

APPENDIX A

# Why Are Youth Leaving Church?

## A Data Analysis by Wheatstone Ministries

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## INTRODUCTION

Wheatstone Ministries exists to invite youth into Christian adulthood. In accordance with this mission, we intend to reach and retain today's Christian youth, and to raise up a new generation of faithful, influential members in society. We believe that our mission is the best response to the challenges facing youth ministry, Christian education, and families today.

We know from personal interactions with hundreds of educators and religious leaders that the desire to reach and retain Christian youth exists, and that there are countless women and men working diligently to reach the hearts and minds of students in youth groups, churches, schools, and universities. Yet we are not alone in noticing that what most ministries have been doing is not working. Youth are leaving churches and active ministry in record numbers.

This document addresses three areas of completed and ongoing research on the issues of youth (college/young professional age and below) who have grown up in evangelical and traditional churches. Much of the research is drawn from recent studies from the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, the Barna Group, and Gallup Polls and the National Study of Youth and Religion (conducted out of UNC Chapel Hill) which rely on a mixture of surveys and interviews to draw their conclusions. This document will consider the general declines in religious and Christian affiliations in the United States, the unique situation of religious youth, and the common reasons for religious affiliation changes, then make an argument that, in light of the best data, Wheatstone's mission is the best response for the next generation.

## 1. DECLINING RELIGIOUS AND CHRISTIAN POPULATIONS

### Summary

Christian affiliation remains high in America, but regular attendance is stagnant or declining, while those who identify as agnostic, atheist, and unaffiliated is growing. The maintenance of Christian affiliation and attendance may be primarily due to large older populations, while the growth in those who identify as agnostic, atheist, and unaffiliated may be primarily due to younger generations, a question that will be addressed in the next section.

### Key Points

- Americans who identify as having “no religious affiliation” have risen to 20% of the population.
- Frequent attendance of religious services has declined ~30% across multiple Protestant denominations, and to 28% of the population overall.
- 77% of Americans currently believe religion is losing its influence on American life.

### Research

Studies that address the quantity and quality of Christian affiliation and practice in the United States tend to look at three different areas: (1) religious self-identification, (2) regular religious practice, and (3) perception of religion and religiosity.

The most startling recent statistic is that in the five years between 2007 and 2012, Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life found that the percentage of Americans who identified as having “no religious affiliation” jumped from just over 15% to just under 20% of all U.S. adults. Their ranks now include more than 13 million self-described atheists and agnostics (nearly 6% of the U.S. public), as well as nearly 33 million people who say they have no particular religious affiliation (14%).<sup>1</sup> Although some recent studies suggest that this rise is leveling off, it is clear that religious populations in the United States have declined. The majority of Americans who identify as religious though, still identify as Christian (73% of Americans in 2012, down from 78% in 2007).<sup>2</sup>

A 2012 Gallup poll addressing the self-reported importance of religion in American’s daily lives found that while 69% of Americans are very or moderately religious, only 28% (40% of 69%) say

1 “Nones on the Rise.” Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, 9 October 2012. <<http://www.pewforum.org/Unaffiliated/nones-on-the-rise.aspx>>

2 *ibid.*

that “they attend religious services regularly”<sup>3</sup> Data from the National Study of Youth and Religion published in 2009 indicates an approximate 30 percent drop in weekly or more frequent religious service attendance across multiple Protestant denominations.<sup>4</sup> Although most data shows that church attendance in America has remained steady over the last decade, some argue that the higher rates of church attendance among those over 60 will cause these numbers to rise as more baby boomers enter their 60s and that there may be a corresponding drop as millennials age.<sup>5</sup>

Americans overwhelmingly (77%) believe that the religion is losing its influence on American life (although this percentage has bounced significantly over the last several decades, with 71% saying that religion was increasing its influence in 2001).<sup>6</sup> Despite declining religious influence, religious affiliation, and a wide divergence between those who are religious and those who are religiously active, about half of Americans think that declining religious influence is bad for the United States<sup>7</sup> and 75% say that American society would be better off if it were more religious.<sup>8</sup>

## 2. THE DECLINE AMONG RELIGIOUS YOUTH

### Summary

The most dramatic decreases in Christian affiliation and practice are occurring among young adults, at rates greater than any generation before them. Christian affiliation is decreasing among young adults sharply. Among those who still affiliate as Christian, essential practices such as church attendance, prayer, Bible study, and belief in a personal God are in decline. This suggests that stability in the percentages of religious affiliation and practice noted in the first section are due to aging generations, while decreases in the percentages are due to the next generations. If we are to reverse this trend, we must find the causes of this decline among young adults and counteract them. In the next section, we will examine the reasons young adults cease their Christian affiliations or practices.

3 Frank Newport. “Seven in 10 Americans are Very or Moderately Religious.” Gallup, 4 December 2012. <<http://www.gallup.com/poll/159050/seven-americans-moderately-religious.aspx>>

4 Christian Smith and Patricia Snell, *Souls in Transition: The Religious & Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

5 Frank Newport. “Americans’ Church Attendance Inches Up in 2010.” Gallup, 25 June 2010. <<http://www.gallup.com/poll/141044/americans-church-attendance-inches-2010.aspx>>

6 Frank Newport. “Most Americans Say Religion is Losing Influence in U.S.” Gallup, 29 May 2013. <<http://www.gallup.com/poll/162803/americans-say-religion-losing-influence.aspx>>

7 “Growth of the Non-Religious.” Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, 2 July 2013. <<http://www.pewforum.org/growth-of-the-nonreligious-many-say-trend-is-bad-for-american-society.aspx>>

8 Frank Newport. “Most Americans Say Religion is Losing Influence in U.S.” Gallup, 29 May 2013. <<http://www.gallup.com/poll/162803/americans-say-religion-losing-influence.aspx>>

### Key Points

- 8 out of 10 Christians (85% of Protestants and 79% of Catholics) who left their affiliation did so before the age of 24.
- 43% of those who leave religious affiliation altogether (19% of the total population) do so between 18 and 29.
- Nearly one-third of 18-29 year olds profess no religious affiliation (compared to 20% nationally).
- 61% of today's young adults had been churched at one point during their teen years but are now spiritually disengaged.
- Only 18% of Millennials (born after 1981) attend religious services regularly—5-15% lower than previous generations at the same age.

### Research

Looking more closely at the situation of young religious and Christian persons offers insight both on the timing of and reasons for religious affiliation or activity changes among Americans.

In a study on the changes in religious affiliation in the United States, the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life found that of people who change their religion, the majority will leave their childhood faith before the age of 24. 85% of Protestants and 79% of Catholics who left their affiliation did so before the age of 24.<sup>9</sup> A 2006 Gallup poll found that of the 44% of Americans who leave religious affiliations altogether, 43% of these (19% of the total population) do so between 18 and 29.<sup>10</sup> The majority of religious affiliation loss occurs among young adults. This trend on the part of young Americans has significantly affected the overall religious composition of the nation. Nearly one-third of 18-29 year olds profess no religious affiliation (compared to 20% nationally).<sup>11</sup>

Although there are few studies addressing the religious beliefs and behaviors of those under 18 (due to the difficulty of completing surveys), the National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR) has begun some studies centered on changes in adolescent religious beliefs and habits. One study consisted of two waves of interviews, the first in 2002 (ages 13-17) and the second in 2005 (ages to 16-21). Although there were no dramatic shifts, the difference between interviewees' answers

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9 "Faith in Flux." Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, 27 April 2009. <<http://www.pewforum.org/Faith-in-Flux.aspx>>

10 Frank Newport. "A Look at Religious Switching in America Today." Gallup, 23 June 2006. <<http://www.gallup.com/poll/23467/Look-Religious-Switching-America-Today.aspx>>

11 "Nones on the Rise." Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, 9 October 2012. <<http://www.pewforum.org/Unaffiliated/nones-on-the-rise.aspx>>

three years apart is telling. In 2005, 78% of respondents affirmed that they believed in God, as opposed to 84% in 2002. The description of God as personal (as opposed to a cosmic life force or uninvolved) dropped from 67% to 63%. Belief in an afterlife, supernatural beings, and miraculous events showed a consistent drop of 3-5%.<sup>12</sup>

In addition to decreased religious affiliation and traditional Christian beliefs, younger Americans display significant decreases in religious activity in their late adolescence/early adulthood. Research from The Barna Group indicates that “a majority of twentysomethings—61% of today’s young adults—had been churched at one point during their teen years but they are now spiritually disengaged (i.e., not actively attending church, reading the Bible, or praying). Only one-fifth of twentysomethings (20%) have maintained a level of spiritual activity consistent with their high school experiences.”<sup>13</sup> According to the Pew Forum, only 18% of Millennials (born after 1981) attend religious services regularly; this percentage is 5-15% lower than when previous generations (Gen X, Boomer and Silent Generations) were at a similar age. Currently, only 43% of religiously affiliated 18-29 year olds attend services weekly. Over a three year period, the NYSR reported a 10-20% increase in adolescents who never attend weekly religious service or youth group events and a 5-10% decrease in young people who prayed, read their Bible, or practiced other spiritual disciplines.<sup>14</sup>

Although the majority of Americans still consider themselves Christians, these numbers are growing smaller, especially among young adults and adolescents. The affiliations, beliefs, and habits that adolescents and young adults choose are likely to stick with them through adulthood. If the religious affiliation and practice trends continue, then we will see a significant drop in Christian belief and practice in the American religious landscape as Millennials age.

### 3. THE RATIONALE FOR RELIGIOUS AFFILIATION CHANGES

#### Summary

Decreases in Christian affiliation and practice do not occur primarily because of “worldview” topics like naturalism, sexuality, postmodernism, or atheism. Rather, the vast majority of those surveyed in one study, 62%, cite a gradual disconnection with Christianity (“simply stopped attending”), or a sense that it did not fit the contours of their adult lives (“life change”). Another

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12 Denton, Piece, and Smith. “Religion and Spirituality on the Path Through Adolescence.” National Study of Youth and Religion, 2008. <[http://www.youthandreligion.org/sites/youthandreligion.org/files/imported/publications/docs/w2\\_pub\\_report\\_final.pdf](http://www.youthandreligion.org/sites/youthandreligion.org/files/imported/publications/docs/w2_pub_report_final.pdf)>

13 “Most Twentysomethings Put Christianity on the Shelf Following Spiritually Active Teen Years.” The Barna Group, 16 September 2006. <<https://www.barna.org/barna-update/article/16-teensnext-gen/147-most-twentysomethings-put-christianity-on-the-shelf-following-spiritually-active-teen-years#.UeBquT7wKfs>>

14 Denton, Piece, and Smith. “Religion and Spirituality on the Path Through Adolescence.” National Study of Youth and Religion, 2008. <[http://www.youthandreligion.org/sites/youthandreligion.org/files/imported/publications/docs/w2\\_pub\\_report\\_final.pdf](http://www.youthandreligion.org/sites/youthandreligion.org/files/imported/publications/docs/w2_pub_report_final.pdf)>

study places a rejection of religious teaching, not worldview topics, as the primary cause. Christianity becomes a stage, simply left behind with their childhood.

### Key Points

- 40-50% of those who leave a religious affiliation do so because they stop believing in God/specific religious truth or because of other disagreement with religious teaching.
- Less than 25% cite issues of community with a religious group, social beliefs, or conflicts with politics, science, or philosophy as reasons for becoming religiously unaffiliated.
- 71% of former Catholics and former Protestants say they just gradually drifted away from the faith.
- Of adolescents who became less religious, 32% said that they had become disinterested or merely stopped attending religious activities, and 30% cited a “life change.” Only 20% cited intellectual skepticism, and only 18% mentioned a negative evaluation of religion.
- According to the National Study of Youth and Religion, “religion appeared to be getting squeezed out by all of the competing demands for [adolescents’] time and attention.”

### Research

It is difficult, of course, to pin down exactly why and how people change their religious beliefs and practices. All studies that address these questions are based on self-reports, and often require participants to evaluate their rationale for decisions made several years prior.

Most major studies of changes in religious belief and practice allow respondents to choose more than one choice although some request that respondents choose their main reason for leaving their prior faith. Both Gallup<sup>15</sup> and Pew Forum polls indicate that between 40-50% of those who leave a religious affiliation do so because they stop believing in God/specific religious truth or because of other disagreement with religious teaching. Issues of community with a religious group, social beliefs, or conflicts with politics, science or philosophy rate considerably lower in importance (approximately less than 25% of respondents cited these as reasons for becoming religiously unaffiliated).

Statistics specifically about those who left their childhood religion tell a slightly different story though. In Pew Forum’s 2009 study of changes in religious affiliation, they reported that “more than seven-in-ten former Catholics and former Protestants (71% each) who are now unaffiliated say they just gradually drifted away from the faith, making this the most commonly offered

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15 Frank Newport. “A Look at Religious Switching in America Today.” Gallup, 23 June 2006. <<http://www.gallup.com/poll/23467/Look-Religious-Switching-America-Today.aspx>>

reason by both groups.<sup>16</sup> In the same survey, only 50% of respondents said that they had left their childhood religion due to stopping belief in its teaching.

The National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR) reports that of their focus adolescents who became less religious over the three years of the study, 32% said that they had become disinterested or merely stopped attending religious activities, and 30% cited a “life change.” Only 20% cited intellectual skepticism, and only 18% mentioned a negative evaluation of religion (respondents were allowed to choose more than one reason). These statistics led the researchers to comment that “The religious decline among these young people was not typically the result of a negative experience with religion or a particular lack of religious belief. Instead, religion appeared to be getting squeezed out by all of the competing demands for their time and attention.”<sup>17</sup>

### CONCLUSION: THE CASE FOR WHEATSTONE’S MISSION

Almost every major response to the problem of apostasy in the next generation has relied on a topical solution (see worldview curricula) or on new marketing approaches for “relevance” to youth. Yet neither of these approaches fit the data, and neither approach has produced a cultural shift.

While topical solutions could have met the needs of a minority of former Christians, it does not respond to the needs of the majority. It does not provide them with a Christianity that fits the contours of their adult lives, or one from which they will not want to “drift away.” Rather, by dictating to them sets of answers to current questions, it 1) encourages the association of Christianity with eras of top-down instruction, namely childhood, and 2) frames Christianity in relationship to a set of issues that will inevitably shift by the time they are older. Who would have anticipated, 10 years ago, the place of the conversation about homosexuality today? Now, topical responses to student apostasy rush to adapt their programs to meet the new challenge. Yet they make these rushing changes only, we suggest, to remain dated when the cultural tide moves past this current debate.

Likewise, while marketing responses understand the need to meet students with a refined, cultural message, they neglect the extremely high likelihood that the same students will abandon the cultural trappings and material culture of their youth when they redefine themselves as adults. Like the topical approach, a marketing approach will fall victim to the march of cultural change, and to the radical transitions that take place as individuals begin to identify as adults.

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16 “Faith in Flux.” Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, 27 April 2009. <<http://www.pewforum.org/Faith-in-Flux.aspx>>

17 Denton, Piece, and Smith. “Religion and Spirituality on the Path Through Adolescence.” National Study of Youth and Religion, 2008. <[http://www.youthandreligion.org/sites/youthandreligion.org/files/imported/publications/docs/w2\\_pub\\_report\\_final.pdf](http://www.youthandreligion.org/sites/youthandreligion.org/files/imported/publications/docs/w2_pub_report_final.pdf)>

No new marketing or topical approach will solve the problem. Rather, the next generation needs an approach suited to their growth. They need to be invited into Christian adulthood. Only when students are shown a picture of Christianity that is large enough to accommodate the vast changes they are about to experience, only when they are shown a way of living that does not “meet them where they are,” but rather inspires them to grow, will we make significant progress with this definitive challenge for the Church of our time.

Wheatstone provides that solution. By training students to think for themselves rather than feeding them answers to difficult questions, it elevates them and respects them, while equipping them for topics and challenges that we cannot anticipate. By immersing students in the best of arts and culture, it enables them to navigate new products, marketing, pop culture, and ideas with flexibility and depth. By placing them in mentoring relationships with excellent Christian scholars and 20-30 year old rising Christian leaders, it gives them role models after whom they can pattern their transitions into adulthood. By focusing on prayer and the imitation of Christ, it calls them to the essential practices of faithful Christian living. By demonstrating healthy community and conflict resolution, it gives them a positive vision of the Church that Christ rules. By calling them to creative lives rather than consumeristic ones, it frees them from the unthought influences of an amoral or immoral system of cultural production. It attends, not to students’ current tastes, but to their ability to discern good things. It attends, not to their current ideas, but to their minds. In so doing, it treats them like adults. It gives them freedom and responsibility, anticipating the changes that are surely going to meet them. In this way, Wheatstone provides a sadly unprecedented and much needed response to the problem of our time. Wheatstone invites youth into Christian adulthood.



Inviting youth into Christian adulthood