

Barna: How Teenagers Practice Their Faith

Edited and posted by Bob Young

Barna Group has released results of a survey focused on the faith of teenagers (July 12, 2010). Teens are among the most religiously active groups in our nation with about six out of every ten teens engaged in some type of group spiritual activity in a typical week. Yet, this apparent spirituality does not translate into the expected results as specific types of faith activities are declining among teens. In fact, overall teens are less inclined toward spirituality than were teens a dozen years ago. The study assessed nine different forms of teenage involvement; six of those religious activities are at their lowest levels since Barna Group began tracking such teen behaviors. These include small group attendance, prayer, Sunday school participation, donations to churches, and evangelism by Christian teens. David Kinnaman, director of the research, pointed out that some of these changes may go unnoticed by church leaders because the most visible activities—teen church attendance and youth group involvement—have not changed much in recent years. Kinnaman commented: “Teenagers view religious involvement partly as a way to maintain their all-important relationships. Yet perhaps technology such as social networking is reconfiguring teens’ needs for relationships and continual connectivity, diminishing the role of certain spiritual forms of engagement in their lives. Talking to God may be losing out to Facebook.”

The most striking change was the fact that teens today seem less inclined to have spiritual conversations about their faith in Christ with non-believers. The survey question specifically asked if the respondent had “explained your religious beliefs to someone else who had different beliefs, in the hope that they might accept Jesus Christ as their savior.” Among “born again” Christian teens, the proportion who said they had explained their beliefs to someone else with different faith views in the last year declined from nearly two-thirds of teenagers in 1997 (63%) to less than half of Christian teens in the December 2009 study (45%). Kinnaman notes: “Christian teenagers are taking cues from a culture that has made it unpopular to make bold assertions about faith or be too aggressively evangelistic. Some of the Barna Group’s other research shows that the vast majority of these students agree with the statement it is ‘cool to be a Christian.’ Yet fewer young Christians apparently believe it is worthwhile to talk about their faith in Jesus with others.”

Other changes were also significant. Sunday school participation declined from 35% in 1997 to 30% in the current study. Small group attendance was down from 30% to 21%. The proportion of teens who reported donating any of their own money to church went from 35% to 26% over the last dozen years. Prayer dropped from 81% to 71% among teens since 1997.

The differences in the responses of teens in different religious groups are interesting. In comparison to Protestants, Catholic teens are more likely to show diminished religious activity. Among 13- to 17-year-old Protestants, there are signs of increased religious activity: more likely to pray, go to worship services, read the Bible and attend youth group meetings than 10 years ago. Given that religious participation improved among this group, the drop in personal evangelism is even more striking (going from 72% in 1997 to 53% in 2009). Much of the increased activity among Protestants came from non-mainline (evangelical) teenagers who showed increased activity in prayer, church attendance, Bible reading, youth group attendance, and personal donations to churches. A third group of teens, those unaffiliated with Christianity, show less participation with churches than the same type of students did a dozen years ago. In other words, Christian churches today appear to have even fewer interactions among non-Christian teens than was the case in the late 1990s.