

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

The rise of the ‘Nones’: Creating community in new ways

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The phrase “Rise of the Nones” is a common parlance these days as we discuss national trends in religious identity, or lack thereof. One in three people younger than age 30 are likely to identify as a “None,” an umbrella term meant to include atheists, agnostics, the “spiritual but not religious,” and those who believe in a God, but are not affiliated with a particular tradition or denomination.

As a None, and a millennial None at that, this ambiguous spiritual space is very familiar to me.

While a phrase such as “Rise of the Nones” has a somewhat ominous and even negative connotation to it, I have seen firsthand the incredible, and creative, ways community is built by the Nones amongst us — locally and nationally.

Two of the people leading the research on this emerging trend are Casper ter-Kuile and Angie Thurston, graduates of Harvard Divinity School and now Ministry Innovation Fellows through The Fetzner Institute.

Their research on Millennial Nones culminated in a study called, “How We Gather.” In it, they write:

“Millennials are less religiously affiliated than ever before. Churches are just one of many institutional casualties of the internet age in which young people are both more globally connected and more locally isolated than ever before. Against this bleak backdrop, a hopeful landscape is emerging. Millennials are flocking to a host of new organizations that deepen community in ways that are powerful, surprising, and perhaps even religious.”

They go on to cite how millennials are not the “spiritual consumers of their parents’ generation.” While they may not be interested in “belonging to an institution with religious creed as the threshold,” they often still are interested in spirituality and community.

When Millennials cannot find those things, they create spaces for them to happen.

For example, in Washington, D.C., a diverse arts community called The Sanctuaries brings together multifaith and multi-

racial artists and creatives, promoting spiritual growth and social change through arts and music.

Another instance is CrossFit, a tribelike fitness organization centered on personal improvement and a community where members have so much of an evangelical enthusiasm that it keeps them accountable and connected in ways that continue outside of the gym.

These communities, popping up across the country, have in common six aspects, according to Casper and Angie’s research: community, personal transformation, social transformation, purpose finding, creativity, and accountability.

But after Casper and Angie gathered 50 leaders from these organizations to learn more, they heard another element that was essential to these organizations. They called it, “Something More.”

This “Something More” was what these secular organizations learned from their religious counterparts — that collective well-being is only possible when we, as individuals, are able to connect deeply to something outside of and larger than oneself.

This “Something More” is not possible without intentional community being built to bring Millennial Nones out of spiritual isolation from one another.

What these trends show us is that the lives of Nones are not spiritually empty, but are rich in community, meaning and relationships across differences and around shared values.

Krista Tippett, in her newest book *Becoming Wise*, even suggested: “The Nones of this age are ecumenical, humanist, trans-religious. But in their midst are analogs to the original monastics: spiritual rebels and seekers on the margins of established religion, pointing tradition back to its own untamable, countercultural, service-oriented heart.”

These new ways to gather, largely led by Nones and Millennials in particular, allow us to engage more authentically, search more deeply, and collaborate more meaningfully. We — religious and non-religious alike — have something to learn from these emerging trends in spiritual life.

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