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Why They're Leaving and Why It Matters: Gen Z's Mass Exodus from Church

Abstract

"Whether we want to admit it or not, the Church has an image problem. Today's iteration of the Church isn't appealing to Gen Z."

Posting about reasons for the decline in church affiliation from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/why-theyre-leaving-and-why-it-matters-gen-zs-mass-exodus-from-church/>

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Comments

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Aaron Baart

The church where I was baptized and grew up, where my parents met and fell in love, and that my grandfathers helped build, no longer exists. It wasn't too long ago that the building and its congregation were influential and significant in the neighborhood. It was one of the larger churches in the city, full of vibrant community members who were active in government, commerce, local schools, and social justice. But merely one generation later, that church no longer exists, and the property is now cluttered with condos. But what's worse—my church's story isn't very unique.

Perhaps you can recount a similar story or share anecdotal evidence about how commitment to the institutional church is waning, how family schedules today hardly leave room for church involvement anymore, how the moral compass of our culture is changing. Regardless of how the story is told, the evidence is indisputable—we are entering uncharted territory in American history. As Dean of Chapel on a Christian college campus, parents ask me all the time, “Why?”

In his 2017 book, *Meet Generation Z*, James Emery White articulates three key forces at play in this current cultural moment that have led to an increasingly post-Christian culture in America: secularization, privatization, and pluralization. These forces are particularly at play in Gen Z, a common short-form for the generation born between 1999-present. White suggests that one significant reason these values matter so much is because of the sheer size of this generation: “By 2020, members of Gen Z will account for 40% of all consumers. They will not simply influence American culture, as any generation would; they will constitute American culture.”¹

Rather than hitting the panic button, perhaps it would help to understand the motivating factors within Gen Z. According to recent research from the Barna Group, there are six trends that are powerfully at work to create the ethos of this generation:

1. They are screenagers (57% spend 4+ hrs./day in front of a digital screen; and 26% spend 8+ hrs./day in front of a screen)
2. Their worldview is post-Christian (unlike any American generation before them)
3. “Safe spaces” are normal (a result of pluralism’s desire not to ever offend)
4. Real safety is a myth (they all grew up post 9/11)
5. They are diverse (over ½ of Gen Z in non-white)
6. Their parents are “double-minded” (they are “helicopter parents” in some respects, relatively absent in others)²

These forces have combined to create an emerging trend in the American story: the rise of the *Nones*—the new term for the religiously unaffiliated. In 1940, only 5% of Americans claimed no religious identity. Fifty years later, in 1990, little had changed with still only 8% of Americans claiming no religious identity. But by 2008, that number had nearly doubled to 15%, then grew to over 19% by 2012, and 23% by 2014. That growth curve is still accelerating at a furious rate; and when factoring in only adults under 30, the number was already 36% by 2014.³ According to Allen Cooperman, Pew’s Director of Religion Research, another way to translate this data is to say,

“There are more than four former Christians [in America] for every new convert to Christianity.”

Barna’s research also revealed significant value differences between even Millennials (the generation born between 1981-1998) and Gen Z. For example, in Gen Z there are pronounced levels of increased focus on education, career stability, financial security, following one’s dreams, and simply enjoying one’s youth. Church involvement and participation in organized faith formation activities simply aren’t as congruent with these prioritizing values for Gen Z.

Wanting to test some of these theories on my own campus, I used anonymous texting in chapel to poll 400 Christian college students (the first 400 respondents) this past semester. In one question, I asked them:

“If I were ever to stop going to church, it would be because . . .” (answers following)

1. Church is irrelevant to my life – 2%
2. Church is too boring – 14%
3. Churches have problems – 54%
4. I’m simply not interested – 2%
5. I don’t have the time – 10%
6. I don’t believe in God – 5%
7. There’s no value in attending – 13%

It is important to keep in mind that I was polling the students who are actively involved in their faith formation (after all, they were attending a non-mandatory chapel at 11:00 am on a Wednesday morning). I was expecting answers related to busyness or an unforeseen decline in

faith. What I wasn't expecting was that over half of them (54%) pointed to the problems they already see evident in our churches. And yet, this matches the national data.

In their 2016 book, *Churchless*, George Barna and David Kinnaman demonstrate their findings that two in every three unchurched Americans consider themselves spiritual people and that more than half of all Americans say that their faith is very important to their lives. Moreover, they found that 99% are aware of Christianity, and 69% hold a favorable view toward it. And yet, at the same time “nearly half of all Americans see no value in personally attending church.”⁴

Whether we want to admit it or not, the Church has an image problem. Today's iteration of the Church isn't appealing to Gen Z. We can bemoan that fact and try to convince ourselves that this new generation isn't loyal. However, the reality we need to confront, one way or the other, is that the manifestation of church we have put in front of them is not appealing enough, beautiful enough, or transformative enough for them to want to be a part of at the same rate as any of the earlier generations.

In other words, the problem in the American church is not theirs, it's ours. We need to spend the coming years taking a long, hard look in the mirror and listening more than we talk if we really want to stem the tide of the departure that we have created.

Before you slump further into your recliner or despair at these findings, be reminded by a faith that has always pointed to death before a resurrection. And, if that is still the center of our story—of the Gospel—and if Jesus' promise still holds that “I will build my church, and the gates of hades will not prevail against it,” then maybe, just maybe, it's not our culture but our Jesus who has us right where he wants us—on the verge of renewal, rebirth, and resurrection.

FOOTNOTES

1. James Emery White, *Meet Generation Z*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2017.
2. Barna Group, *Gen Z: The Culture, Beliefs and Motivations Shaping the Next Generation*. Barna Group, 2018.
3. James Emery White, *Meet Generation Z*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2017.
4. George Barna and David Kinnaman, eds. *Churchless: Understanding Today's Unchurched and How to Connect with Them*. Tyndale Momentum, 2016.