

The young "nones"

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Youth are not the future of the church—they already are the church." That claim is often made by those with a heart for youth ministry. People who work with youth resist the idea that their ministry is a training ground for future ministers, because they know it is more than that: it's the real deal. Youth can be as passionate as any other age group about God, worship, prayer, community, service and justice.

In this issue, Amy Frykholm [reports on](#) a program designed to take youth seriously as people of faith and even as theologians. The Youth Theological Initiative challenges high school youth to grow in faith and seeks to put theological seminaries in closer touch with the concerns and questions of youth.

The importance of such work is underscored in a recent landmark study on American religion, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us*, by two political scientists, Robert Putnam of Harvard and David Campbell of Nortre Dame ([reviewed](#) in the *November 16 Century*). Putnam and Campbell devote considerable attention to the rise of the "nones"—the people who, when asked about their religious affiliation, check "none." From 1970 to 1990 this number stayed at about 7 percent, but starting in 1990 the number began to rise sharply, reaching 17 percent in 2010.

Putnam and Campbell note that the rise of the "nones" is swelled by the increasing indifference to organized religion exhibited by people age 18 to 29. From 1990 to 2010 the number in that age group who cite "no religious affiliation" rose steadily, from 12 percent to 27 percent.

What happened in 1990 to start turning so many young Americans off to religion? The authors argue that by 1990 religion in the U.S. was publicly identified with the religious right, a brand of religion which struck the young as hypocritical and judgmental—too focused on rules, not enough on spirituality. The religious right fought the culture wars so hard that they lost the battle, or at least the battle for the young.

So far Putnam and Campbell see no sign that young people will return to the church in great numbers. Yet they also note that this cohort is not indifferent to issues of faith. Indeed, young people are deeply interested in spiritual topics. They just don't associate the pursuit of such topics with religious organizations.

The prospect that successive generations will be alienated from religious organizations is a sobering one for congregations. But the challenge is also an opportunity. It is perhaps especially an enormous opportunity for religious traditions that can do what the Youth Theological Initiative has been trying to do—connect youth with a faith that has a robust intellectual tradition and that is rooted not in politics but in worship, service and the pursuit of justice.