

Conservative Christianity driving a generation away from religion

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A week ago, the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Minnesota announced a [reorganization plan](#) that will eliminate twenty-one congregations in the metro, merging them into fourteen existing parishes. Stated another way, thirty-five current congregations will be downsized into fourteen. Some have suggested that if it wasn't for the influx of Hispanic immigrants, the Roman Catholic church nationally would be suffering even greater declines in membership.

Of course, the problem of declining religious participation is not confined to Catholicism. Indeed, [statistics suggest](#) the decline in Americans who identify with religion is startling.

That shift is the decline in participation by all Americans, but particularly young adults, in churches. In 1990 only 7 percent of Americans indicated "none" as religious affiliation. By 2008 that number had grown to 17 percent. But among young adults, in their twenties, the percent of "nones" is reaching nearly 30%. The new "nones" are heavily concentrated among those who have come of age since 1990.

But wait, aren't many conservative Christian denominations growing? Many evangelical churches thrive but at the cost of theological depth—"a mile wide and an inch deep". Some are thinly veiled entertainment ministries. Joel Osteen Ministries is merely the most blatant example of the appealing "prosperity gospel" that too often characterizes the mega-growth churches, and makes charismatic leaders such as Osteen very wealthy.

But it is the judgmental scapegoating that is turning off this generation of young adults according to [an article out of Seattle](#) last week. Blaming the public perception of Christianity, as espoused by the religious right, for the stark decline in those identifying with religion, the article discusses a poll and a book entitled *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us*, which:

makes the case that the alliance of religion with conservative politics is driving young adults away from religion Among the conclusions [of a major survey] is this one: "The association between religion and politics (and especially religion's intolerance of homosexuality) was the single strongest factor in this portentous shift."

Twenty somethings are walking away from the church, the article concludes, because of a skewed "public perception of religion as largely socially conservative," and the perception of religion as homophobic is especially responsible for the growing percentage of "nones."

[An unrelated poll out last week](#) suggests similar conclusions, and correlates with this blog's recent theme of suggesting that conservative Christian policies are part of the problem of gay bullying and critically low self esteem for many young gays.

Most Americans believe messages about homosexuality coming from religious institutions contribute to negative views of gays and lesbians, and higher rates of suicide among gay youths, a new poll reports ... Americans are more than twice as likely to give houses of worship low marks on handling the issue of homosexuality, according to a PRRI/RNS Religion News Poll released Thursday (Oct. 21).

After a recent spate of teen suicides prompted by anti-gay harassment and bullying, the poll indicates a strong concern among Americans about how religious messages are impacting public discussions of homosexuality.

Once again, there is a significant gap between the attitudes of younger versus older adults which mirrors very closely the higher percentage of "nones" among young adults.

Nearly half of Americans age 18-34 say messages from places of worship are contributing "a lot" to negative views of gay and lesbian people, compared to just 30 percent of Americans age 65 and older.

I'll close by [repeating the words of a young woman](#) spoken at the ELCA Church Wide Assembly in 2009 (CWA09),

"Give us honesty," she said. "My generation is turned off by what they see as hypocrisy in the church. 'Love your neighbor' is on the lips of the church, but a cold shoulder is what my generation sees."

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