

Young Adults Who Abandon Faith May Have 'Lukewarm' Upbringing

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The idea that young adults are abandoning their faith in droves may be widely accepted but isn't fully accurate. So says a Focus on the Family study that casts light on trends among young adults that may contradict doomsday predictions for the Christian faith.

The study, titled "Millennial Faith Participation and Retention," tracked the religious trends of Millennials (usually those born between 1980 and 2000) and found that only a fraction are leaving their childhood faith -- usually because they may not have had much of one to begin with.

The study utilizes data from the Pew research sources and the National Science Foundation's annual General Social Survey.

About a fifth (18 percent) of young adults raised in homes with any measure of religious influence are now unaffiliated with a specific faith, according to the Focus on the Family analysis. Sixty (60) percent of Millennials, meanwhile, categorize themselves as "keeping faith."

Of those who are unaffiliated, only 11 percent said they had a strong faith as a child and lived in a home where a vibrant faith was practiced and taught. In other words, the vast majority of young adults leaving Christianity never had a strong faith to start with.

"This is not a crisis of faith, per se, but of parenting," the Focus on the Family study noted. "Parents who provide a home where faith is vibrantly practiced -- even imperfectly -- are remarkably likely to create young adults who remain serious Christians, even as they sometimes go through bumpy spots in the road," the study said. "Not surprisingly, homes modeling lukewarm faith do not create enduring faith in children."

The study also found that 20 percent of young adults are switching faiths, with most of the transition being from one Christian denomination to another. Citing the General Society Survey (GSS), the study noted that the percentage of Americans identifying with mainline Protestant churches declined by 2.2 percent from 1991 to 2012, while those identifying with more conservative evangelical churches gained slightly (0.6 percent).

The GSS also indicated a commonly-reported growth in the number of Americans claiming no particular religious affiliation (from 8.1 percent in 1991 to 19.7 percent in 2012). Among Millennials, however, the study says that many of these "nones" have not abandoned faith altogether but rather turned to a more generalized spirituality.

The study, which was released in August, cited some leading theories as to why "nones" have risen in number among Millennials: Young adults tend to engage less in community participation (which includes church); are more likely to view religious people as insincere, hypocritical or judgmental; and are increasingly breaking from churches and people who practice "what they see as strident conservative political rhetoric."

Additionally, the study noted that leading scholars associate religious disengagement with the trend to postpone marriage and parenthood. "Settling down in family usually means settling down to church," the study said. "Growing strong marriages and thriving families is an important church growth strategy that cannot be ignored."

Among the study's key conclusions for ministry...

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