

2021

The State of Religion & Young People

NAVIGATING UNCERTAINTY

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RESEARCH INSTITUTE

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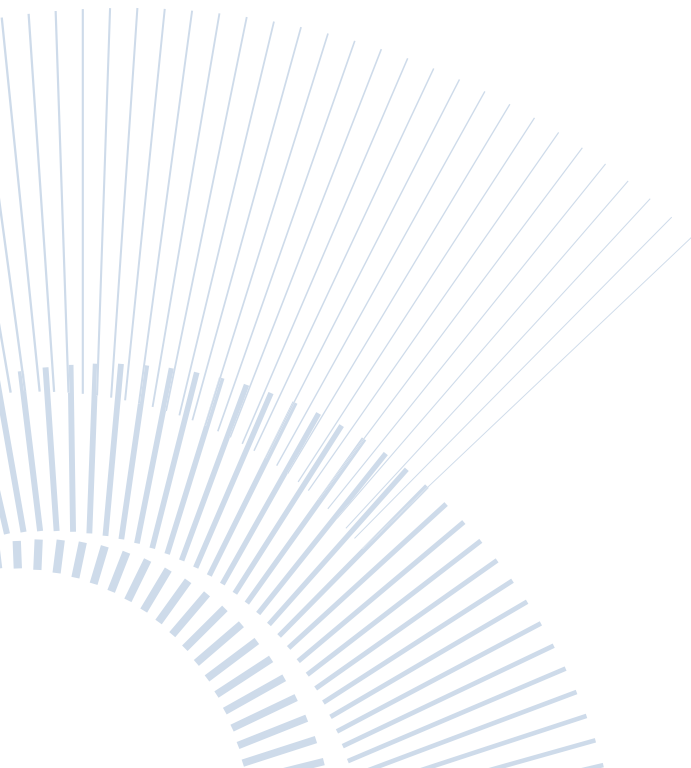
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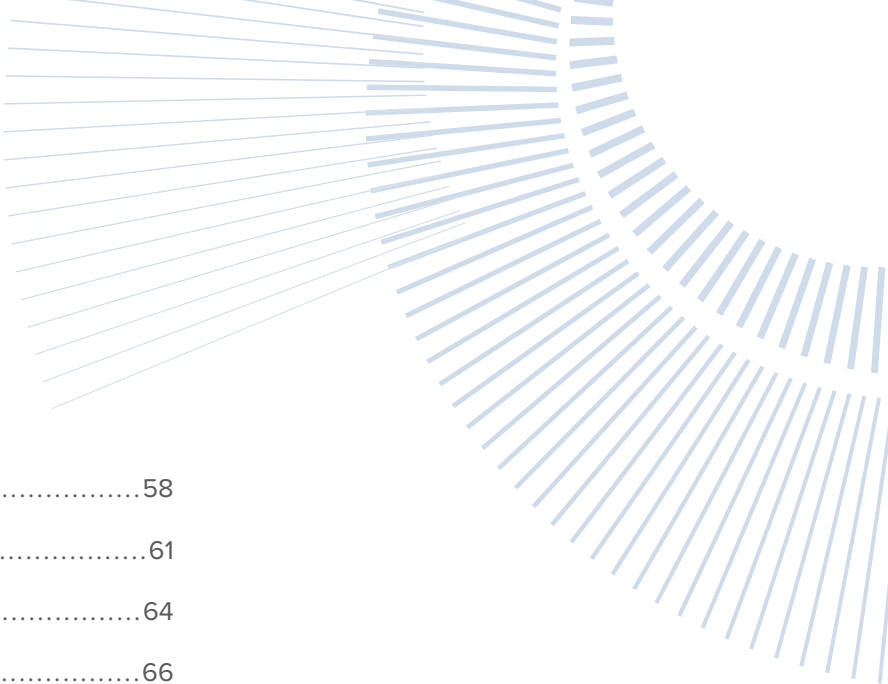
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“Unbundling is the name of the spiritual game, at least for the foreseeable future. Springtide helps us understand what that means, and how to serve young people in the midst of it.”

—Casper ter Kuile

Foreword

By the time I attended my third wedding that summer, about a decade ago, the trend was clear. Instead of having religious ceremonies led by ordained ministers in churches, my friends were coming up with more personalized marriage rituals, inviting peers to officiate in beautiful outdoor settings. Often these ceremonies wove together secular sources—poetry, music, family stories—with religious ones: Bible readings, a breaking of the glass, a blessing. Most of these friends might describe themselves as religiously “nothing in particular,” though a couple might have said “just Christian.” But all of them felt a hunger for something spiritual in their lives, including a way to mark the spiritual significance of their wedding day, even while they were uneasy with traditional, institutional ways of doing so.

Springtide’s new report *The State of Religion & Young People 2021: Navigating Uncertainty* is brimming with insight about the way young people (ages 13 to 25) are figuring out how to draw on religious and spiritual support to make it through life’s challenges and to celebrate its joys, and the ways they are increasingly doing so outside of formal structures of faith. At the heart of the report is the notion of unbundling. Rather than finding one’s religious identity, practice, community, and language in one consistent source, more and more young people are piecing together their inner life by drawing on various traditions, familial lineages, and wisdom sources.

Is this evidence of a kind of selfish spiritual path among young people? An approach to questions of faith that smacks of consumerism, with a marketplace of religious commodities, all up for grabs, and little concern for questions of appropriation or context? No, argues this report.

Rather than trying to extract the elements of faith from different religious contexts (which sociologists of religion might recognize as Robert Bellah’s *Sheilaism*), young people are trying to integrate their existing multiplicities. By finding ways to piece together their varying family histories, geographic and cultural contexts, personal interests and sensibilities, young people are attempting to experience a wholeness and connection that demands curiosity and flexibility if they are to stay true to the people they understand themselves to be.

It’s no surprise that young people resist a fixed definition about what it means to be religious today. Just as gender expressions, sexualities, and racial identities are now understood on a richer spectrum and grounded in intersectionality, young Americans are reimagining religiosity, spirituality, or faith as something that opposes a stark “in” or “out,” “this” or “that” way of compartmentalizing. Indeed, in my experience—both professionally as someone watching these trends, and personally as I witness my peers marking life’s biggest moments by forging new territory between and among various traditions—I continue to see that young people find institutional identity or whole group cohesion not only unattractive but often untrustworthy.

Unbundling is the name of the spiritual game, at least for the foreseeable future. Springtide helps us understand what that means, and how to serve young people in the midst of it.



Casper ter Kuile

*Casper ter Kuile is the author of *The Power of Ritual*, the cofounder of Sacred Design Lab, and cocreator of hit podcast “*Harry Potter and the Sacred Text*.” He served as a Ministry Innovation Fellow at Harvard Divinity School between 2016 and 2021 after graduating with master’s degrees in public policy and divinity. Learn more about his work at www.casptk.com and on Twitter @casptk.*

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. They have been searching, and sometimes finding, ways that spirituality, religious practice, and belief can help them deal with uncertainty and anxiety. So who are they turning to for those solutions?

Spoiler alert: They 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 non religious in all aspects of their well-being, including when navigating uncertainty.

And although the majority of young people Springtide surveyed consider themselves at least slightly religious (71%) or spiritual (78%), the majority aren'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 that 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. These personal, social, and religious reasons start to explain *why* there's a disconnect between young people and institutions. But the cost of this disconnect remains the same no matter the reason: young people tell us institutional responses aren't meeting their needs.

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 non religious sources. 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. They offer us a vision of care that is at once adaptable to the needs of young people, while still drawing from the deep well of their own traditions.

The State of Religion & Young People 2021: 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 and use [#religionandyoungpeople2021](#) to join the conversation. 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.



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

Many of these major questions 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 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 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.”

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

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WATCH

>



71%

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



78%

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

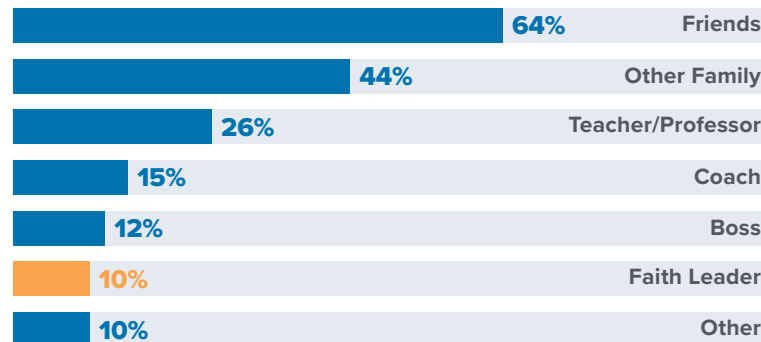


Of the young people who identified as “very religious,” **less than half (40%)** told us they found connecting with their faith community helpful during challenging or uncertain times.

By and large, young people 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?

Participants were allowed to select more than one option.



Percentages are rounded

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



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*, 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 reported turning to “no one” when feeling overwhelmed or unsure about something. Young people reported turning to “someone from [their] faith community” at the same low rate (16%).**

Nearly 1 in 5 young people (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 nearly half of young people say they watched at least one religious or spiritual service online (44%), very few young people say they found joy (13%) or hope (14%) in these services. Just 12% say they hope virtual services continue after the pandemic.

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

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WATCH



KEY FINDINGS

What Young People Are Telling Us

In 2021, we asked young people 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.

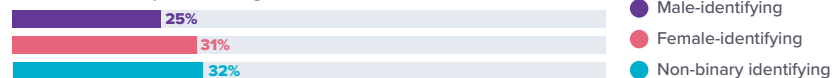


62% say they have experienced emotional distress as a result of a challenging event.



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 experience 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.

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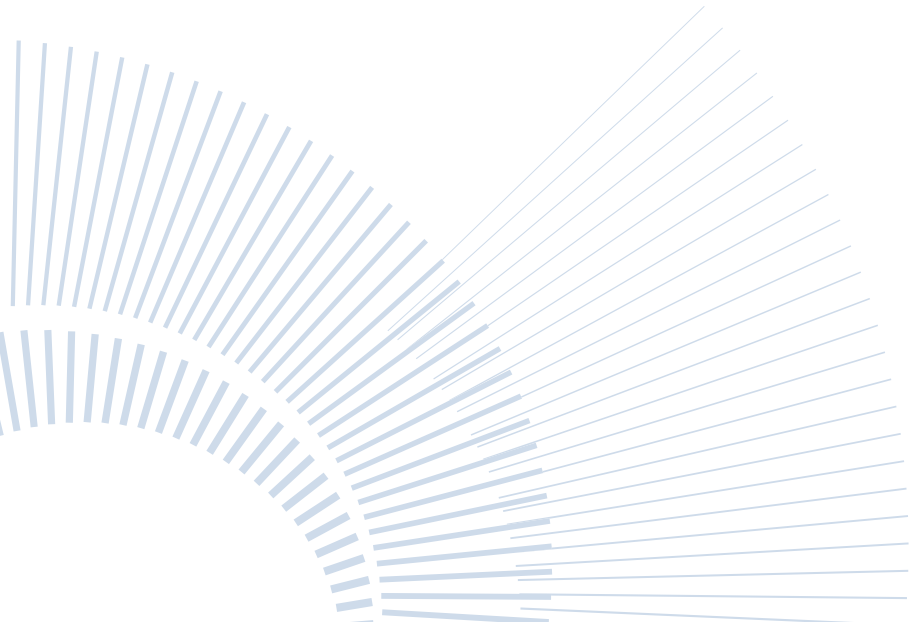
I'm not deeply religious, but I guess for me, religion is just something that kind of helps me when I'm feeling like I'm . . . like I need to believe in something. It can be calming, like when I pray.

—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.



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.

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 non-religious 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.

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

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WATCH

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, rather than feel they need to change, fix, or hide parts of themselves. This doesn't mean they aren't interested in growth (85% 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%).



85%
of young
people
believe in
personal
growth.



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

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:



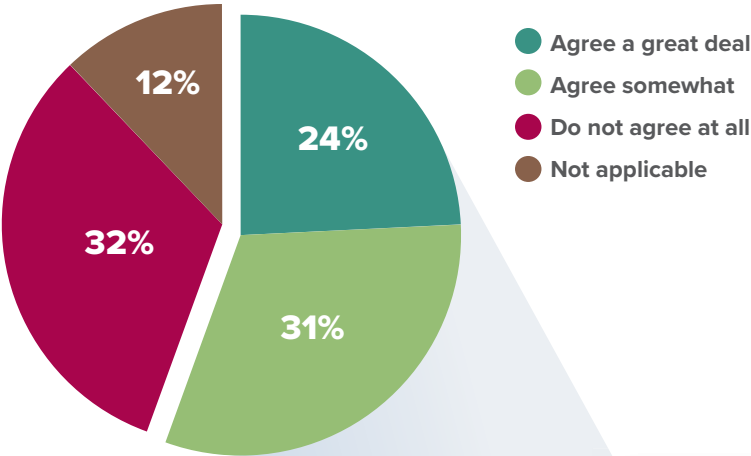
I'm just, I'm kind of in that gray area where, on one hand, I want to trust my religion just because that's what I've been raised with. But on the other hand, I know that parts of it just don't make sense to me. And I guess I'm going through life right now, trying to cherry-pick what makes sense to me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

—Ethan, 21



Fifty-five percent of young people 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.”



More than half of young people (55%) don't attend religious or spiritual services because they don't feel free to be who they are at those kinds of gatherings.

10

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 facing uncertainty. And they're not turning to religion to cope.

Why is there a disconnect, and how can you bridge the gap?

Although nearly 75% of young people are religious or spiritual, they don't turn to their faith communities to help them through stressful moments in life. *And only 10% of young people told us that a faith leader reached out to them in the past year.*

But this gap can be bridged. *The State of Religion & Young People 2021: Navigating Uncertainty* has the data, insights, and frameworks to show you how.



Find out why young people, even *religious* young people, aren't turning to religion in times of uncertainty or difficulty.



Learn about *Faith Unbundled*, a framework to help leaders better understand the way young people are constructing their religious and spiritual lives by drawing on a variety of sources.



Hear from experts across religious, spiritual, and secular traditions for insights about how to connect with Gen Z in light of—not *despite*—this emerging, unbundled approach to faith.

Gen Z is pressing forward, exploring the boundaries of their faith, constructing meaning, and encountering the divine in new and unique ways.

The only question that remains is whether you'll be there to support them.

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