

Young adults missing from pews: Young singles may not contribute much money, but they often can give volunteer time

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It's not that they don't care. In a recent study, 80 percent of people in their 20s said their faith is very important in their lives. Nearly 60 percent claimed to have made a personal commitment to Jesus Christ. Three-fourths of the age group told the Barna Research Group that they had prayed during the past seven days.

But in a typical week, just three out of ten twentysomethings attend church. Only 30 percent of adults in their 20s donated to a church during the past year; the same percentage reads the Bible during any given week. Religious leaders weren't surprised by the statistics.

"I think it's pretty much straight up with what we see here," said Scotty Jernigan, pastor of the Crossroads Church at Belforest in Daphne, Alabama. "They have not seen where church relates to and where Christianity relates to their everyday life." Bottom line, Jernigan said, is that young adults are looking for something relevant at church and coming up short.

"One of the trends we're noticing [is] people are looking for something that's real," said Charlie Granade, pastor for singles at Dayspring Baptist Church in Mobile, Alabama.

"College students are looking for a worship service where there's nothing fancy," Granade said, adding that his church offers such an experience during its "Unplugged" service on Monday nights. During those services one person may play a guitar, another may lead a devotional, but "the focus is on God," Granade said. "I think people respond to that. It's not about bells and whistles."

If something appears fake to twentysomethings, Granade said, they leave. “Our whole deal is, let’s be real about God,” Granade said. “Let’s be real about the problems we face.”

Jamey Crosson, 24, said he and his peers grew up wanting to be popular and “rule the school.” Now, he said, he worries that that mind-set is creeping into some churches, and individuals are using worship services to promote themselves. Crosson doesn’t like it. Instead, he said, he’s working with Granade to create a worship service at Dayspring Baptist Church in which believers can “just meet with the Lord and have him deal with us on an individual basis.”

“We want to enter into a house of prayer,” he said. “We want to confess. . . . We want to cry out and declare that we need his help. . . . We want to be as real before him as possible.”

Sally Morgenthaler addressed such desires in her book *Worship Evangelism: Inviting Unbelievers into the Presence of God*. “Church is a place where we are supposed to be able to meet God, but often we don’t meet God there,” Morgenthaler observed. “Young people want to encounter the ‘other’ at church, but they are not finding it there. They’re finding programs, they’re finding games, they’re finding cute things to do, but they’re not finding an experience with the other they assume is there somewhere in the world.

“But just because they don’t find it at church doesn’t mean they’re going to stop their search. They’re going to find it somewhere, and it’s the church that is missing out.”

Rob Couch, a minister at Christ United Methodist Church in Mobile, concurred that congregations are losing out by the absence of young adults who have a “unique experience of God” and great enthusiasm.

In the past, Granade said, some congregations may not have made much effort to reach young adults as they were viewed as relatively noncommittal and as poor financial contributors.

While religious leaders acknowledged that young adults may be fairly transient or financially strapped, they said twentysomethings shouldn’t shy away from getting involved in congregational life.

The leaders said that while many young singles may not be able to be churches' major financial supporters, they're often in a prime position to volunteer their time by serving at a soup kitchen, for example. Alene Ferguson, 29, said she used to join a group of young adults from Dayspring Baptist Church in serving at 15 Place, a service center for homeless men and women in Mobile.

"It was just wonderful," she said. "We really got to minister to them." Ferguson said that in looking for a church, she wanted to find a friendly community with a singles group that offered fun and social activities as well as opportunities to minister to those in need. "Most people are going to go out and do something," she said. "You're looking for the friendships and the companionships. . . . I can't think of a better place to make friendships." -*Kristen Campbell, Religion News Service*