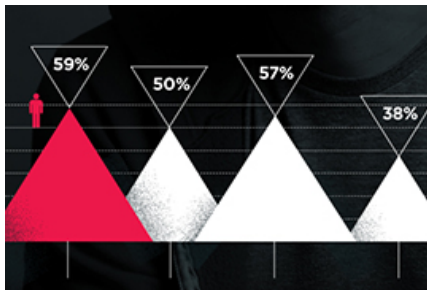


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# Three Spiritual Journeys of Millennials



May 9, 2013 – Much ink has been spilled in recent months over what social analysts are calling the “rise of the Nones.” The trend describes the seeming surge in people who claim no faith or say they are unaffiliated with any belief system.

The term rose to prominence when a **Pew Research poll** found that the number of Americans who are religiously unaffiliated rose to almost 20%—a nearly 5% leap in just the last five years. In the subsequent

months, a **Gallup poll showed similar numbers**, and most recently, in March 2013, a poll from **UC-Berkeley and Duke University** similarly found religious affiliation in the U.S. is at its lowest point since it began to be tracked.

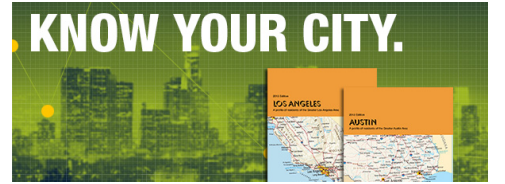
One common thread in every survey has been the significant number of Millennials among these “Nones.” The initial Pew survey found that nearly one-in-three members of the Millennial generation (32%) has no religious affiliation. But, who are these faithless twentysomethings? Where did they come from? Did they ever claim faith? And what is it about religion that has left them cold?

Recent surveys by the Barna Group have shed light on this trend by examining those 18- to 29-year-olds who used to identify themselves closely with faith and the church, but who have since begun to wrestle with that identity. In fact, between high school and turning 30, 43% of these once-active Millennials drop out of regular church attendance—that amounts to eight million twentysomethings who have, for various reasons, given up on church or Christianity.

Over half of Millennials with a Christian background (59%) have, at some point, dropped out of going to church after having gone regularly, and half have been significantly frustrated by their faith. Additionally, more than 50% of 18-29 year olds with a Christian background say they are less active in church compared to when they were 15.

## THE SPIRITUALLY HOMELESS YOUTH

Today, there is a 43 percent drop-off in church engagement between the teen and early adult years. This represents 8 million twentysomethings who were once active churchgoers but who will no longer be particularly engaged in a church by their 30th birthday. Who are these 8 million young adults?



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by their 30th birthday. Who are these 8 million young adults? What characterizes their exit from the church? How do they feel about Christianity in general? Here is a profile of these spiritually homeless Millennials:

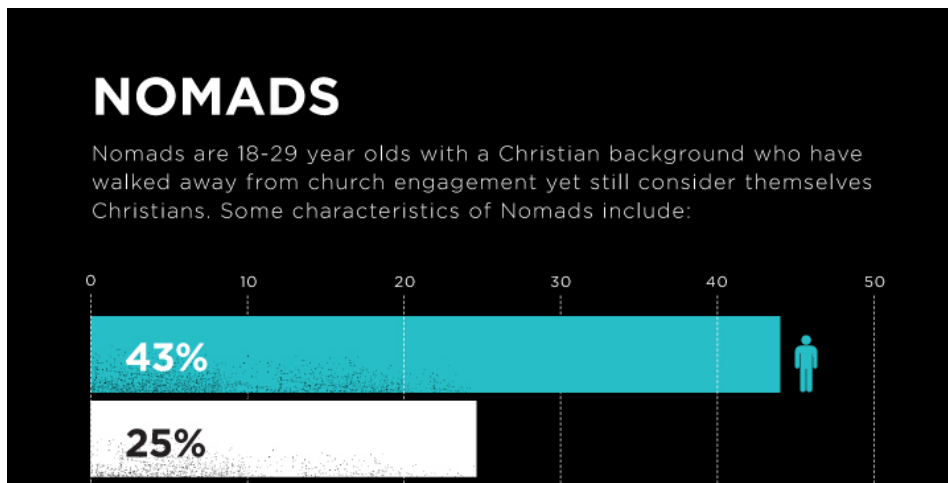
Of 18-29 year old Americans with a Christian background:



In his book *You Lost Me*, David Kinnaman—president of the Barna Group—divides these once church-going Millennials into three spiritual journeys, which he termed “nomads,” “prodigals” and “exiles.” These groups are derived from the most common answers given to a variety of questions about religious belief and attitudes toward Christianity, churches and faith. Their answers may help church leaders and cultural analysts better understand why some Millennials are migrating from a firm faith to the side of the Nones.

### Nomads

The most common spiritual journey is that of the nomads. This group is comprised of 18- to 29-year-olds with a Christian background who walk away from church engagement but still consider themselves Christians. A person in this group typically has trouble identifying with a church or a particular “brand” of Christianity, but would consider themselves, broadly, a Christian.



### Popular Resources - Teens/Next Gen

- [You Lost Me](#) by David Kinnaman
- [unChristian](#) by David Kinnaman
- [The Family & Technology Report](#)

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- [Three Spiritual Journeys of Millennials](#)
- [Research Examines the Role of Healthy Families in Youth Ministry](#)
- [Top Trends of 2011: Women Making it Alone](#)
- [Top Trends of 2011: Millennials Rethink Christianity](#)
- [Five Myths about Young Adult Church Dropouts](#)

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23%

- 43% think going to church or being with Christian friends is optional
- 25% say that faith and religion just aren't that important to them right now
- 23% say they used to be very involved in their church but don't fit there anymore

This trend may exist because more than four-in-ten American young adults with a Christian background (43%) believe going to church and having Christian friends is optional. One-quarter of that same group say faith and religion just aren't that important to them. Additionally, nearly one-fourth of Millennials with a Christian background (23%) say they used to be very involved in their church, but they just don't fit in anymore.

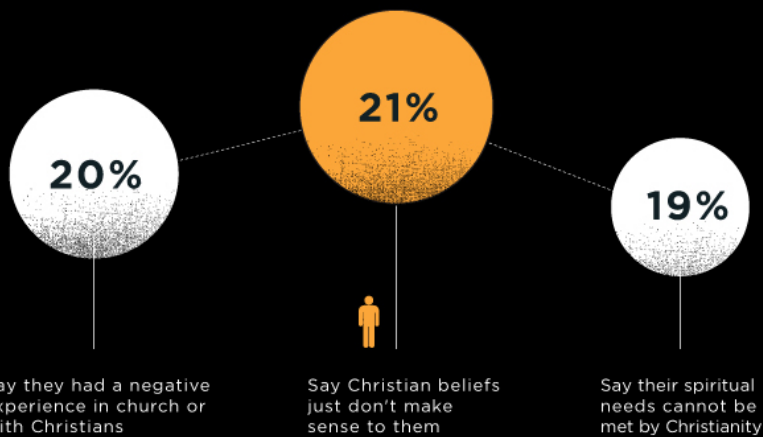
These are the people who have become the church's nomads, young adults who see themselves as *personally* interested in God and religion, but not really in a formal or institutional expression of that faith. This is the group most likely to say they love Jesus but not the church—or that they are "spiritual but not religious." They might appear to be wandering, but they would never claim to have lost their faith.

### Prodigals

Prodigals, on the other hand, are those who have lost their faith. This group is made up of young adults who used to claim a personal faith, but no longer claim any Christian belief. In many of their answers in Barna Group surveys, they describe themselves as fairly certain they won't ever return to the Christian faith.

## PRODIGALS

Prodigals are 18-29 year olds who have a Christian background but have lost their faith, describing themselves as "no longer Christian." Some characteristics of Prodigals include:



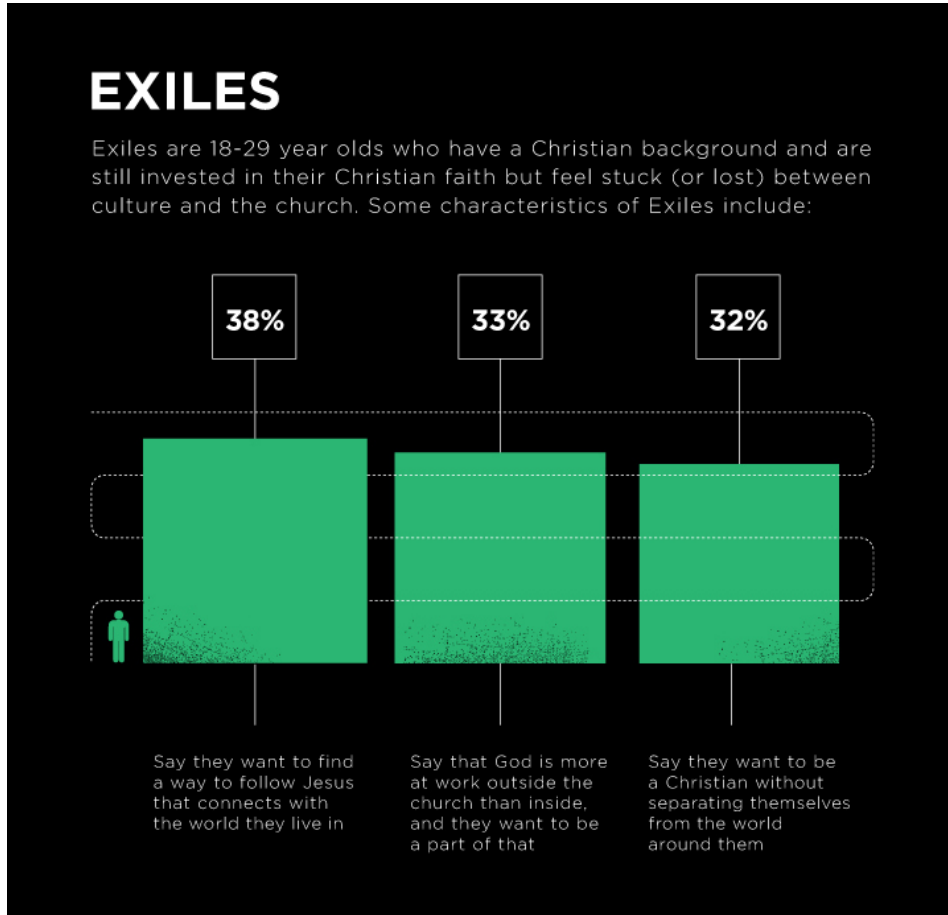
More than one-fifth of Millennials with a Christian background (21%) say Christian beliefs don't make sense to them. Many prodigals also admit to having had a negative experience in church or with Christians (20% of 18- to 29-year-olds with a Christian background say this). Finally, 19% of young adults who have a Christian background say their spiritual needs cannot be met by Christianity, another characteristic of prodigals.

This is the group that most often gets lumped in with the "Nones," even though they might not be totally opposed to faith and spirituality. Rather, they've often had some kind of experience or realization that has made it impossible to reconcile their life with the Christian faith. Often, this is either tied to some kind of intellectual change or emotional injury, leading to a long-term dismissal

of the Christian faith.

### Exiles

The final category of Millennials who struggle with the Christian faith can be termed "exiles." This group has a tough time finding a place in a church setting, but has chosen to remain within an institutional church context. They feel "lost" somewhere between their commitments to church and their desire to stay connected with the world around them. These young adults with a Christian background struggle to connect their faith or church with their everyday lives, and yet they continue in their Christian faith despite these headwinds. More than one-fifth of Millennials with a Christian past (21%) say they remain Christian and continue to attend a church, but they find that church to be a difficult place for them to live out their faith.



This group is defined by wanting to figure out how to follow Jesus in the day-to-day aspects of their lives. In fact, nearly four out of ten Millennials with a Christian background (38%) say they desire to follow Jesus in a way that connects with the world they live in. One-third of twentysomethings with a Christian background say God is more at work outside the church than inside the church, and they want to be a part of that. Notice they didn't say they were *leaving* the church, but they desire a connection to a broader expression of faith.

Exiles also search for ways to remain active participants in their surrounding culture without giving up their allegiance to Christ. Hence, nearly one-third of American 18- to 29-year-olds with a Christian background (32%) says they want to be a Christian without separating themselves from the world around them.

[Watch David Kinnaman Speak on Prodigals, Nomads and Exiles.](#)

### Bright Spots, Opportunities to Learn

Despite the millions of twentysomethings who are conflicted with Christianity and churches, there is still some good news for the future of the American church. That's because there are millions of Millennial Christians who are concerned for the future of their faith, have a strong desire to connect to the traditions of the church and feel a sense of excitement about church involvement. More than four out of ten Millennials with a Christian background (42%) say they are very concerned about their generation leaving the church, and a similar number (41%) say they desire "a more traditional faith, rather than a hip version of Christianity." And nearly one-third of young adults with a Christian past say they are "more excited about church than any time in my life."

While these engaged young adults are good reasons not to despair over the future of American



Christianity, the trend of disengagement provides a sobering backdrop. The reality is that more than one-third of Millennials who grew up in the Christian faith say they went through a period when they felt like rejecting their parents' faith. How they deal with such struggles often defines their spiritual trajectory. They can be the people reconnecting with a vital faith; they can be nomads, claiming vestiges of their previous faith while mostly rejecting the church that fostered that faith; they can be prodigals, leaving Christianity in the rearview mirror; or they can be exiles, struggling to connect their Christianity in a complex, accelerated culture.

### Getting a Handle on Millennials

The trend of youth and young adult disengagement from Christianity seems to be picking up steam at a larger rate than normal generational trends. On these matters, previous Barna articles have explored [six reasons young people leave church](#) and [five myths about young church dropouts](#).

To help educate leaders about the Millennial generation and their faith journeys, the Barna team has recently completed the national tour *You Lost Me, Live!* The series of events convened nearly 10,000 leaders, pastors and parents over the past 16 months. One of the features of the events was hearing Millennials from the stage talking about their spiritual views and journeys.

Kinnaman said one of the key insights emerging from the tour was that "nomads, prodigals and exiles share something in common: being somewhere other than home. One of the characteristics of Millennial life has become the image of the traveller. They want to wander the world, both in real life and in digital ways. They want to feel untethered. There is a trend among young adults of delaying the pressures of adult life as long as possible; they want to embrace a lifestyle of risk, exploration and unscripted moments. At the same time, they want to be loyal to their peers. The generation has come to appreciate and take identity from a spiritual version of life on the road. In other words, it is a generation that is spiritually homeless.

"This transience stands in contrast to the staid, predictable, and often overprotective experience that most churches seem to offer. The gap is simple: Millennials are a generation that craves spontaneity, participation, adventure and clan-like relationships, but what they often find in churches are featureless programs and moralistic content. Leaders who hope to alter the spiritual journeys of today's Millennials need to embrace something of a 'reverse mentoring' mindset, allowing the next generation to help lead alongside established leaders. Millennials need to find spiritual rootedness, but that's not simply to preserve old ways of doing church.

"During the last 16 months of touring, our team learned that Millennials are more willing to be challenged than most church leaders are willing to challenge them. However, this does not mean simply confronting Millennials to become more conventional and embrace what they may see as 'boring' or 'outdated' forms of spiritual expression. It means inviting them into the Christian community as valued members of *that community* to create a new, courageous sense of home."

Twitter: [@davidkinnaman](#) | [@barnagroup](#)

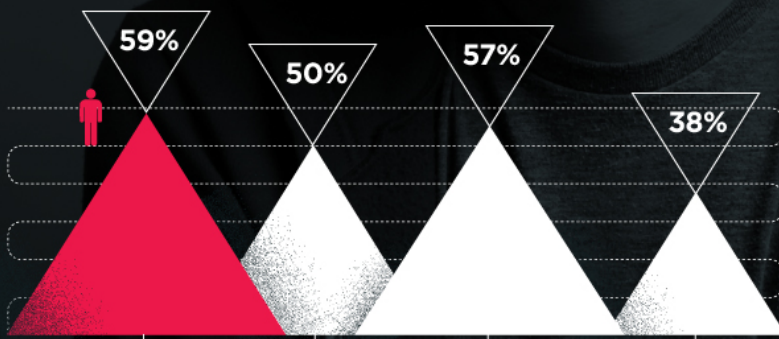
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Of 18-29 year old Americans with a Christian background:



Dropped out of attending church after going regularly

Have been significantly frustrated by faith

Are less active in church today compared to when they were 15

Went through a period when they significantly doubted their faith

**42%**

Are very concerned about their generation leaving the church

**41%**

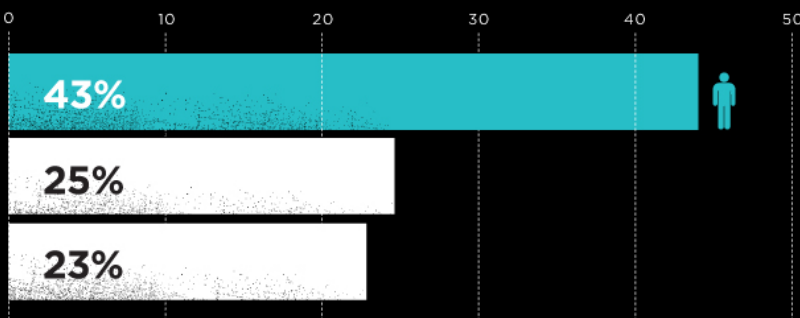
Have a desire for "a more traditional faith, rather than a hip version of Christianity"

**30%**

Say they are "more excited about church than at any time in my life"

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Say Christian beliefs just don't make sense to them



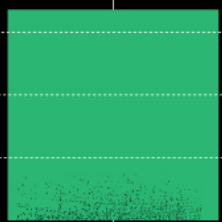
Say their spiritual needs cannot be met by Christianity

## EXILES

Exiles are 18-29 year olds who have a Christian background and are still invested in their Christian faith but feel stuck (or lost) between culture and the church. Some characteristics of Exiles include:



Say they want to find a way to follow Jesus that connects with the world they live in



Say that God is more at work outside the church than inside, and they want to be a part of that



Say they want to be a Christian without separating themselves from the world around them

Barna Group



Read more about Nomads, Prodigals and Exiles—and how the church can engage a spiritually homeless generation—in David Kinnaman's book, *You Lost Me*.

### About the Research

This Barna Update is based on research conducted for the Faith That Lasts Project. The research included a series of national public opinion surveys conducted by Barna Group.

In addition to extensive quantitative interviewing with adults and faith leaders nationwide, the main research examination for the study was conducted with 18- to 29-year-olds who had been active in a Christian church at some point in their teen years. The quantitative study among 18- to 29-year-olds was conducted online with 1,296 current and former churchgoers. The Faith That Lasts research also included parallel testing on key measures using telephone surveys, including interviews conducted among respondents using cell phones, to help ensure the representativeness of the online sample. The sampling error associated with 1,296 interviews is plus or minus 2.7 percentage points, at the 95% confidence level.

The online study relied upon a research panel called KnowledgePanel®, created by Knowledge Networks. It is a probability-based online non-volunteer access panel. Panel members are recruited using a statistically valid sampling method with a published sample frame of residential addresses that covers approximately 97% of U.S. households. Sampled non-Internet households, when recruited, are provided a netbook computer and free Internet service so they may also participate as online panel members. KnowledgePanel consists of about 50,000 adult members (ages 18 and older) and includes persons living in cell phone only households.

### About Barna Group

Barna Group (which includes its research division, the Barna Research Group) is a private, non-partisan, for-profit organization under the umbrella of the Issachar Companies. It conducts primary research, produces media resources pertaining to spiritual development, and facilitates the healthy spiritual growth of leaders, children, families and Christian ministries.

Located in Ventura, California, Barna Group has been conducting and analyzing primary research to understand cultural trends related to values, beliefs, attitudes and behaviors since 1984. If you would like to receive free e-mail notification of the release of each update on the latest research findings from Barna Group, you may subscribe to this free service at the Barna website ([www.barna.org](http://www.barna.org)). Additional research-based resources are also available through this website.

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