

young
adult
ministry
Trend Report



TOPICAL NEWS, RELIABLE DATA &
ACTIONABLE INSIGHTS FOR MINISTRY TODAY

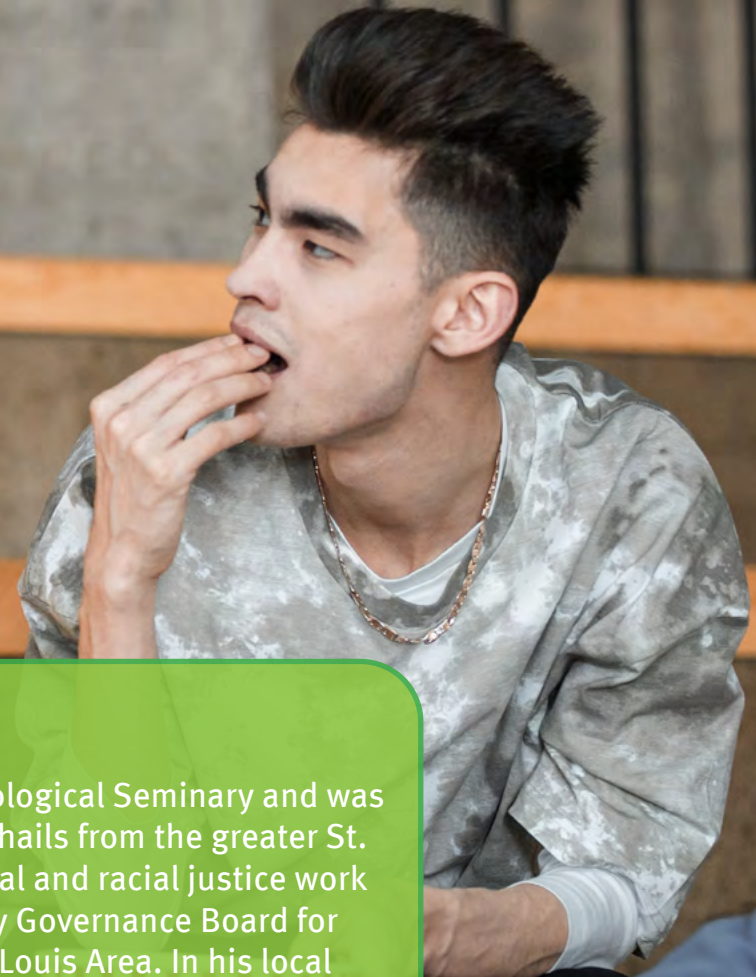


Spirituality & Religion



WHO WE ARE

We are a team of seminary faculty and church practitioners seeking to support and encourage church leaders as they engage youth and young adults (13–39-year-olds) in their ministries. We hope to provide an accessible overview of current trends in North American society that can help to inform youth and young adult ministries across church traditions. We believe that a careful analysis and engagement with cultural and social trends is crucial to ministry with young people and we aim to support practitioners by making that analysis “short and sweet” for the busy pastor and church leader.



Team Member Highlight!



The Rev. Aaron Rogers recently graduated from Virginia Theological Seminary and was ordained earlier this month (Congratulations Aaron!). He hails from the greater St. Louis, Missouri area and has long been involved in social and racial justice work in his hometown, including his work on the Community Governance Board for the Racial Healing and Justice Fund for the Greater St. Louis Area. In his local Diocese of Missouri, Aaron is the Ministry Developer for Young Adult Ministry and serves on the Executive Leadership Team of the Dismantling Racism Commission. Furthermore, Aaron serves as the board chair for both the East Side Aligned and Faith For Justice organizations. Once described by Charlie Parker as a “jazzy freedom fighter and millennial mystic,” Aaron envisions his social justice work as a form of sociological jazz—riffing on melodies old and new with flair and joy.

CONTENTS

02

WHO WE
ARE

04

UPTICK IN
RELIGIOSITY AMONG
YOUNG PEOPLE

05

GENDER
DIFFERENCES IN
RELIGIOSITY (PART 1)

06

GENDER
DIFFERENCES IN
RELIGIOSITY (PART 2)

07

GENDER
DIFFERENCES IN
RELIGIOSITY (PART 3)

08

POLITICS &
RELIGIOSITY
— RETURN OF THE SOCIAL
GOSPEL?

09

PARENTHOOD AND
RELIGIOSITY

10

PLACES OF BELONGING
FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

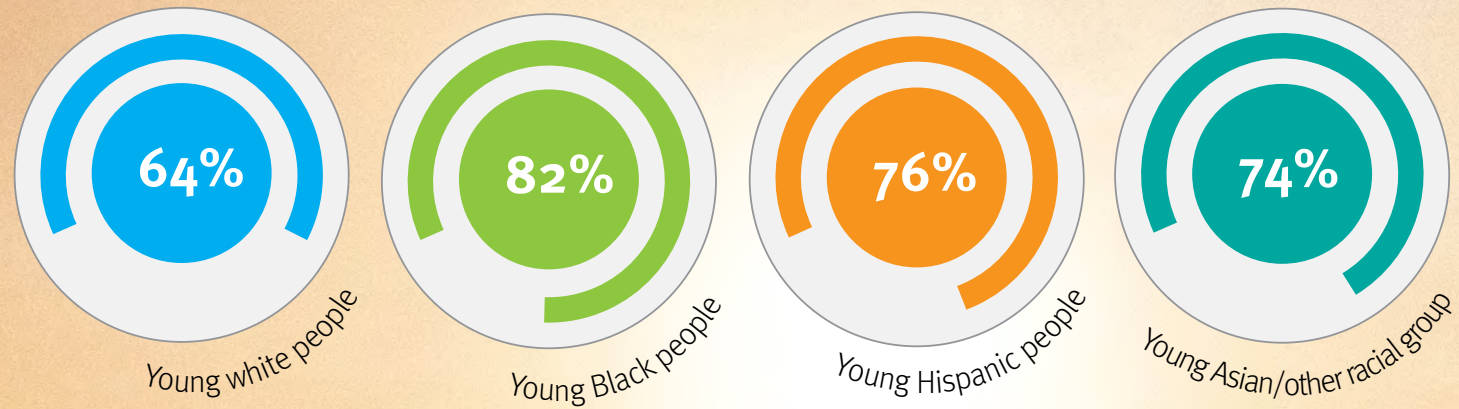
11

COMMUNITY
AND BELONGING
—A FUTURE FOR
THE CHURCH?

Subscribe

Sign up for a paid subscription and **get access to our monthly newsletter!** Our June edition will focus on this recent report, teasing out implications and actionable ideas for church and youth leaders today. Our May edition focused on **Social Media Use among young people** and our April edition covered

dating and partnering norms. Sign up today and get access to our newsletter archive along with all future editions! Each newsletter provides insights into ongoing trends among young people, connecting these trends to helpful resources and ministry ideas for leaders today.



Uptick in religiosity among young people

In our May 25th Insights slide we described recent research from YPulse that showed an **increase in the number of young people who consider themselves religious and who believe that religion is important to them**. While only 63% said that religion was important to them in 2018, that number jumped to 68% in the most recent YPulse Spirituality and Religion Behavior Report. Furthermore, 34% of young people (ages 13-39) described themselves as religious in 2022, but that number also increased to 37%. Though these figures represent small snapshots of change, more of a slight shift than a sea change, the implications are important nonetheless.

The subgroups within this data set also reveal some interesting trends. Though there was a slight increase in religiosity among those in college (68%) versus those not in school (66%), there were substantial differences between racial and ethnic groups.. **While 64% of young white people (ages 13-39) said religion was important to them, this figure jumped to 82% for Black people, 76% for Hispanics and 74% for Asian/other racial groups**. As the nation becomes more and more racially diverse, and already is so among Gen Z and Millennial generations, perhaps the demographic trends in religiosity will also shift.

All data on this slide comes from YPulse's May 2023 Religion and Spirituality Behavior Report

Gender Differences in Religiosity (Part One)

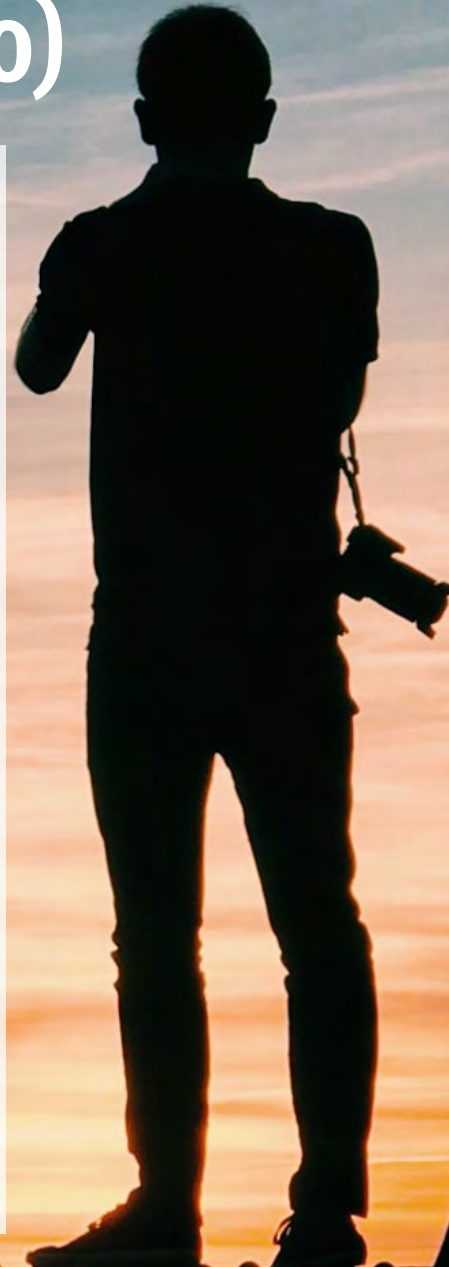
There were some interesting trends between subgroups in YPulse's data as well. For instance, while 71% of males reported that religion was important to them, this figure dipped to 65% for females. This overall difference between genders is almost entirely attributable to differences *within* the Millennial generation (for Gen Z, 69% of males and 68% of females reported religion as "important" to them). **Among Millennial men (ages 22-39), 71% reported religion as being important to them versus only 63% of Millennial women.**

All data on this slide comes from YPulse's May 2023 Religion and Spirituality Behavior Report

Gender Differences in Religiosity (Part Two)

There are myriad possible explanations for the disparity in religiosity between Millennial men and women—hopefully future research will help point us in the right direction. One possible explanation is offered by Richard Reeves in his 2022 book, *Of Boys and Men: Why the Modern Male is Struggling, Why It Matters, and What to Do about It*. As Reeves discusses in his recent interview on [The Ezra Klein Show](#), **boys and men perform better with more direct and clearly understandable social roles, expectations and goals** (women, generally speaking, do not require these structures to the same degree).

Perhaps some young men see such clarity in organized religion and, whether consciously or not, recognize that it fills an important gap in their orientation to the world? As Reeves describes in the interview, men tend to gravitate towards more hierarchical social structures because they provide more obvious sets of social roles, expectations, and goals. This is both a boon to churches and a potential threat, as the same impulse drawing men into religious organizations can also push them towards more antisocial activities (gang involvement, cults, far-right militias, etc.).



Gender Differences in Religiosity (Part Three)

Let's switch focal points from higher male religiosity to the lower levels of religiosity among Millennial women. Why the big difference in religiosity between young men and women? One possible explanation for this difference is political: the surging influence of the religious right during the Trump presidency and the conservative shift on the Supreme Court in the last five years has had a major impact on women's access to reproductive healthcare in various parts of the U.S., and this change may be impacting their approach to organized religion. **That is, women are bearing the brunt of the anti-choice politics of the religious right and the GOP, and may be reacting against it by keeping organized religion at a distance** (at least much more so than young Millennial and Gen Z boys and men).

Perhaps Millennial women have these issues much more center-of-mind than Gen Z women and girls (5% more Gen Z women and girls said religion was important to them compared with Millennial women). This difference could be connected to the fact that most Gen Z females still live with their families of origin—they have not yet struck out on their own and made personal decisions about religious observance. At the same time, it could be connected to the fact that Millennial women are closer to the national average time of child-bearing years, and so the legal changes around reproductive health impact them more generally than Gen Z females. The two possibilities are not mutually exclusive, and the answer is most likely a combination of these and other sociological factors. Further research as to the source of this gender difference will be necessary to provide greater clarity.



Politics and Religiosity — Return of the Social Gospel?

Another important insight from the data set is that **a majority of both Millennial men (57%) and women (53%) would prefer churches to support progressive politics.** Considering demographic trends in mainline church traditions specifically, we can assume an even greater majority preference here. That is, since this dataset comes from a randomized cohort, we can expect that those who have conservative or very conservative political views would self-sort into more conservative church denominations (evangelical Protestants, for example, make up [25% of the American public](#)). Thus, a preference for churches supporting progressive politics among Millennials and Gen Z individuals *already in the pews* of mainline congregations would be even stronger than the slight majority represented above.

What does a clear progressive political preference among young people today mean for the church and how we engage politics in our community? How can the church speak to the social and political concerns of young people while retaining credibility with longer term Gen Z and Baby Boomer parishioners? Most importantly, how can we nurture the Christian vocation of young people as they explore and engage political and social activism? **How can we partner with them to join God’s mission for a better world?**

The data around progressive political support in churches does not mean, however, that young people want religious traditions to play major roles in politics or the law. In fact, **72% of young people agree that “religion should not be a part of politics or laws.”** It seems that young people want support of progressive politics from churches rather than any overt or direct participation in political or legal processes. Indeed, Professor and Chair of the University of Notre Dame’s political science department David Campbell [argues](#) that many young people see religion as bound up with conservative politics and the Republican party specifically. He believes this is a significant cause for religious disaffection among young people today.



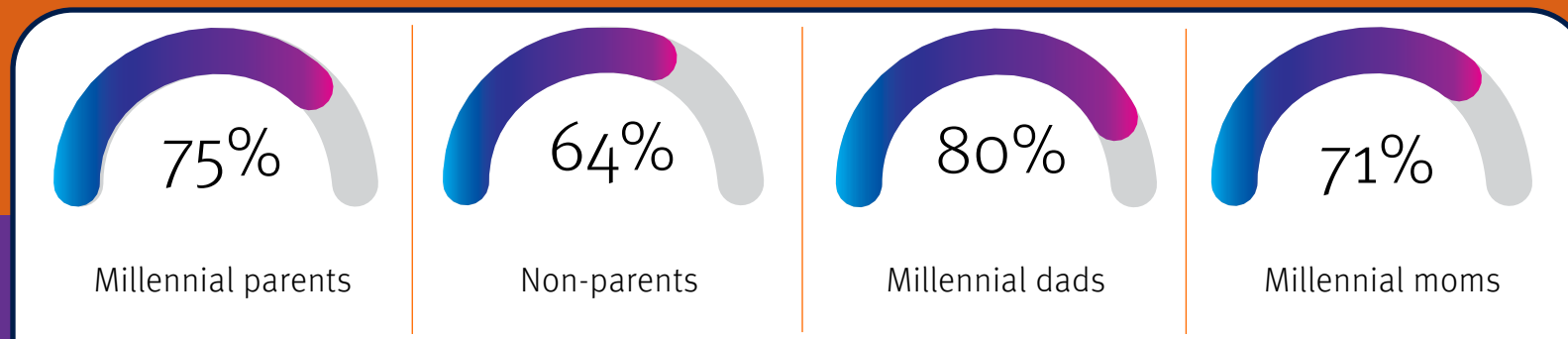
Parenthood and Religiosity

Somewhat predictably, YPulse’s data showed a significant jump in religiosity among parents: **75% of Millennial parents reported that religion was important to them compared to 64% of non-parents.** The data showed a similar gender differentiation as that described above—**80% of Millennial dads reported that religion was important to them compared to 71% of Millennial moms.**

The increased religiosity compared to non-parents may have many causes, but the desire to teach and instill certain values and beliefs in their children might easily describe why many parents turn to religion as trusted sources of those values and beliefs. Furthermore, YPulse found that **61% of young people ages 13-39 agree that, “I wish I had**

more spiritual guidance in life.” Perhaps these young people are more likely to visit and join religious organizations so that they might find such mentors, both for themselves and their children. This dataset also found that **70% of Millennial parents agreed that they “would prefer that [their] children follow [the parents’] religious or spiritual beliefs” compared with 53% of non-parents.**

Given these preferences, both for religion in general compared to non-parents and for children to follow the same religion as their parents, churches may see some organic return to church from Millennials and eventually Gen Z as they start having families. **How can churches today welcome young families creatively and sustainably?**



Places of Belonging for Young People

While organized religion made a showing among the top ten most important places in which young people find a sense of community (squeaking in at #10), the numbers are not exactly encouraging for church leaders. **Among both Gen Z and Millennial respondents, 13% said that they find a sense of community in organized religion.** Startlingly, the next most popular response (#11) was that **12% of Gen Z and 13% of Millennials don't feel connected to a community at all.**

Among the places ranking higher than organized religion were: 1) on a social media platform (35%), 2) work (32%), and 3) a video game they play (29%). Shared interest groups like a book club, and fitness organizations (either a fitness class or an athletic team in which young people participate) also rank above organized religion. Interestingly, **three of the top five places of community are social media or internet-mediated.** Part of this is surely connected to the status of these generations as tech-natives, but a large part may also be a result of the pandemic—the experience of in-person social isolation pushed young people to build community and seek community in digital spaces that could be relied upon even during shutdowns and a global pandemic. It will be especially interesting to see if these numbers shift in the future as the world emerges more and more from pandemic trends and conditions.



Community and Belonging— a Future for the Church?

In Charles Vogl’s book, *The Art of Community: Seven Principles for Belonging*, the author describes community as a group of individuals who share a mutual concern for one another’s welfare, including a sense of shared values, clarity on identity, agreement around moral proscriptions and accepted group understanding. Though the church is perhaps best positioned among the list of places young people go to find a sense of community, the data indicate that there are major gaps in its ability to do so with and among young people. **The places young people most reported as sources of community present a challenge to the church—what are these spaces doing, and how are they creating community? Why is it that young people find a greater sense of belonging there than in church communities? What are their practices of belonging that might inform church engagement and activity around these issues?**

How can church leaders create spaces for young people to share mutual concern for one another’s well-being and develop

a sense of shared values? How might we do that in a way that invites young people to form a part of the process and take ownership over it?

These are questions that young adult ministry leaders have been asking for some time now, but the data point to the fact that there remains much that we can do. Supporting a greater sense of belonging in the church for young people may be the crucial task of young adult ministries for years to come. Though there are no easy answers, ongoing youth and young adult ministry workers offer various possible approaches. Creating this sense of belonging and community is not easy in any social context, but it is a struggle the church has engaged and adapted to many times over the course of its history. Returning our energies to this struggle does not require us to remake the wheel. Rather, **it requires us to learn from one another, to learn from our shared and individual histories, and to work together for Christ’s kingdom.**

In short, our new calling is to return to our old calling, and to follow the one who calls wherever he may lead.