

2020

The State of Religion & Young People

RELATIONAL AUTHORITY



The State of Religion & Young People 2020

RELATIONAL AUTHORITY

Springtide™
RESEARCH INSTITUTE



A note about the cover:

The cover symbolizes various connections that hold society together. The blue triangle represents social bonds based on what people have in common and the authority that arises from shared experience. The burnt orange triangle represents social bonds based on difference and the authority that arises from the interdependence of credentialed experts. The gold pentagon represents Relational Authority, a model of social connection that responds to the complexities of the state of religion and young people—a model that insists that shared experience and expertise are both needed to have lasting influence in the lives of young people. Relational Authority arises when one combines the sharing of wisdom and expertise with the practices of listening, transparency, integrity, and care.



Mission

Compelled by the urgent desire to listen and attend to the lives of young people (ages 13–25), Springtide™ Research Institute is committed to understanding the distinct ways new generations experience and express community, identity, and meaning.

We exist at the intersection of religious and human experience in the lives of young people. And we're here to listen.

We combine quantitative and qualitative research to reflect and amplify the lived realities of young people as they navigate shifting social, cultural, and religious landscapes. Delivering fresh data and actionable insights, we equip those who care about young people to care better.

A Springtide Tribute.

A Promise. A Pledge.



TO YOU

... who are young, full of wonder and possibility. You who are navigating some of life's most important questions and most tumultuous waters. You who are sometimes flourishing and sometimes floundering and oftentimes both. You who are at once being and becoming.

We dedicate our work to your thriving.

We dedicate ourselves to understanding your inner and outer lives.



TO YOU

... who are fiercely devoted to young people. You who advocate for and walk alongside young people with steadiness. You who are unwavering amid the waves.

We offer our research as an aid to the role you already play.

We offer ourselves as allies in accompaniment.



... the waves that crash, the currents that bend and beckon, the dark depths, and the effervescent crests. To this all-important period of life: worthy of considered listening and faithful retelling, worthy of companionship, worthy of care.

We situate our work at this intersection of human and religious experience in the lives of young people: a space of ebb and flow, of calm and chaos, of clear and murky moments.

A space we are dedicated to exploring and engaging



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Introduction

Springtide Research Institute listens to the stories of young people, ages 13–25, and amplifies their voices through quantitative and qualitative sociological research. **Our work exists at the intersection of religious and human experience. We strive to understand how young people make sense of an increasingly complex world, so that those who care about young people can be equipped to care better.**

In 2020, we asked questions at this intersection—questions about meaning, vocation, relationships, religion, friendships, education, community, politics, and more—to **over 10,000 young people** through quantitative surveys. We explored, unpacked, and deepened these questions by listening to over **150 young people's stories** in qualitative interviews.

These numbers make *The State of Religion & Young People 2020* the largest available data set of this demographic in the United States.

In 2020, we launched a podcast called *The Voices of Young People Podcast* to share how young people speak for themselves about the things we discover in our data. And to unpack what care for young people really looks like, we've produced videos and webinars with guest experts and practitioners. Throughout our blogs, books, and reports, we share stories and insights into young people's inner and outer lives coupled with actionable ideas for those who care about young people to put into practice. **Many of these resources are available, linked, or listed throughout this report for hearing, interacting with, and diving deeper into the story these data are telling.**

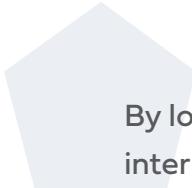
Religion, understood broadly, is a hallmark of our interest in young people's inner and outer lives. For Springtide, the term *religious* is not a reference to a particular creed, code, or system, but rather a term that captures and categorizes a wide array of diverse impulses, questions, and connections. These are the impulses that inspire young people to pursue community, identity, meaning, and connection. And we recognize that these impulses are increasingly finding expression in ways that may not seem overtly religious—that is, they are not connected directly to a specific tradition or institution. Instead, the desire for meaning may show up in careers, club sports, or creative hobbies. Young people find outlets for justice, faith, or purpose in politics, volunteering, nature, or close relationships.

While these impulses could be simply called *human* values, we understand them as religious because we are particularly interested in the ways they are expressed and exercised within systems. This interests us because we are sociologists, looking for trends in behaviors amid social, cultural, and religious shifts. Systems are just trends: they are patterns, repeated behaviors, that start to indicate different ways of being, believing, and becoming. And the systems and markers we've long relied on to gauge, measure, or express religious impulses are changing.

RESOURCES

All the resources referenced in numbered marginal notes throughout this report are compiled in a list both at the end of this book and at springtideresearch.org/thestate2020.

Diverse, rich, and complex, the religious lives of young people are anything but easily categorized or codified. And yet categories give us a starting point for exploration. *The State of Religion & Young People 2020* uses categories like “affiliated” and “unaffiliated,” common for assessing the religious identities of young people, for an initial, partial snapshot of their inner and outer lives. But alongside formal questions of *identity*—questions like self-ascribed affiliation or sense of personal religiosity and/or spirituality—we also ask questions of religious *practices* (i.e., attendance at various services, prayerful practices or habits, and so on) and questions of religious *belief* (i.e., strengthening or weakening faith, concept of a higher power, and so on).



By looking at identity, practice, and belief, we move past simple interpretations or assertions about young people’s inner and outer lives and start to see something more complex—and more accurate—emerge. And precisely *because* it’s more complex, it’s all the more important that young people have trusted adults in their lives that will listen to, care for, and guide them. To be an effective mentor in the life of a young person today—amid many complexities—a new framework is needed.

This report presents not only salient findings but also actionable insights. We call them **Tide-Turning Tips:** concrete practices and ideas for turning the tide on the experience of loneliness, anxiety, depression, or meaninglessness that plague young people today.



The way to turn the tide is through relationships.



The most effective relationships practice Relational Authority.

Part I of this report highlights the changing cultural landscape through big-picture observations and insights from Springtide data. We present these findings in a way relevant to religious leaders working with young people.

Part II unpacks these findings and offers a framework for how to have an impact in the lives of young people amid new social and religious circumstances. **We offer both empirical data and a framework for action for a reason: we recognize that data alone are not enough to spur action that responds to real needs.**

We offer a framework, driven by our empirical findings, that shifts and builds upon a century of insights from the social sciences, called Relational Authority. At Springtide, we know that the need for relationships and expertise as guiding forces in the lives of young people hasn't changed. But other, larger factors have. We know that cultural realities—as vast as pluralism or as immediately felt as political polarization—affect how and whether young people seek meaning, trust others, build community, or understand their own identities. These factors also change how we relate to, trust, and depend on one another. **For religious leaders, advocates, ministers, educators, and anyone else caring for the inner and outer lives of young people, this means young people need to feel cared for before they can be receptive to the influence of others in their lives.** This dynamic is at the heart of Relational Authority.

Part II not only presents Relational Authority as a framework but also unpacks its five dimensions: listening, transparency, integrity, care, and expertise. Combined with brief special features on young people's feelings about and connections to virtual environments (for things like learning or worship), politics, and careers, this report offers both a sweeping account of current circumstances and a detailed, action-oriented look at the state of religion and young people in 2020.

"2020 was the year that Relational Authority became the only real pathway to having a lasting influence in the lives of young people."

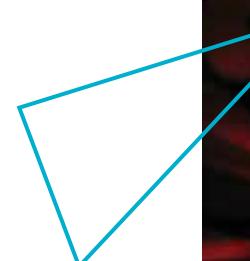
Dr. Josh Packard,
Springtide Executive
Director

A CLOSER LOOK

Throughout this report, you'll find five special features, called "A Closer Look," that dive deeper into current events, modes of solidarity, virtual environments, politics, and careers, and how these things impact young people today.

PART I

RELIGION & YOUNG PEOPLE 2020







INTRODUCTION TO PART I

Caring for Young People Better

The State of Religion & Young People 2020 names realities that you may already see, feel, and experience in your work with young people. Our goal is to equip and empower you to do something in light of these realities with up-to-date data and practical actions.

READ

Read *Belonging: Reconnecting America's Loneliest Generation* and learn more about the findings and insights from that report.

This report confirms and builds on what our report *Belonging: Reconnecting America's Loneliest Generation* made clear earlier this year: Young people are experiencing record loneliness. They have low levels of trust in most traditional institutions, and they are likely not responding to the efforts these institutions are making to connect with them. But they are—amid all these realities—seeking meaning, navigating questions of identity, and pursuing community. **And they need trusted adults to listen to, care for, and guide them.**

Of young people ages 13–25 with no adult mentors, 24% say they never feel their life has meaning and purpose. *But* for those with even just one adult mentor, this number drops to 6%.

Your work with and for young people is more important than ever, and your impact can't be left to old, ineffective models or outdated understandings of the social and religious landscape. With more than 25% of young people ages 13–25 telling us they have *one or fewer* adult mentors in their lives, the need is critical. **Your positive impact in the life of a young person can't be left to chance.** This is the heart of our mission at Springtide and the motivation for this report: to help those who care for young people to care *better*.

We hear from people just like you, who are working hard to help young people flourish in human and religious ways—in their work, relationships, and their sense of identity; in their goals, communities, and contributions to the world. We see and hear about ways this hard work is making a positive impact in the lives of young people as well as ways it is proving frustrating and less effective than perhaps it once was.

The world has shifted in both subtle and significant ways, yet many of the models that guide care for young people today are based in yesterday's realities. They don't account for shifting social, religious, or cultural forces. They are not responsive to ever-changing current events. They don't consider the complexities of young people's inner and outer lives.

It is no wonder these old models are not as effective for connecting with young people as they once were. Whether you notice young people drifting from religious communities, disconnecting from peer and adult relationships, or seeming to flounder amid the pressures of decision-making around identity, education, careers, or politics, it's clear: **New frameworks are needed to help young people flourish.**



24%

of young people with
no adult mentors never
feel like their life has
meaning and purpose.

Just **one adult
relationship** reduces
that percentage to **6%**.



WATCH

Watch a short video of Dr. Josh Packard unpacking the emotional pain that loneliness causes.

2

And the work you do—the ways you aid and support their flourishing—could not be more urgently needed. Young people today report record levels of loneliness. Nearly 70% of young people ages 13–25 report having three or fewer meaningful interactions per day. Nearly 40% say they feel they have no one to talk to and that no one really knows them well, at least sometimes. More than one in four young people say they have one or fewer adults in their lives they can turn to if they need to talk.

69%
have **3 or fewer**
meaningful
interactions in
a regular day.


NEARLY
40%
say they feel they
have **no one to talk to**
and that no one really
knows them well, at
least sometimes.



MORE THAN 1 in 4
young people say they
have one or fewer adults
in their lives they can turn
to if they need to talk.

Your presence, work, ministry, service to, and advocacy for young people is crucial. Whether you work in campus ministry or faith-based advocacy; whether you lead a church, mosque, temple, or synagogue; wherever you are and however you care for the inner and outer lives of young people, your work is too important to be left to old models and outdated frameworks. *The State of Religion & Young People 2020: Relational Authority* offers data to help us see the needs of young people more clearly, a framework for responding to those needs more effectively, and actions for putting that framework into practice easily and immediately.

“
A lot of the time I feel
like I haven’t really had
a sense of belonging. I’ve
moved around a lot and
haven’t had friendships
that lasted that long.

”
Ben, 20

OVER
10,000
surveys | OVER
150
interviews

We've heard from young people ages 13–25 about their inner and outer lives.
The findings are clear: their religious lives are more complex than ever.

2020 was the year that Relational Authority became the only real pathway to having a lasting influence in the lives of young people.

— Dr. Josh Packard, Executive Director

More important than checked boxes? Behaviors.

More revealing than affiliations? Relationships.

To be an effective mentor in the life of a young person, a new framework is needed. *The State of Religion & Young People 2020: Relational Authority* presents the latest research on young people's inner and outer lives, as well as actionable insights and fresh frameworks that respond to the shifting social, religious, and cultural landscape.

So that those who care about young people can care better.

