



Our Changing Context for Mission

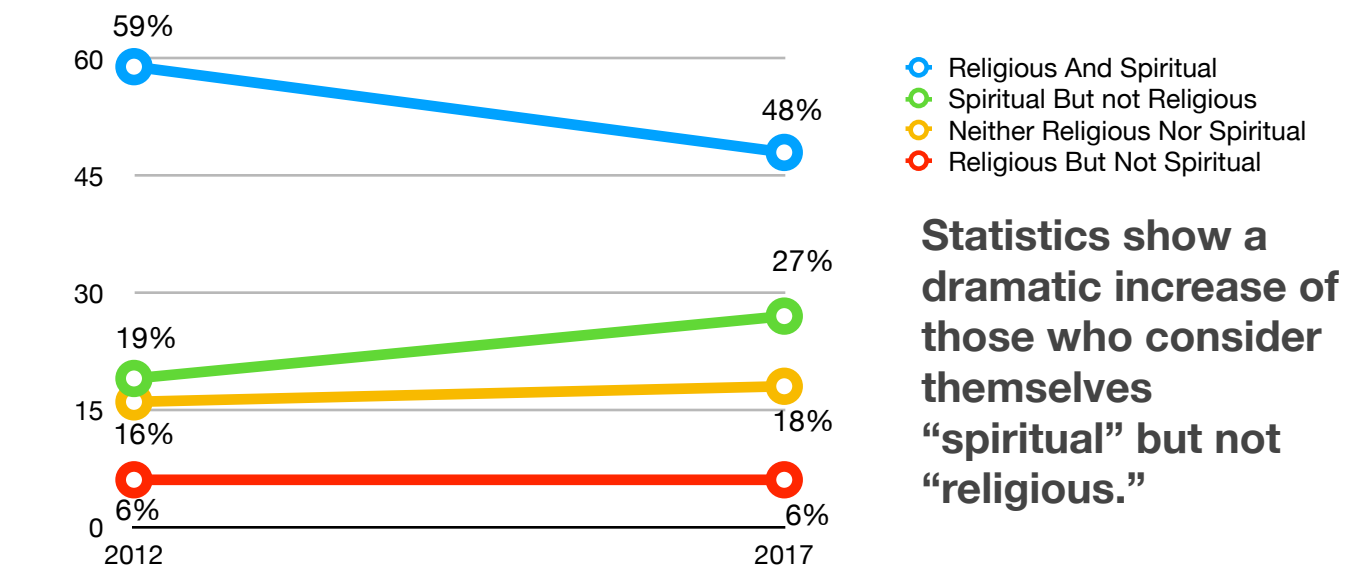
Awaken

“More than ever before, spirituality is not handed to us in reliable packages, and we must cultivate an incarnational worldview capable of finding God in all things-making our world a sanctuary instead of searching for a temple.”¹

“Now in this moment, now in this day, God is creating and leading the way; life is behind us, life is before; we write the story not heard before.”²

This is a moment in history with great cultural and religious upheaval. As we live into a rhythm of awakening, risking, and blessing, we will need to begin by awakening to the major shifts happening around us. What we have experienced as decline in numbers and participation in church is really pointing to something deeper.

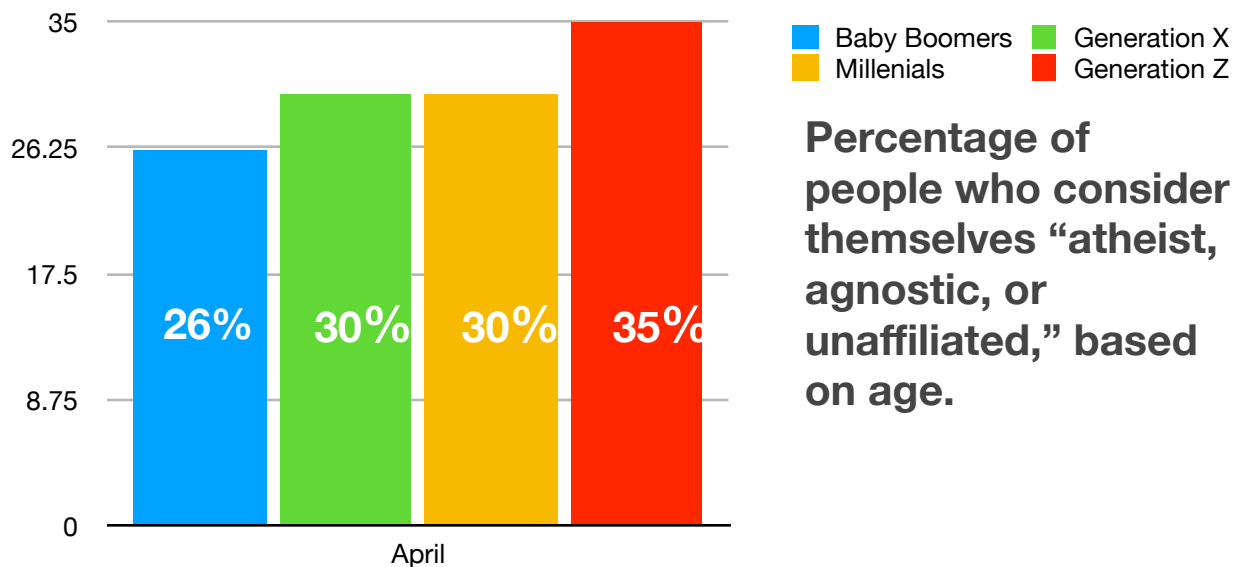
Let's begin by taking a look at some of the trends in research:³



¹ Joseph Stewart-Sicking and Diana Butler Bass, *Spiritual Friendship after Religion: Walking with People While the Rules Are Changing* (New York: Morehouse Publishing, 2016), 54.

² Community of Christ, ed., *Community of Christ Sings*, Pew ed (Independence, MO: Herald Publishing House, 2013), *Now in this Moment*, 96.

³ <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/09/06/more-americans-now-say-theyre-spiritual-but-not-religious/>



Barna Group Study⁴

WHAT DO THESE NUMBERS MEAN?

The most important thing to understand about the statistics in our changing religious context is that although there is a decline in people who participate in religious institutions, there is an *increased* interest in the spiritual life. Notice that in the five year span of this study by Pew Research center, those who claimed to be “spiritual but not religious” increased from 19% in 2012 to 27% in 2017. That means that over one quarter of people in the US are hungry for spiritual fulfillment but are not finding that in the institutional church.

In a study by Barna Group (see second graphic), there is striking data that 35% of Generation Z considers themselves to be atheist, agnostic, or unaffiliated. That’s an increase of 5% between Millennials and Generation Z (13-19 year olds).

⁴ Barna Group: <https://www.christianpost.com/news/gen-z-is-the-least-christian-generation-in-american-history-barna-finds-214856/>



At first glance it would seem that these two studies contradict each other. How can there be an increase in spiritual yearning as *well* as an increase in atheism and agnosticism?

In reality, these studies teach us that spiritual hunger and longing for connection can also accompany deep theological questioning and skepticism. This skepticism may have driven people from the church, where they have often received a narrative that particular belief is required for belonging - but the yearning for spiritual connection has not gone away.

Diana Butler Bass frames this well in her book, *Christianity After Religion*. She writes, “For the last few centuries, Western Christianity ordered faith in a particular way. Catholics and Protestants taught that belief came first, behavior came next, and finally belonging resulted, depending on how you answered the first two questions.”⁵

This order of faith - belief, behavior, and belonging - has led to the trends we are seeing in our changing context. When belief is required for belonging, those with questions or skepticism have often walked away. We are called reverse this order. As Bass writes, “Instead of believing, behaving, and belonging, we need to reverse the order to belonging, behaving, and believing. And therein lies the difference between religion-as-institution and *religio* as a spiritually vital faith.”⁶

Risk

President Veazey shared the following insights about our identity and calling during his September 20, 2017 address to the church:

“The future church is being formed by a basic concept: Our chief purpose is to birth, nurture, and multiply communities of disciples and seekers engaged in spiritual formation and compassionate ministry and action. This basic blueprint—spiritual

⁵ Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity after Religion: The End of Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening* (New York: HarperOne, 2013), 201.

⁶ Bass, 204.



formation, community, compassionate ministry and action—is true to the vision of Christ. Everything else, like organizational structure, resources, funding methods, congregational forms, etc., should support this primary purpose.”

QUESTIONS TO FOR REFLECTION AND RESPONSE

- Have you experienced faith in the order which Diana Butler Bass describes - belief, behavior, and then belonging?
- What would the reverse look like?
- President Veazey has offered us a blueprint for the future church. What stands out to you in his words above?
- How might a community shaped by spiritual formation and compassionate action differ from our current models of church?

ACTION STEPS

- Go out into the neighborhood. Choose a time (even Sunday morning!) to get to know your context by walking the neighborhood, spending time in local shops or gathering places. Who is in your community? Who is not?
- If you choose to walk the neighborhood on a Sunday morning, notice what goes on in your community during the hours normally dedicated to church.
- Be open to forming new relationships! The Spirit is already moving ahead of us; all we need to do is risk following where it leads.



Bless

- Listen to the song Pray by Sam Smith. You can find a version on YouTube here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hhREiAarjVY>
- Share in the Round about what you hear in the song - what are the longings that you hear?
- Offer a closing prayer in response to what you hear in the song.