

Nones I have known

By [Daniel Schultz](#)

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We hear a lot about the "nones" these days: Americans who claim no connection to any particular faith. We'll hear a lot more too, as [recent studies](#) document this ever-expanding slice of the American demographic pie. We hear less, however, about the nones as individuals. But like any pastor, I've known more than a few in my time. At 20 percent of society, they are literally everybody's friends and neighbors.

One none I know—a Marine medic turned hippie seamstress and triathlete—had a kid in the same class as my son. She and her husband eventually moved their daughter to another school, but I still hear from her whenever a big religion or political story moves. She sends me links, wants to know what I think.

Another woman, a refugee from a Church of England upbringing, is a friend who brought her family to sit with mine on our last Sunday at my former church. She wept with my wife and shot death stares at the people who had given me such grief over the years. Her husband, another runaway from England's medieval cathedrals, sat bored through most of the service. He liked my sermon but admitted it was difficult not to come up with dirty jokes during it. Maybe that's just him.

A third woman was inspired to join our little congregation after attending a service. I baptized all three of her daughters and confirmed one, and she served for a year as our director of Christian education. She even helped bring another family into the church, disaffected Catholics turned off by their parish's reactionary politics and constant pleas for money to keep its school afloat. Despite all her activity in the church, she might have had a difficult time saying what exactly she believed. She knew she was a Christian, she knew she liked me and my family, and she wanted a faith that wasn't as rigid and exclusionary as the brand of Lutheranism she'd grown up in.

Her husband, who grew up feeling obligated to attend Catholic mass weekly if not daily, was even more skittish about the church. He often preferred to go for a run on Sunday morning, but he was glad for a while that his daughters received some kind of instruction in the faith.

It's easy to place these folks within the ranks of the "spiritual but not religious" whom Lillian Daniel [likes to scold](#). There's some truth to this: to the extent that my hippie-Marine friend has any kind of spiritual practice, it's tied up with the yoga she teaches. The English woman derives more meaning from U2 lyrics than scripture, a habit I dare not tease her about for fear of having something thrown at my head.

We are also told, particularly by committed atheists, that the nones represent the rise of a post- or even anti-religious society. There's some truth to this as well, but only some. Of my five closest friends from high school, only one would attend a church if he could find one that suited him nearby. Yet four of them wanted me to officiate at their weddings. (The other got married before I entered ministry.) Only one is antipathetic to faith; the others simply shrug their shoulders at it. Yet they—and all the others I have mentioned—would have no qualms about claiming me as their pastor, as though that were some kind of subversive triumph. Perhaps I should cut down on the swearing.

Finally, we often hear that the nones are people who have left—or been pushed out of—organized religion. This is the interpretation that is most concerning from a pastoral perspective. The unaffiliated I have known almost always come at faith with deep curiosity and equally deep wariness. You could chalk this up to the kind of

Christianity that values partisan rectitude over any kind of grace or welcome. (The members who came to us from the Catholic church left because their parish led a campaign—I swear I am not making this up—to burn books on witchcraft at the public library.)

But the problem goes deeper. At our congregation, one member went on an ultimately successful campaign to get me ousted from the pulpit. To the extent that these things have root causes, ours was an unpopular congregational decision to give a significant sum to missions, compounded by some truly unhealthy ways of dealing with conflict.

Of course, it could have been any number of other reasons. But one result is that, despite repeated pleas from the campaigner and other church members, our former Catholics have floated back out of the congregation. Now they can protect their kids from the influence of their former church friends—and they can sleep in on Sunday mornings. In fact, everyone I've mentioned currently has Sunday mornings free, myself included.

And that, more than anything else, is the spring that feeds the flood of the nones.