide for and expand their religious literacy. Look for what you can harness in the wisdom of your tradition to encourage curiosity that drives young people's religious question-asking.



A Catholic Look at Curiosity

Insights from Dr. Natalia Imperatori-Lee

Ugly headlines have accused college and university teachers of indoctrinating students—a huge overestimation of our power. (I can't get students to read what I assign; trust me when I tell you they aren't following me in some kind of ideological lockstep.) Indoctrination couldn't be further from our goal. Education doesn't aim to constrain students within a particular slate of teachings or substitute for genuine encounter with the world. Education—especially education about religion and theology—functions like an invitation. Too often, my students, many of whom are culturally Catholic but not practicing, have rejected not only Catholicism and Christianity, but all religion. Why? Because they have been presented with religious belief as a slate of answers. But when they are presented with the depth and variety that exists within and among faith traditions, students are freed to relate to religious belief in a new way.



Few students know, for example, that Aquinas integrated philosophers of different faiths into his work. They encounter Aquinas as “the” Catholic thinker, who “proved” God’s existence, and leave it at that. The rich story of Aquinas’s encounter with Jewish, Muslim, and Greek thought gets lost and, with it, we lose an example of genuine dialogue. Boundary crossing, not unlike that exhibited by young people today who are not content to stay within the confines of one religious tradition, is a hallmark of good theology. The incarnation—Christians’ central claim about God’s nature—is itself a boundary crossing event: between the divine and human, the infinite and the finite, the perfect and the very, very messy.

My hope is that Catholic educators are framing the tradition not as a slate of answers to life’s problems—do this, say this, avoid that—but as an invitation to encounter the world with open arms. This is well within our Catholic tradition, embracing saints like Hildegard of Bingen, Teresa of Ávila, Oscar Romero, or Servant of God Dorothy Day, who stood outside the prescribed norms of their day and expanded the boundaries, and therefore the reach, of the Church as it was expressed and understood at the time. Openness to the other, genuine dialogue, and engagement with the world around us—in other words, expressions of religious curiosity—are the hallmarks of a Catholicism that is worth inviting young people to explore.



Dr. Natalia Imperatori-Lee is Professor of Religious Studies at Manhattan College, and the author of *Cuéntame: Narrative in the Ecclesial Present* (Orbis Books, 2018). She lives in the Bronx with her spouse and two sons.

UNBUNDLED IDENTITY

Wholeness in Well-Being

Insights from Nima Dahir

The process of the unbundling is something I resonate with. It makes natural sense to me when I think of my generation, as a Millennial, and the generations younger than me. Young people are reconsidering what to take as a “given” in their faith journeys. There is often a negative connotation of picking and choosing, certain judgments made about how these religious questions are held or pursued. But what young people are exhibiting with unbundling is not picking and choosing for ease; it’s not a refusal to sacrifice. No. These are individualized, thoughtful decisions rooted in a commitment to personal well-being and flourishing. Young people are searching for a faith practice that resonates with them and gives them a sense of attachment to, and belonging within, the community.

Well-being is really at the heart of this desire for wholeness: young people have the language to talk about their physical, spiritual, mental, emotional, relational, and psychological well-being. They are leading the conversations around a more holistic view of what it means to be healthy. And when it comes to religious commitments, young people today are less willing to sacrifice one type of well-being for another. They won’t take the trade-off. Real wholeness wouldn’t require a trade-off: getting to flourish spiritually but at the cost of your relationships, getting to flourish physically but at the cost of mental wellness, etc. Wholeness means the whole picture, well-being in the whole person.

I work with and study immigrant populations, and there’s an interesting nuance to mention about this overall trend toward wholeness. In many instances, the “whole package”—the box containing everything it means to be Muslim, for instance—is important. People find comfort, security, and certainty in having bundled-up clarity: “This is who we are! This is what we do!” The religion confers something rigid, but



that rigidity is often welcome. It makes it easier to move safely through a new world, because some of the guesswork is gone. It helps give concrete footing in contrast to the fluctuating circumstances. I can see why this is valuable for some populations, including why it was important for many generations before.

If a young person came to me with this guiding desire for wholeness as they took up religious questions, I would affirm this value right away. I would tell this young person that the quest for wholeness is a meaningful inroad to faith and spirituality, and I would encourage them to use the mindfulness that spirituality grants us to specify and identify their own sense of self and how faith can serve them in the quest to be their best selves. Finally, I would remind them that seeking wholeness (and seeking all well-being) is both individual *and* communal, and I would encourage them to lean on loved ones and other communities in their development of self and in their search for wholeness.

Religious traditions have long offered a type of wholeness to individuals: here is a comprehensive way to live, to believe, and to practice the good life—the whole picture, all bundled up.



Nima Dahir, from Columbus, Ohio, is a PhD candidate in sociology at Stanford University, where her work focuses on neighborhood change and immigration.

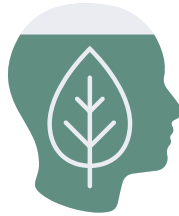


Rebundling Identity through Wholeness

Young people today seek wholeness. Specifically, they want to experience wholeness in their life. They want to feel that their whole self is welcomed and even celebrated within a group or organization as opposed to feeling like they need to change, fix, or hide parts of themselves. This doesn't mean they aren't interested in growth (85% of young people in general tell us, "I believe in personal growth") but that integrity and authenticity are more valuable to them than conformity. In fact, the vast majority say "being authentic" is an all-important value for them (84%).

82% of young Catholics say, "I believe in personal growth."

81% tell us that "being authentic" is an all-important value.



85% of young people believe in personal growth.



84% say being authentic is an all-important value.

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Read a blog post from SAP member Mat about his decision to leave organized religion while still acknowledging the benefits it had for him.

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READ

It's no surprise they have little tolerance for spaces that encourage shedding or hiding parts of the self. Ethan, who is gay, discusses this kind of decision-making in his choice to remain Catholic:

I'm just, I'm kind of in that gray area where, on one hand, I want to trust my religion just because that's what I've been raised with. But on the other hand, I know that parts of it just don't make sense to me. And I guess I'm going through life right now, trying to cherry-pick what makes sense to me and what I want to believe in.



—Ethan, 21



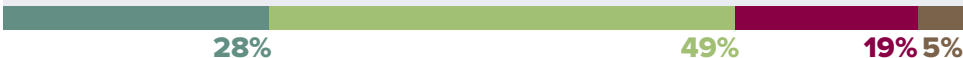
WHOLENESS

Fifty-one percent of young Catholics say they don't turn to religion in times of distress because they don't feel they can be their "full self" in a religious organization. If their whole selves are not welcome, young people won't show up:

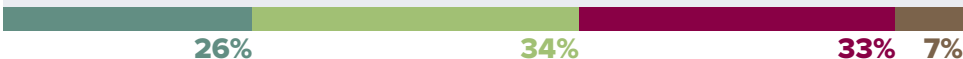
"I do not attend religious or spiritual services because I am not free to be who I am at religious gatherings or worship services."

● Agree a great deal ● Agree somewhat ● Do not agree at all ● Not applicable

Orthodox



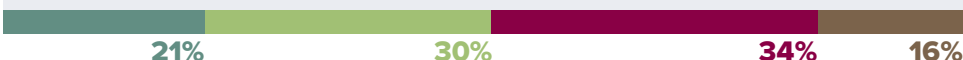
Muslim



Catholic



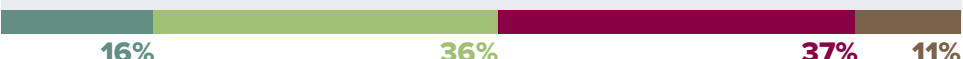
Jewish



Mormon



Protestant



Percentages are approximate due to rounding.

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Watch Dr. Josh Packard and Tim Coons talk about belonging in an age of social isolation and disconnection.

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WATCH

Gen Z is less interested in a complete and intact *system* and more interested in a complete and intact *self*, which may rely on and draw from many systems and traditions.

Tide-Turning Tip

Young people unwilling to deny parts of themselves that don't "fit" institutional norms will shed parts of that institution, if not the institution as a whole, rather than parts of themselves. But the shedding may not be readily apparent. Just as young people who tell us they are religious may not attend, believe, or practice their faith in ways that seem traditional, young people who still appear to fit into the box by outwardly practicing in conventional ways may be discerning whether they really belong.

If young people don't feel free to be themselves, they may find it difficult to fully explore the ways your religious tradition might help them become whole. Take time to assess your organization: does it send signals—subtle or otherwise—to young people that they are more valuable the more they conform to certain norms and the less they ask hard questions about religious beliefs and practices?



A Catholic Look at Wholeness

Insights from Steven Ellair

The hallmark of wholeness should be the cause of great hope for our ministry with young people. It beautifully reminds us that our role is one of walking with young people on their journey toward integrity, exploring with them how the Catholic faith can be part of that journey. If we have any remaining illusions that the goal is only about securing unquestioned adherence to all aspects of the Catholic faith, Faith Unbundled helps us recall that authentically owned faith comes about by testing, questioning, doubting, and challenging. These qualities should be seen as markers of the path to mature faith and should be not only accepted but encouraged. This calls us to an uncompromising welcome of young people so that they feel safe and supported bringing their whole selves to the process of faith formation.

In my own work in Catholic educational publishing, I think about creating an invitation to wholeness by developing resources that present the teachings of the faith in a way that is welcoming and doesn't make presumptions about who the learner is or what their current beliefs or experiences with faith might be. The aim is to support learning environments that are inviting and in which young people can freely and honestly explore how faith can make a difference in their lives and lead to growth and flourishing. By keeping the learner at the center of the curricula and providing engaging, approachable, and relevant learning experiences, I am able to encourage young people to interact with faith in a way that fosters the very wholeness and integrity they are seeking.



Steven Ellair *has a special passion for bringing faith and meaning to life for young people. He has been involved in religious education for over 30 years and has served as a Catholic schoolteacher, parish catechist, youth minister, and archdiocesan educational consultant. For the past 18 years, Steven has found his home in Catholic publishing, currently serving as the Director of Content Development at Saint Mary's Press.*

COMMUNITY UNBUNDLED

Collaborative Connections, Not Competitive Communities

Insights from Chris Stedman

When I was a humanist chaplain, I'd design programs just like typical religious programming. And I was often surprised at low attendance, especially when I'd meet a young person for coffee and find that their questions were the exact kind I was building a program to explore. I could have sunk more resources into better marketing, telling myself she would have come *if only she had known*. But I have since realized it wasn't an issue with the program's quality or the marketing or anything like that. It was the structure itself: opt-in programming when young people are already too busy. Sometimes the greatest gift I could give a young person was permission *not* to attend. But then I had to face the question of my role and work: How could I serve their needs if they didn't show up? What was this community without regular, well-attended gatherings?

I see a broad shift happening across many "givens": young people seem less and less inclined to tie their identity, their religious life, their political beliefs, and so on to any particular institution. And this can be a moment of clarity for institutions. Many dig their heels in and try to make superficial tweaks to their current programming to maintain appeal, but the issue isn't the programming. It isn't a problem with the instances of gathering, but with the institutions doing the gathering.

Here's what I mean: young people know they don't need to belong to a religious institution to benefit from religious ideas and practices. But I also see that belonging to an institution can make accessing those things *more* difficult,



that it's *harder* to benefit from those ideas and practices while a part of that organization. Sometimes, the better, more effective way into a belief or practice is through smaller connections rather than overarching commitments, because the simple fact is that young people aren't likely to knock on the doors of a church or mosque and participate in religion in some wholesale way.

I think a lot of institutions (including those I belong to!) need to reimagine what belonging and participation look like. If they are up for the challenge, the resources they have—things like institutional memory, rich practices, community rituals—will continue to serve the needs of young people. But if they won't reimagine the structure itself, young people will look elsewhere.

The reimagining has to do with how and where young people are already finding connection.

Religious institutions have to show up where young people already are: at protests and rallies, in higher ed seminars, at the workplace. Instead of competing with these other points of meaningful connection, share resources with them. Instead of asking young people to come *here* instead of *there*, meet them there. Join them at the places they are already making and finding life-giving connections, instead of demanding another block of time from their busy days or another commitment to a bundled-up community.

I eventually learned this when I transitioned from a chaplain to a professor. I have the chance to do deep, thoughtful work with the students in my seminar that I rarely got to do with the ones in my care as a chaplain.

Why? Because they're already here.



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Watch Aliza Kline talk with Dr. Josh Packard about how building Shabbat dinners helps young people feel connected.

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WATCH

The class I teach focuses on the search for meaning. I try to give students an opportunity to do what they're already doing in a piecemeal, DIY kind of way, the unique way they're constructing meaning outside of an institution. Because sometimes the work of constructing meaning piece by piece is slow or reactive or subconscious, as they respond to uncertainty or difficulty with whatever resources they have when it hits. My class gives them a chance to take stock of where they're at, where they're finding meaning in their life, and how they're navigating these questions.

I invite students to build a canon of meaningful texts that have helped shape who they are and their worldview. Then we look at those canons together: What's at work here? What do we find here? Often students have never before articulated what moves them or resonates. But initial articulations are footholds to deeper conversations about what matters to them, who they are, and who they are becoming. We spend time on spiritual and human questions in a place where they're already showing up.



Chris Stedman is the author of *IRL: Finding Realness, Meaning, and Belonging in Our Digital Lives (2020)* and *Faithiest (2012)*, writer and host of the narrative podcast *Unread (2021)*, and has written for publications including *The Guardian*, *The Atlantic*, *BuzzFeed*, *Pitchfork*, *VICE*, *The LA Review of Books*, and *The Washington Post*. Previously the founding director of the *Yale Humanist Community* and a fellow at *Yale University*, Chris also served as a humanist chaplain at *Harvard University* and currently teaches in the department of religion and philosophy at *Augsburg University in Minneapolis*. To learn more, visit chrisstedmanwriter.com or follow him on *Twitter*, *Instagram*, or *Facebook* at [@ChrisDStedman](https://twitter.com/ChrisDStedman).



CONNECTION

Rebundling Community through Connections

The hallmarks of Faith Unbundled relate to and build on each other. Young people are curious and will look to multiple sources to bundle the elements of their faith: their beliefs, identity, practices, and community. The unbundling of formal community membership—the kind that’s tied directly to a traditional institution—means young people are instead participating in several overlapping communities, as long as those communities offer opportunities for genuine connection and do not diminish their sense of wholeness.

Springtide data consistently show that young people feel a sense of belonging when they have a *personal* connection within a community. Because young people don’t join communities wholesale by signing up as members who believe, practice, and live in a prescribed way, they opt to define their commitments within a given community with a sense of nuance and even distance. That is, as Chris mentions above, they are reimaging participation:

Sometimes I have found it really hard to identify with Christianity because of other Christians. And I know that’s not necessarily right, because people are not always an accurate representation of the whole and of the belief, but I live in a really small town in a rural area and it can be really discouraging at times to have to identify with part of a church that I really disagree with at times. I don’t currently attend a church, but I’ll listen to sermons online and stuff. And I do some smaller Bible studies with friends.

—Viola, 17



Only 6% of young Catholics **feel strongly that their spirituality is private.**

78% believe in trying to relate to others.



Viola is uninterested in an overarching commitment to “a church that I really disagree with at times” but *is* interested in deep connections with friends on matters of faith. The local community of Christians isn’t providing that, so she articulates a distance from that group while maintaining interpersonal relationships that meet her needs.

Just as Viola turns to friends rather than church for her faith connections, half of all young people ages 13 to 25 tell us, “I don’t need a faith community, because I have other communities.” Since only 7% of young people in general feel strongly that their spirituality is private, and 80% believe in trying to relate to others, these other communities, even if not explicitly related to their faith, may very well be meeting their spiritual and religious needs for connection.

Tide-Turning Tip

Young people, as Chris notes, need help carving out intentional, guided space to ask and answer the questions of faith. For a variety of reasons, young people increasingly find that traditional religious organizations are not that space, though they continue to have the tools and rich resources to aid in the work of the inner life.

Instead of focusing on ways to bring young people into your community or through the doors of your organizations, think about ways you or your religious organization can partner with the spaces they’re already in to offer resources for faith and help them forge meaningful connections with other people, not necessarily for the sake of eventual membership, but simply to support the religious flourishing of young people.



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Read, in our Voices of Young People blog, about how participants in the Springtide Ambassadors Program define and experience *community*.

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READ

A Catholic Look at Connection

Insights from Br. Armand Alcazar

A few years ago, while teaching undergrad students, I had several students reach out to me to discuss my life as a religious brother. But when I agreed to the conversation and asked those students to come to my office, each backed off and asked me to just write out answers to questions that they posed in an email instead. Now, from what I am learning from Springtide Research Institute, I wish I had told them that I would come to meet them at any place of their choice, instead of requiring them to come to me. In order for authentic connection to emerge, we, as mentors for youth, need to be willing to go the extra mile, or the extra block, to go to young people who are somewhat hesitant about what they're getting into. And we have a model for going out of our four comfortable walls to meet others. After all, Jesus didn't sit around in a synagogue waiting for the people to come to him. He was constantly going to them, to the mountains, the valleys, the marketplace, and even into their homes.

But connection is not just about showing up in the spaces young people already find themselves, as Stedman notes above. A sense of connection is impossible in relationships where one side has all the questions and the other all the answers. When Springtide asked young Catholics about reasons for feeling disconnected from religious institutions, more than half (52%) said: "I do not like to be told answers about faith and religion. I'd rather discover my own answers." Twentieth-century Catholic theologian Karl Rahner was fond of describing God as "ultimate mystery." If we as Catholic mentors could only be honest with young people about what we know and don't know about God, perhaps we could make many more connections with them through our shared questions than through our presumed expertise about God.



Br. Armand Alcazar, FSC, PhD, *has worked in education his entire life, teaching theology in high schools and universities. His career has also included leading workshops and retreats on spirituality, collecting oral histories from his Lasallian brothers, contributing to research projects with Catholic publishers, and serving on boards and councils related to his various areas of expertise.*

PRACTICES UNBUNDLED

Don't Fix the Flexibility

Insights from Rabbi Joshua Stanton

The majority of Jewish institutions in the United States came into being—at least in model, and very often in actual form—between 1880 and 1920, and they have more or less had the same goals since then. At the time, the institutions' goal was to help a majority immigrant community settle into life in a new country. It has been a hundred years and more. Our community has integrated remarkably! And now we're just trying to sustain the institutions themselves. That has become the goal, instead of the means to the goal. I say this as the leader of a house of worship! That I love!

But religion needs to serve people's needs. And the simple reason that our religions are not drawing people is because they are not serving people's real needs. People feel compelled to join an institution to have their needs met. But, in the words of Rabbi Ben Spratt, "Our purpose has petrified." And I suspect this is true of many religions.

Still, flexibility and fluidity are, or *can be*, at the heart of what it means to be Jewish. There are so many strands of belonging, so many *ways* to be Jewish. Why would we confine ourselves to just a couple notions of it? We are not a faith, per se, but a group of people with different strands in common (or *not* in common). And when you have enough in common, you get to join together in this wonderful heterogenous amalgamation called community.

The whole notion of sacred space, from the Tabernacle wandering around in the desert, was to hold space; to make space, and then allow for divine interactions to happen. Instead, religious leaders have been trained to take up space, to talk *at* people, to assume that they know they have more truth than they do. But what if we could just wonder together?

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Watch Dr. Josh Packard and Rabbi Joshua Stanton discuss how Jewish young people are navigating their spirituality.

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WATCH



FLEXIBILITY

Young people are experiencing constant fluctuation, in internal and external ways. The circumstances of the past year, yes, but there are also people who experience fluidity in so many areas of their life. At a very human level, there are people who are going through the internal work of discovering a shift in their gender identity; there are people whose needs or interests or worldview is shifting and changing day by day. People are asking and answering religious questions in unique ways. And I see fluctuation constantly in young people because there is no one place that meets all their needs.

I see that part of my job is holding space so that young people can deal with that flux in their religious and spiritual lives. My job is to help them see religion and spirituality through the lens of change. I hope to be a constant in their lives as the whole world is spinning around them. I want them to feel free, I want them to feel empowered in their spiritual journeys. I hope this gives them the chance to experience even more variation, to *lean into* the flux and the fluidity because they feel safe knowing they have a home base. Young people don't need me to fix the fluctuation, they need a consistent presence as they work to navigate it.

So when a young person is holding on to the value of flexibility as they navigate religious and spiritual questions, I respond in a simple way. I ask for their story. Because their story is what connects the dots. And until I understand how their practices connect to their lived experiences, I won't understand the internal logic that brings together a life of meaning for them.



Photo courtesy of
Hannah Stampleman

Rabbi Joshua Stanton is spiritual co-leader of East End Temple and Senior Fellow at CLAL — The National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership. His interviews and writings have appeared in a dozen languages, and he is currently working on a book with Rabbi Benjamin Spratt, whose ideas are interwoven in this section. You can find Rabbi Joshua Stanton on Twitter @JoshuaMZStanton.



44% of young Catholics say, **“Religious communities are rigid, restrictive, and that’s not helpful to me.”**



Rebundling Practices through Flexibility

More than half of young people in general (52%) tell us, “Religious communities are rigid, restrictive, and that’s not helpful to me.” Young people aren’t looking for static answers to dynamic questions. They don’t expect simple solutions to complex bouts of uncertainty, and they don’t necessarily see religious institutions capable of the same nuance.

Unbundled faith is not defined by a static relationship to a system or institution. This makes the religiosity of young people inherently flexible. When systems of belief seem “closed” (to use Delio’s term), they cut off the chance for curious exploration. In a phrase, it discourages religious and spiritual question asking. In Alex’s case, something more “open” is a requirement for any future involvement in religion:



I’m not doing anything in terms of spiritual life. I’m in this period where I need to like take a break from anything of that sort. I have a lot of feelings about some not-great experiences. So I’m working through that. But even in the future, I don’t think my beliefs would change, but I think if someone invited me to something, I’d be like, sure. I’d be open to that. But only if I feel like it’s like not going to be exclusionary and it’s not really rigid. Only if it’s pretty open. Then I think I’d be down.

—Alex, 18



Young people are inclined to build something from scratch from many sources rather than accept the precepts of a single institution.

Tide-Turning Tip

Fifty-five percent of all young people, and 52% of young Catholics, said the most helpful thing a person did for them while facing uncertainty was “just let [them] talk.” Rabbi Joshua begins here, asking for the story that can connect the dots amid flexibility and fluidity in various parts of a person’s life.

Listening well, especially about matters of community, meaning, identity, or faith, is an art form. It is not just about uncrossed arms or nodding along, but about witnessing a young person express something, possibly for the first time. Spend time actively practicing the art of listening by responding to someone’s sharing with curiosity about—not advice for—who and how they are becoming.



A Catholic Look at Flexibility

Insights from Becca Meagher

The flexibility of religion is the anchor that can accompany young people as they navigate uncertainty. As a Catholic high school theology teacher, I am often the first face of the tradition for my students. This comes with great privilege and great responsibility. As a way to meet the changing needs of our young people, our religion department began designing seminar-style theology courses rooted in story and conversation as a way to engage our students in their faith journey. Often my

colleagues and I remind ourselves that the questions are the curriculum. How we respond to our students' questions either creates space for them to wonder, wander, and wish—or promotes petrification, which leads to something rigid and inflexible.

The guiding statements of our courses are designed to elicit questions from our students and to encourage conversation about and exploration of the beauty of our tradition. But we know that these guiding statements can be gateways to other paths to spiritual connectedness. I often speak of a “continuity of doctrine” when referring to how a Catholic teaching, concept, or practice may look in non-Christian traditions. Often the teachings are similar. My students find this appealing, as they desire to see spirituality and religious identity as something that can be theirs even if they don't subscribe to a particular faith, as Faith Unbundled seems to capture. The questions and the conversations that ensue become like bread crumbs that the students use to guide their way as they look for individuals and communities that allow them to wonder, wander, and wish.



Becca Meagher is a theology teacher at Benilde-St. Margaret's School in St. Louis Park, Minnesota. She has worked in Catholic education for over 20 years. Most recently, she has been developing curriculum rooted in story and conversation as a way to engage students on their faith journey.



Every new generation nuances the traditions they've inherited, whether those traditions are religious, spiritual, secular, or something else, to make sense and meaning of the particular circumstances of their lives. Gen Z, in that sense, is no different. But where they're similar in kind, they're different in degree: we know today's young people are less tied to religious institutions than were the



generations before them. They are unique in how they're constructing their faith lives. The hallmarks of curiosity, wholeness, connection, and flexibility are the foundation of a new kind of faith, an unbundled faith, that adopts and adapts the parts of faith—beliefs, identity, community, and practices—from a range of traditions, religious or not. Karleigh, raised evangelical but whose insights reflect those of many young Catholics, puts it succinctly in an interview with Springtide. She says she is “not religious” and describes herself as “a more scientific person,” thinking that God probably doesn't exist, but *might*. Still, she tells us, she is interested in finding “a way.”

The different religions around the world are extremely fascinating. People who pray five times a day or who fast during the daytime are extremely dedicated. And I am amazed at what they do. Obviously not everyone wants to do this, but I just like to experience different religions. And then I can maybe at some point find a religion that I want to be part of. I probably won't find something I want to join. But even if people don't want to be part of a religion, just help young people find something—like a person, or an activity, or maybe not activity, but *a way*—so that they connect and have faith in something that can support them and guide them in life.

—Karleigh, 16

When a young person's faith is unbundled from a single, intact religious system or tradition, often they lack guideposts or boundaries for discerning beliefs or practices. Leaders who make room for curiosity, wholeness, connection, and flexibility in the lives of young people can themselves become effective guideposts, the kind that young people can trust and turn to in times of uncertainty, or whenever they're facing life's biggest questions.



 15

Read the blog post about the playlist that Springtide interns created by inviting young people to suggest songs that help express how they feel amid uncertainty.

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READ

A CATHOLIC LOOK

Concluding Thoughts on Uncertainty & Unbundling

Springtide invited Josh and Oscar Noem—a father and son—to read and reflect on this report and offer concluding thoughts. Josh is an editor for a Catholic publication, and Oscar is a student at a Catholic university and a member of the Springtide Ambassadors Program. Josh and Oscar represent the two audiences at the heart of this report: we are writing to Catholic leaders, like Josh, who are eager to engage and serve young Catholics, and we are talking with and about young Catholics, like Oscar, as well as his classmates, siblings, friends, and acquaintances. Below, Josh and Oscar model an exchange of openness, curiosity, and trust.

OSCAR: Hello, I'm Oscar, a student at the University of Notre Dame and a Springtide Ambassador. Looking over this report, a few things stand out as important takeaways.

For young people, modern religion and spirituality is a deeply personal experience. We live in a world that's constantly shifting and evolving, that forces us to evolve along with it. We aren't going to go out looking for an institution that reflects everything we agree with; instead, we tend to construct our own, more personal faith from the elements of religion that we already find meaningful, often free of the baggage and overbearing oversight of the grand institutions. If the Catholic Church wants to reach us, it is not going to be able to do so by simply opening its doors and inviting us in. It has to open those doors and then *go out of them*; it has to reach out to the community. Instead of offering rigid, incontrovertible answers to questions people aren't asking, the Church needs to ask its people: "What do *you* need right now?"

I really believe that the Church has plenty of potential to be the buoy that my generation is looking for in the chaotic sea of modern society, a safe space where we can rest, process, and recover before continuing on our own journeys. But a buoy does no good onshore; it has to meet us in the waters we're treading.

JOSH: Hi, I'm Josh, and I serve as editor at Grotto Network, an initiative that is pioneering new approaches to digital evangelization. When I review this report, here's what's going through my head—both in light of my work and as a parent of Oscar, the remarkable young man you just heard from.

It used to be that the most important decision a pastor made was what time to unlock the doors at the parish—by that I mean, there was a built-in expectation that as long as the doors were open, the People of God would show up. But this generation is not looking for an institution to offer answers by which to navigate their life. What they want more than answers is *accompaniment*—someone to listen and understand them for who they are. So the Spirit is calling forth relatable, healthy, whole, trustworthy ministers who are willing to stand alongside young adults and hear their stories. This generation is leading us into an era of renewal of the Church, and their needs give us a clearer vision of what and who we should be: a community animated by the heart of the Gospel, which is Jesus' call to love one another.

JOSH: So, Oscar, we both used the image of opening doors. Think of a Catholic priest who *did* open a door to faith for you. What characterized him? What gave him credibility in your eyes?

OSCAR: He didn't approach me from any position of power or authority—he started the conversation as a friend, as someone who could offer advice and support in a time of need rather than as an authority who came to answer my prayers.

OSCAR: You talk about how my generation is leading us into a vision of what the Church should be. How do you see us doing that?

JOSH: Keep being you! Which is to say, continue being faithful and creative and true to yourselves and to one another. The Church will catch up. Your generation has high standards—you don't share your allegiances easily. And that's a gift for the Church because it is shaking us up from our old ways of doing things. It's just what we need right now: a reminder that faith comes alive in relationships, in how we walk together. Without that personal connection, nothing else matters. That's been true since Jesus called his first followers.



Oscar Noem, student,
University of Notre Dame



Josh Noem, senior editor,
Grotto Network



Conclusion

Uncertainty is at the heart of adolescence and young adulthood, with each year different from the last and looming questions about who and how to be in the world. For many young people, the past year intensified this already common experience of difficulty, change, and upheaval.

Uncertainty is also at the heart of many religious traditions, including in Catholicism. Perhaps more than any other modern institution, religion is unafraid of life's biggest questions.

The State of Religion & Young People 2021, Catholic Edition: Navigating Uncertainty investigates how young people experience and navigate these seasons of uncertainty. Who and what do they turn to when coping? What kind of help do they hope to receive when they turn to certain relationships or practices?

We learned that Catholic young people turn to friends in times of need most often (54%). They turn to prayer and to trusted adults at the same rate (34%). They turn to someone from their faith community (18%) only marginally more often than they turned to “no one” at all (14%) amid times of uncertainty. This

disconnect is a two-way street: young Catholics report not reaching out to religious leaders in times of uncertainty, and not being reached out to.

But our data also reveal that despite not turning to religious leaders, communities, practices, or beliefs in times of uncertainty or difficulty, a majority of young people in general identify as “religious.”

In other words, young people who identify as religious don’t necessarily participate in religion in the traditional sense. This is true even of young Catholics, including those who tell us they are “very religious.” Young people in general are not accepting the whole “bundle” of rituals, practices, and beliefs that religious institutions offer. They are approaching their faith differently.

Faith Unbundled describes the way young people, including young Catholics, increasingly construct their faith by combining elements such as beliefs, identity, practices, and community from a variety of religious and nonreligious sources rather than receiving all these things from a single, intact system or tradition.

Amid the trend toward this new, “unbundled” way of approaching faith, young people who identify as religious, including young Catholics, are more likely to report that they are flourishing in nearly every area of their health, well-being, and relationships.

When young people unbundle their beliefs, identity, community, and practices from a single religious system, their seeking will be marked by curiosity, wholeness, connection, and flexibility. Following the insights of Reverend Sumi, Dr. Imperatori-Lee, Nima, Steven, Chris, Brother Armand, Rabbi Joshua, and Becca, we can see that leaders who make room for curiosity, wholeness, connection, and flexibility in the lives of young people can be the kind of guides young people trust and turn to in times of uncertainty, or whenever they’re facing life’s biggest questions.

Equipped with renewed understanding, critical insights, and expert advice, this report should help you support the young people in your life even better, wherever they fall on the spectrum of diversely held beliefs, practices, or community commitments.

APPENDIX

Research Methodology

Quantitative Research

Springtide Research Institute collects quantitative data through surveys and qualitative data through interviews. The quantitative data tell us what is happening. The qualitative data tell us why and how it is happening.

For the quantitative data in this report, we conducted five primary studies over the last year, beginning in the fall of 2020. While the specific phenomenon of each study varied, all projects contained a set of repeating, foundational questions to measure demographics, uncertainty, flourishing, and faith life. We surveyed a nationally representative sample of young people ages 13 to 25 in the United States, totaling 10,274 participants. The sample was weighted for age, gender, race, and region to match the demographics of the country and produces a margin of error of +/- 3%. The age, gender, racial, and regional demographics of this sample are as follows:

Age	Valid Percent
13 to 17	40%
18 to 25	60%
Total	100%

Gender	Valid Percent
Girl/Woman or Transgender Girl/Woman	51%
Boy/Man or Transgender Boy/Man	42%
Nonbinary	7%
Total	100%

Race	Valid Percent
White	52%
Hispanic or Latino	18%
Black or African American	17%
American Indian or Alaska Native	1%
Asian	8%
Native Hawaiian / Pacific Islander	1%
Other	3%
Total	100%

Region	Valid Percent
Northeast	18%
Midwest	20%
South	39%
West	24%
Total	100%

Tables may not add up to exactly 100% due to rounding.

Qualitative Research

For the qualitative research, we conducted 65 in-depth interviews either in person, via telephone, or via video. Interviews focused on understanding how young people navigate uncertainty and dimensions of their faith lives. Conversations were guided but open-ended, allowing for as much direction as possible from the interviewee. Interviews were transcribed and then analyzed thematically.

Interviews and survey responses are confidential, and all names of research participants in this report are pseudonyms. For more information or to obtain the survey instrument or request access to the data sets, please contact us at research@springtideresearch.org.

Our questions about the dimensions of flourishing were inspired by the validated categories in the Netherlands Mental Health Survey and Incidence Study-2, as featured in an analysis of flourishing factors by Schotanus-Dijkstra et al. (2015). To construct our flourishing scale, the dimensions were combined in a similar manner to the NEMESIS scale and used as an overall measure of flourishing.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Created by the publishing team of Springtide Research Institute.

Printed in the United States of America

5936INT

ISBN 978-1-64121-177-2

Research Team

Josh Packard, PhD, Executive Director

Megan Bissell, MA, Head of Research

Nabil Tueme, MA, Associate Researcher

Amanda Hernandez, MA, Associate Researcher

Adrianna Smell, MA, Associate Researcher

Sean Zimny, MA, Associate Researcher

Writing Team

Ellen Koneck, MAR, Head of Writing & Editing

Josh Packard, PhD, Executive Director

Maura Thompson Hagarty, PhD, Developmental Editor

Lucy Cobble, Editorial Intern

Creative Design & Production Team

Steven Mino

Sigrid Lindholm

Becky Gochanour

Brooke Saron

Paul Peterson

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Resources Listed throughout the Report

The resources referenced in numbered marginal notes in this report, which are listed here, are available at springtideresearch.org/ts21-ce-resources.

RESOURCE 1

Page 5—Watch how members of our Springtide Ambassadors Program bring our Springtide Tribute to life with their creative interpretation and filmmaking skills.

RESOURCE 2

Page 14—Watch Dr. Josh Packard and Ryan Burge discuss the “nones” of religion, and young people who are growing into religion.

RESOURCE 3

Page 15—Watch Dr. Josh Packard explain why a sociological approach is needed to navigate religious identity among young people.

RESOURCE 4

Page 21—Watch some of Springtide’s ambassadors discuss returning to campus in the fall and what the pandemic has meant for them.

RESOURCE 5

Page 27—Watch Dr. Josh Packard and Derrick Scott III talk about how non-white and queer young people are navigating church.

RESOURCE 6

Page 28—Read about these findings in our Social Distance Study.

RESOURCE 7

Page 63—Watch Dr. Josh Packard talk with Crystal Chiang and Brett Ryan Talley about youth ministry and Gen Z.

RESOURCE 8

Page 64—Read, in our Voices of Young People blog, about how seven student filmmakers turned to art to process the pandemic.

RESOURCE 9

Page 70—Watch Dr. Josh Packard interview Harrison Blum and Rev. Sumi Kim on what attracts Gen Z to Buddhism.

RESOURCE 10

Page 78—Read a blog post from SAP member Mat about his decision to leave organized religion while still acknowledging the benefits it had for him.

RESOURCE 11

Page 79—Watch Dr. Josh Packard and Tim Coons talk about belonging in an age of social isolation and disconnection.

RESOURCE 12

Page 84—Watch Aliza Kline talk with Dr. Josh Packard about how building Shabbat dinners helps young people feel connected.

RESOURCE 13

Page 86—Read, in our Voice of Young People blog, about how participants in the Springtide Ambassadors Program define and experience community.

RESOURCE 14

Page 88—Watch Dr. Josh Packard and Rabbi Joshua Stanton discuss how Jewish young people are navigating their spirituality.

RESOURCE 15

Page 93—Read the blog post about the playlist that Springtide interns created by inviting young people to suggest songs that help express how they feel amid uncertainty.

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Our data matters to Catholics.

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"Everyone's got data. Pew, Barna, everyone. But the unique thing about Springtide is that they help us answer the question, What next? We have this data, now what do we do with it? That's why I wanted Josh to come and speak in our diocese."

—Francine Costantini
Director of Youth Ministry
Catholic Diocese of Cleveland

On our reports . . .

"The 2021 report is really remarkable, and I don't say that lightly. I decline to share a lot of the 'study of young people' stuff that's out there because I question its quality, depth, or expansiveness. I really do want everyone who worked on this to know that the work you put in is obviously apparent, and I will help get it in front of youth ministers, college ministers, clergy, educators, etc."

—Michael Bayer
Director of Youth, Young Adults,
and Campus Ministry
Catholic Diocese of Lexington

On our custom research . . .

"The conversations we had around the findings of the Springtide research inspired me and renewed in me a sense of hope for the future direction of religious education and Lasallian education. I am very excited to see what the implications of the study will be."

—Tony Behan
Chair of Religion Department
De La Salle High School
New Orleans