

FAITH INDEPTH

# America's youth are religious. They're spiritual. But they don't trust institutions

New data shows that most young people call themselves religious or spiritual. But they aren't finding comfort in church. What's the best way to reach America's youth?

By Mya Jaradat | @myaguarnieri | Nov 6, 2021, 10:00pm MDT



"Christians are called to care for creation and the environment. It's time," said Jenna Van Donselaar, 25, of Willimantic, Conn., about her role as a steering committee member and former field organizer for Young Evangelicals for Climate Action, a national faith-based, call-to-action group. YECA's parent organization is the Evangelical Environmental Network, she said. Van Donselaar, an elementary school teacher, added that participation in the nonpartisan, non-lobbying group is an expression of her faith though she makes clear that her role in the organization is "more about climate than evangelism." Van Donselaar said she strives to provide resources, such as small stipends and leadership training, to young people to be leaders in climate care within their respective churches and colleges. | Patrick Raycraft, for the Deseret News

Wearing bright-orange shirts and standing on a strip of grass facing Capitol Hill in Washington, D.C., the small group of young protesters held signs that read, "Love God. Love your neighbor. Act on climate."

This wasn't just a Saturday afternoon demonstration; it was also an expression of faith, as the placards suggest. These young people were part of YECA, or Young Evangelicals for Climate Action; their speech was filled with quotes from the Bible —

Ecclesiastes, to be specific, said YECA field organizer Jenna Van Donselaar.

“The ethos of our work on climate action comes out of our calling as Christians,” she said, explaining that the Bible compels the faithful to take care of the environment. But she added that she doesn’t see many churches heeding that command.

“I don’t know how we’re reading the same gospel,” she said of conservative-leaning congregations that ignore climate change and other progressive issues. “My faith is rooted in a call to social justice and a call to social action.”



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According to new research by Springtide Research Institute, many young people are like Van Donselaar. While they still consider themselves religious or spiritual, they are wary of religious institutions. And so they are approaching their faith in ways that, to an outside observer, might not look like traditional worship.

Springtide’s latest survey found that 71% of Americans between the ages of 13 and 25 identify as religious and 78% embrace the label spiritual. But they don’t find much comfort inside the four walls of a church. Even among those who identify as “very religious,” only 40% said they found comfort by connecting with their religious community “during challenging or uncertain times,” the report stated.

While almost half of those surveyed reported they attended at least one online service during the pandemic, only 13% reported finding joy in virtual worship; a similarly low percentage said that they found hope in online services.

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Experts said that because the numbers reveal a deep disconnect between America's youth and the country's religious institutions, religious leaders seeking to keep the young in the fold don't need to think about better programs in their churches, synagogues or mosques. Rather, they need to think outside of the institutional box.

Josh Packard, executive director of Springtide Research Institute, explained that while young Americans are distrustful of religious institutions, "They express a high level of trust in individual relationships. You'll hear young people say, 'I don't like youth ministers but I like *my* youth minister.'"

Religious leaders should strive to meet young people where they're at and should focus on building relationships, he and others noted.

"A lot of young people are already expressing their faith through service," said Packard. "The causes they rally around overlap with spiritual concerns; the people who are there with them become their spiritual partners."

Religious leaders should show up with "a learning posture," Packard added. However, he and other experts cautioned against religious leaders artificially inserting themselves into spaces. The connection has to be organic.

"Younger generations are less inclined to affiliate with institutions and organizations and more likely to affiliate with people," said Angie Thurston, a former Ministry Innovation Fellow at Harvard Divinity School and co-author of the report "How We Gather," which offered a deep dive into how unaffiliated millennials express spirituality.

"There's a deep hunger for anything that addresses these core questions: How should I live? Why should I live? And how to do it?" said Thurston. Though younger generations are less inclined to affiliate with institutions, she said, they — like all humans — are looking for the sense of deep belonging that comes from being part of a community.

The country's youth long for the "experience of being deeply known and deeply loved," said Thurston. "They want to be connected to something bigger than themselves."

Pointing to *Soul Cycle* and *Black Girls Run* as examples, Thurston added that, for America's youth, even participation in organizations and events that have no overt connection to religion or spirituality can constitute a form of worship.

"You can go running and just be running or you can go running as a form of spiritual practice," said Thurston. What's important, she added, is "intention, attention and repetition."

Not only do we need to reformulate our ideas about how young Americans worship, we also need to reconsider how we meet the youth's emotional and intellectual needs more broadly, said Chris Stedman, a writer and a professor in Augsburg University's Department of Religion and Philosophy.

Young people who don't identify as religious or spiritual grapple with many of the same questions as those who do, said Stedman, who also served as a humanist chaplain at Harvard University and was the founding director of the Yale Humanist Society. As a society, we need to find a way to address those needs.

Echoing the argument made in Alain de Botton's book "Religion for Atheists," Stedman noted, "Whatever you think of religion, it's this tool kit of resources. Just because someone doesn't believe in the truth claims doesn't mean that we don't need practices that reorient us to a more intentional way of living in the world."

But, even though he was part of building an alternative framework himself, now Stedman isn't sure that creating additional institutions and programs are the key. Rather, he reflected, the answer might lie in bringing some of those questions and tools from religion into the institutions young people have contact with and trust in already — places like schools.

Pointing to the popularity of classes like *Yale's happiness course* and the meaning-making that happens in his own classes, Stedman posited that perhaps colleges and universities might be the ideal place for students to wrestle with timeless philosophical questions that are also part and parcel of religion.

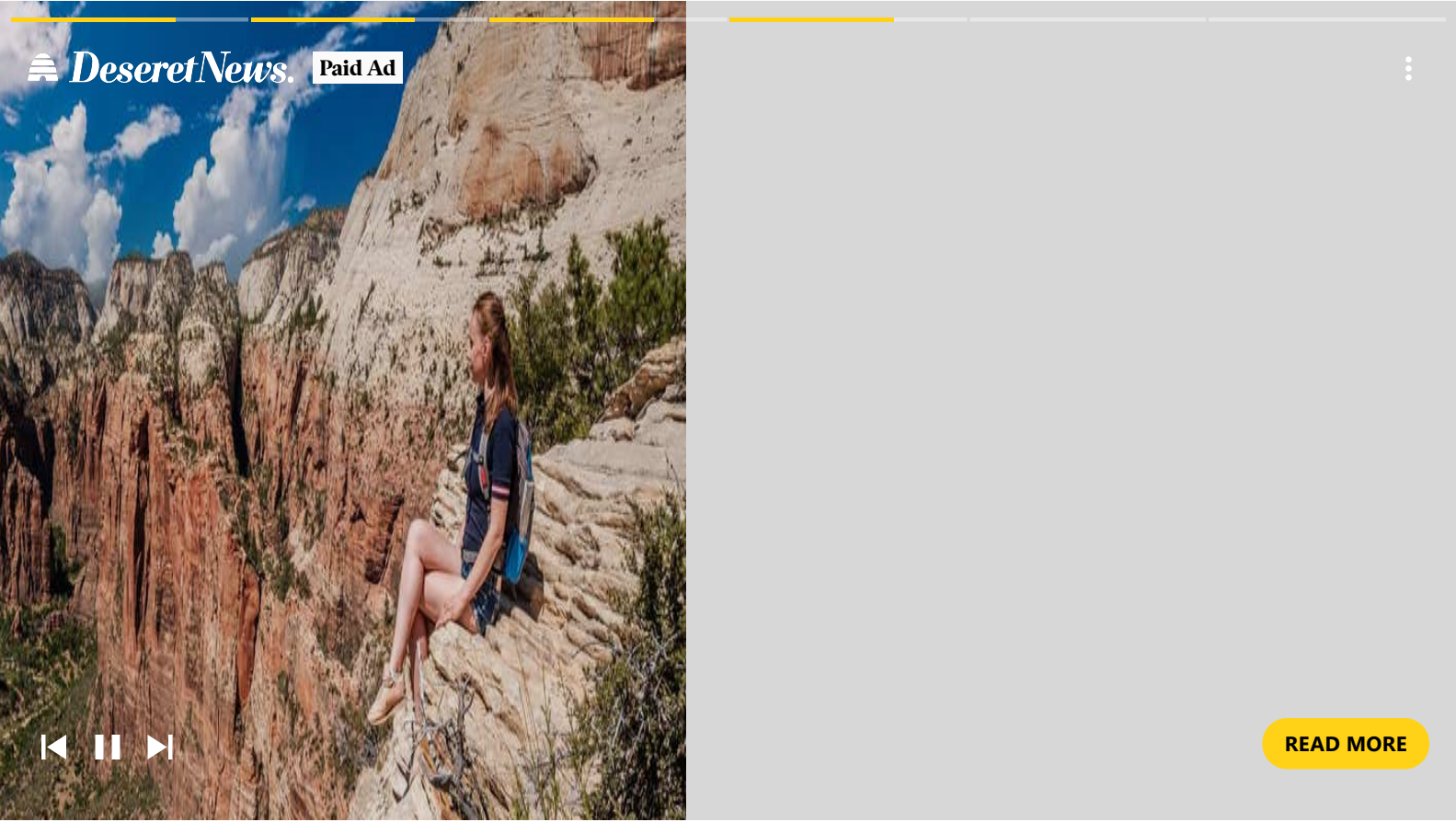
“Higher education institutions that have (a) religious orientation are equipped to help people think through these questions,” said Stedman, adding that many young people “won’t step through the doors of a church but will walk into a classroom.”

For the young people who are religious or spiritual, many are approaching their faith in a kind of do-it-yourself way, Stedman added, something Springtide referred to as “unbundling.”

Stedman reflected that “moving towards freedom has positives but it puts a lot of burden on the individuals” to figure it out on their own.

While YECA provides members with much of the meaning and community that they seek and does so within an overtly religious framework — “That is my Christian community” said Van Donselaar — national organizer and spokesperson Tori Goebel remarked that, for many of those involved, the organization doesn’t completely replace the church. Rather, Goebel said, they hope that religious institutions will learn from groups like YECA and will begin to reshape themselves to meet young people’s concerns and needs.

“We don’t want to leave the church out of frustration,” said Goebel. “We want leaders to integrate (our concerns) into the life of the church... we want to make (institutions’) expression of faith more full and complete.”



The image is a video player interface for a paid advertisement. On the left, there is a video thumbnail showing a woman with a backpack sitting on a rocky ledge in a canyon. The video player has a grey background with a yellow progress bar at the top. In the top left corner of the video area, there is a logo for "Deseret News" and a "Paid Ad" label. In the bottom left corner, there are navigation icons for back, play/pause, and forward. In the bottom right corner, there is a yellow button with the text "READ MORE".