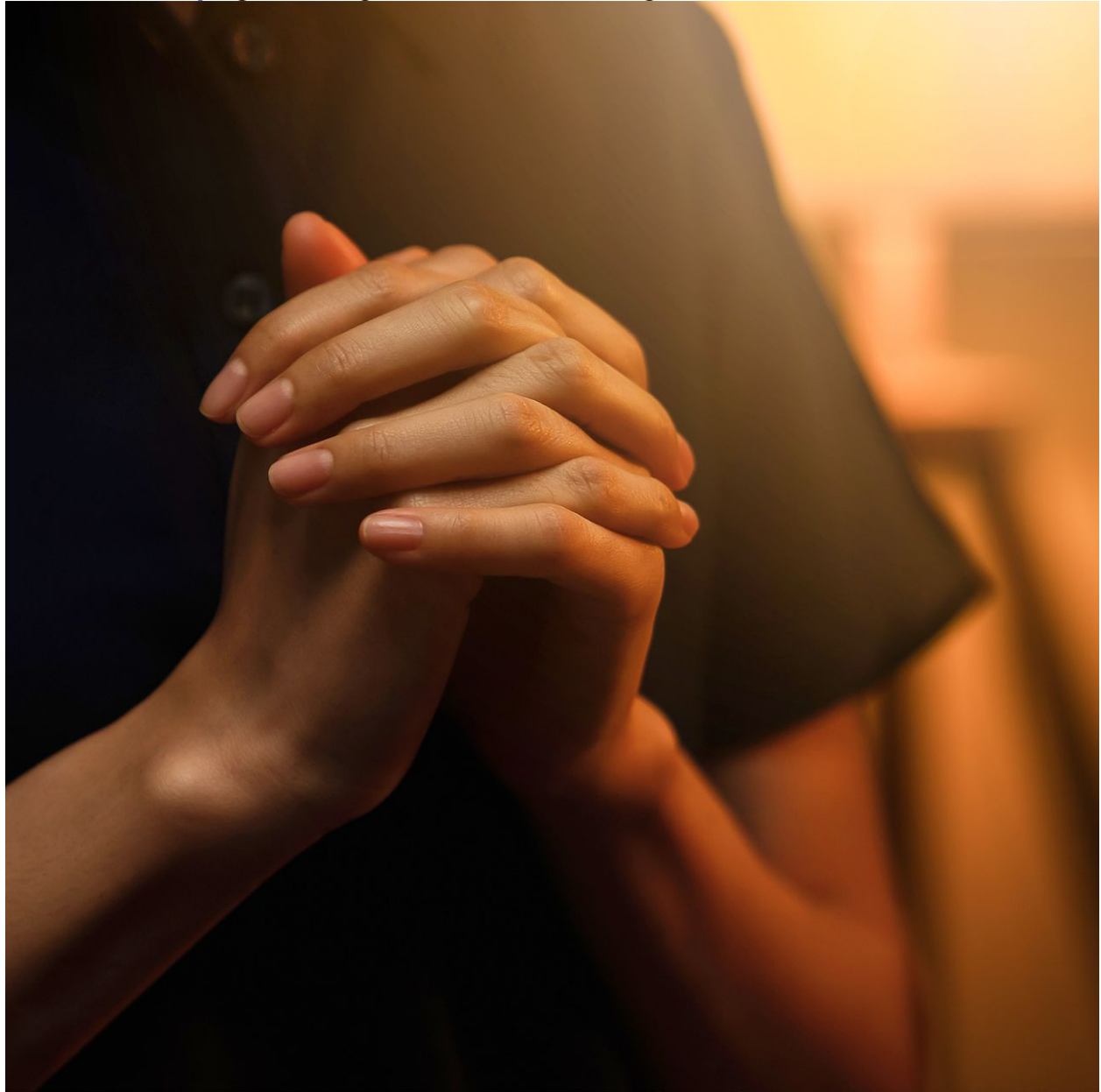


The Surprising Surge of Faith Among Young People

Young adults, theologians and church leaders say the increase is a response to the pandemic

[Clare Ansberry](#) Updated April 23, 2023 at 1:44 pm ET



A greater share of young adults say they believe in a higher power or God.

About one-third of 18-to-25-year-olds say they believe—more than doubt—the existence of a higher power, up from about one-quarter in 2021, according to a recent survey of young adults. The findings, based on December polling, are part of an annual report on the state of religion and youth from the Springtide Research Institute, a nonpartisan nonprofit.

Young adults, theologians and church leaders attribute the increase in part to the need for people to believe in something beyond themselves after three years of loss.

For many young people, the pandemic was the first crisis they faced. It affected everyone to some degree, from the loss of family and friends to uncertainty about jobs and daily life. In many ways, it aged young Americans and they are now turning to the same comfort previous generations have turned to during tragedies for healing and comfort.

Believing in God “gives you a reason for living and some hope,” says Becca Bell, an 18-year-old college student from Peosta, Iowa.



‘God is bigger than religion,’ says Becca Bell, an 18-year-old college student.
Photo: Becca Bell

Ms. Bell, like many in her age group, doesn’t attend Mass regularly as she did as a child because of studies and work. But she explores her faith by following certain people on social media, including one young woman who talks openly about her own life and belief, which Ms. Bell, who was raised Catholic, says she finds more meaningful and relevant.

The Springtide survey uses the term “higher power,” which can include God but isn’t limited to a Christian concept or specific religion, to capture the spectrum of believers. Many young adults say they don’t necessarily believe in a God depicted in images they remember from childhood or described in biblical passages, but do believe there is a higher benevolent deity.

Other polls, [including Gallup](#), ask specifically about believing in God and show a decline in young adults who believe in God.

End of invincibility

The Rev. Darryl Roberts, pastor of the Nineteenth Street Baptist Church in Washington, D.C., says the pandemic, racial unrest, fears of job loss and other economic worries, stripped away the protective layers that many young people felt surrounded them. No longer feeling invincible, he says, some are turning to God for protection.

“We are seeing an openness to transcendence among young people that we haven’t seen for some time,” says Abigail Visco Rusert, associate dean at Princeton Theological Seminary and an ordained pastor in the Presbyterian Church.

At the same time many young adults say they [feel disconnected](#) from organized religion over issues like racial justice, gender equity and immigration rights. And belief in God or a higher power doesn’t necessarily translate into church attendance or religious affiliation.

A Wall Street Journal-NORC poll published last month found that 31% of younger Americans, ages 18 to 29, [said religion was very important](#) to them, which was the lowest percentage of all adult age groups. A Pew Research Center study also released last month found that 20% of 18-to-29-year-olds [attend religious services](#) monthly or more, down from 24% in 2019.

Desmond Adel, 27, describes himself as an “agnostic theist,” which is someone who believes in one or more deities but doesn’t know for sure if they exist. He attended church every Sunday as a child, but doesn’t recall “which subset of Christianity” it represented, and quit going as a teen. He says he’s not 100%

convinced there is a higher power, but “leans towards” the existence of one that isn’t tied to one denomination.

“I don’t think it’s like any Gods described by major religions,” says Mr. Adel, of Carmel, Ind.

Service attendance

Nicole Guzik, a rabbi at Sinai Temple in Los Angeles, says she’s observed more young adults coming to Friday night services at the synagogue as well as monthly events that might include hikes and yoga in the park.

“I think this demographic has a need to connect socially and spiritually,” she says.

Christian Camacho, 24, was raised in a conservative Catholic household and says he has had doubts about God when his parents were going through a divorce and when he was dealing with depression. “How could God allow something like this to happen?” he would ask.



Christian Camacho, 24 and studying to join a Christian brotherhood, believes in God but had doubts over the years. Photo: Christian Camacho

Over the years, his image and perception of God has changed, from a judgmental punitive God of his childhood to a more accepting one. He thinks this belief is common among his generation, who don't associate God with a specific organized religion.

“A lot of people are turned off by the institutions,” says Mr. Camacho, who lives in Minneapolis and is studying to join a religious order.

Courtney Farthing, 26, who works as a customer-service representative for a call center, attended Baptist and Pentecostal churches growing up and identifies as Christian. Ms. Farthing, who lives in Richmond, Ky., believes in God but says she questioned that belief as a teen.

Now, she says, she chooses to believe.

“If I ever started to doubt, or believe there wasn’t a God, it would send me into a spiral of ‘What ifs,’ things that I would rather not get into.”

Alora Nevers, a 29-year-old stay at home mom of four in Sidney, Mont., has always believed in God. She no longer goes to her Catholic church, where, she says, they talked too much about making donations.

“I would rather praise God the way I do with my family. We pray every night.”

SHARE YOUR THOUGHTS

*How have your religious beliefs or your faith in God changed over the years?
Join the conversation below.*

Write to Clare Ansberry at clare.ansberry@wsj.com

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