

Are We Doing Better or Worse in America at Raising Youth to Embrace the Christian Faith?

You, the readers of the Kairos Youth Culture Newsletter, were asked to complete an online poll on whether you think Christians in America are doing better or worse at reaching youth (aged 14-18) and emerging adults (aged 18-25) than we were in the past?

You were asked, "Look around you. How would you answer this based on what YOU SEE?" You answered as follows:

- Much better or better: 39%
- About the same: 19%
- Much worse or worse: 42%

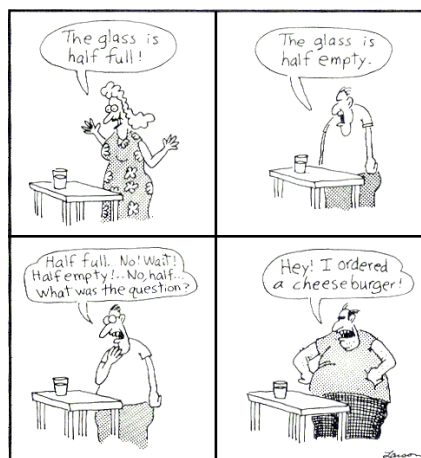
Next you were asked, "Now examine your external sources. What do you think you have been told by the television, Hollywood and the newspapers?"

- Much better or better: 11%
- About the same: 19%
- Worse or much worse: 72%

Finally you were asked, "Make your own call -- what do you think?" You answered:

- Much better or better: 38%
- About the same: 20%
- Much worse or worse: 42%

Most of you believe what **you see**, not what you are told. However, what you believe is evenly split between better and worse.



The four basic personality types

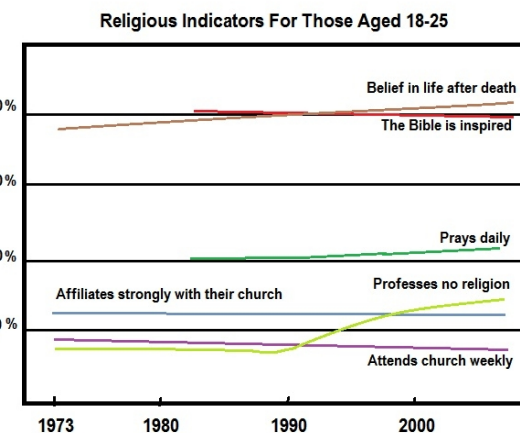
Most of you think the media paint things as more bleak than they are.

Christian Smith and Patricia Snell, in their book *Souls in Transition: the Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults*, makes three key conclusions that will help us understand what is going on.

Page numbers in this month's newsletter refer to the book, *Souls in Transition*, by Christian Smith and Patricia Snell. Oxford University Press 2009.

1) **Today's emerging adult performs at very similar levels** to the emerging adult of 1973 on basic benchmarks.

- A few more believe in life after death. In 1973, 75% believed in life after death. In 2008, 84% did. The percentage of Catholics that believe this has grown from 73% to 89% (p. 100).
- Belief that the Bible is inspired or the literal Word of God has declined slightly from just over 80% to just under (p. 96).
- The number of those who pray daily in any way has risen slightly to 43% (p. 96), but those who pray on their own has dropped.
- The percent of those who affiliate strongly with their church has remained constant at just under 30% (p. 96).
- Attendance at a weekly church service has dropped from 19% to 15%, but this benchmark increased a bit among conservative Protestants and decreased substantially among mainline Protestants (from 14% to 5%) and



Catholics (from 25% to 14%, p. 97).

2) **The percentage of emerging adults professing no religion has nearly doubled**

since 1990 from 14% to 26% (p. 94). Why this trend only began in 1990 is not explained.



3) **The typical emerging adult performs worse** on most key benchmarks than he or she did in high school or will in later years. The emerging adult years are the nadir of religious practice. This trend has been around for decades. It is described in the final article.

WHERE THEY GO

Less than two thirds of emerging adults retain their church affiliation (or stay non-religious).

Who stays what they were?

- 50% of mainline Protestants
- 55% of Black Protestants
- 64% of conservative Protestants
- 66% of Catholics
- 68% of non-religious.

But many who stay stop attending church. Of those who don't stay more become non-religious than switch to another church.

Who goes where?

- Conservative Protestants become non-religious (15%), mainline Protestant (10%) or Catholic (2%).
- Mainline Protestants become non-religious (24%), conservative Protestant (20%) or Catholic (2%).
- Catholics become non-religious (20%), conservative Protestant (6%) or mainline Protestant (3%).
- Non-religious become Conservative Protestant (11%), Catholic (7%) or mainline Protestant (4%).

(For all the above groups, some respondents were undecided.)

Former Catholics were twice as likely to drop Christianity as to switch churches. Almost as many Protestants switched churches as dropped out.



HOW ARE THEY DOING?

Mormons retain 72% of their emerging adults. They lose 17% to the non-religious category. They lose 10% to Protestants of various sorts. Despite their reputation for "evangelizing," they gain just 3%, a net loss of 24% (p. 109).

CAMPUS CHRISTIANITY

How are Christian groups doing on campus? Only one percent of those in a typical college Christian group were non-religious in high school (p. 131), reinforcing the view that the emerging adult years are stony ground for the Gospel.

Campus groups mainly serve those who identified themselves as Christians in high school. That said, campus groups reach many who were nominal in their faith during high school and such groups can help retain those who believe.

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WHAT HAPPENS?

Although emerging adults perform at most benchmarks similar to how they did in 1973, they perform worse than they did in high school on the following 13 bench-marks (pp. 112-135). The average drop is 7%.

- There is a 6.6% drop in belief in God, down to 77.6%
- Weekly church attendance drops 20%
- Singing in a music group or choir drops 12%
- Trying to observe the sabbath drops 10%
- 9% switch from saying faith is important to them to faith is unimportant
- Feeling close to God drops by 8%, down to 29%
- Praying *alone* daily drops 8%



- Belief in a judgment day drops by 7%, down to 63%
- Thinking it is OK to try to convert others drops by 7% to 49%. (Catholics drop 10%, down

to 36%.) Actual sharing of one's faith drops only 5%

- Belief in angels drops by 7%, down to 56%
- The daily reading of scripture drops 2%, down to 6%
- Self-denial practices drop 3%
- Devotional reading drops 2%

However, the reported degree of interest in learning about religion remains stable at 32% (p. 114).

When asked if they had changed in their religious practice over the past five years, 59% said no or not much. Notably, 24% said they had *increased* while 17% said they had *decreased* (p.126). On this statistic alone, one would conclude we were doing better! The right conclusion might be that those decreasing in faith don't sense they have lost much but those growing in faith sense they have gained a lot.

When asked if they expected to be attending religious services when they are 30 years old, 53% said yes. Currently, **48.3%** of all Americans attend once per month or more, but only 38.5% of emerging adults. Only time will tell what will happen.

Is America doing better, worse or staying about the same as we were in the past? My conclusion: if better, not much. If worse, not much.

Next month we will look at how we can do better: Signs of Hope!