

Center for Congregations *Passing Along Faith Project*

Life Stage Summaries

Children

Children's Development (Tanya Campen)

- 0-2 Years: Am I safe and can I trust you?
- 2-4 Years: What can I do?
- 4-5 Years: Is it OK for me to explore?
- 5-12 Years: How can I succeed?

Human Development

- Need: Safe space
- Need: Purpose
- Need: Opportunities to try new things

Family Development

- Need: Caring relationships
- Need: Practice makes perfect
- Need: Explore the world together

Social and Cultural Development

- Need: Work is important
- Need: Justice seekers

Faith Development

- Need: Participate in ritual and liturgy
- Need: Engage in Story

Developmental Learning	Gift Children Bring
Create Safe Space	vulnerability
Discover Purpose	helper
Try New Things	courage
Build Relationships	relational awareness
Practice	play
Explore	curiosity
Work	wonder
Seek Justice	empathy
Participate in Ritual and Liturgy	order
Engage in Story	imagination

Spiritual Characteristics of Children

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Preschoolers

- ✓ have a growing sense that God is very special and real.
- ✓ tend to have a literal concept of God, perhaps as a grandfather figure who lives “up there.”
- ✓ readily accept what you say about God.
- ✓ sense that God loves them and cares for them.
- ✓ enjoy Bible stories, especially about Jesus; want stories repeated . . . and repeated!
- ✓ can develop attitudes of trust and love toward Jesus and God.
- ✓ do not yet have a built-in control (conscience) that nudges them toward right behavior for its own sake; they generally do the “right thing” out of fear of punishment or to win approval.
- ✓ sense that church is a good place to be.
- ✓ can recite simple prayers; may add their own ideas to form personal prayers.

5- and 6-year-olds

- ✓ have a very real spiritual nature, a strong sense of who God is, and often relate to Jesus as their friend.
- ✓ are aware of right and wrong but are still likely to define “wrong” in terms of its immediate consequences (“Taking cookies is wrong if Mom catches me!”). They begin to experience guilt and understand the joy that comes with forgiveness.
- ✓ understand God’s love and our response within the context of everyday experiences and, to some extent, within the context of God’s family, the church. By and large they are still concrete thinkers.
- ✓ can be delighted and awed by Bible stories. They can use their imagination to ask questions about the Bible and God.
- ✓ can express their love for Jesus in their own words and actions.

7- and 8-year-olds

- ✓ are capable of understanding basic salvation concepts and making a commitment to Jesus, but they may do so simply out of a desire to please their teachers or parents.
- ✓ often express opinions and feelings about God and church. They enjoy asking a great many “why” and “how” questions.
- ✓ often include prayer in their daily routines. Their prayers are frequently self-centered but are sincere and offered in faith.
- ✓ often still see issues in black and white.

9- and 10-year-olds

- ✓ are developing a conscience: a personal sense of right and wrong that often expresses itself in judgments of what’s “unfair” or unjust. They may be critical of adults who appear to be insincere in their faith.
- ✓ may be able to deal, in a limited way, with moral questions in terms of motives and consequences. They are beginning to think about questions of ethics and morality in the context of love, loyalty, promises, and so on.
- ✓ may show an increasing concern for people who are hungry, homeless, or poor.

- ✓ are often open to learning about other cultures and can be more accepting of differences in others, especially if they have personal experiences with people who are different from them.
- ✓ understand why we pray and are often able to make up spontaneous prayers.
- ✓ are more inclined to look inward than younger children and may ask questions and wonder about making a commitment to Christ.

Children's Faith Formation

Karen Marie Yust ("Being a Child, Becoming Christian" in *Children's Faith Formation - Lifelong Faith Journal*, www.LifelongFaith.com) (See also: *Real Kids, Real Faith*. Jossey Bass, 2004)

Infants and Toddlers

- **Congregational Life:** In order for them to see, hear, taste, touch and smell what it means to be part of a Christian community, we must invite them to participate in congregational worship and outreach. Their dependence on us requires that we practice hospitality by bringing them to church and taking them with us to food pantries, homeless shelters, and hospice rooms.
- **Bible:** Telling biblical stories and narratives of Christian spiritual practices, then, contributes to young children's generation of faith memories. Overhearing Scripture read and prayers said at liturgy contributes to these memories, as does regularly hearing about God and God's people from a children's story Bible or the Scriptures themselves.
- **Ritual:** The rituals of religious communities thus hold great potential for attracting young children's interest. Children wonder about the identity and use of common objects, and we can encourage this early form of contemplation by providing child-friendly access to items used in our religious rituals.
- **Liturgical Year:** The cycle of the liturgical year also offers contemplative possibilities for young children. The lighting of Advent candles, the pageantry of Palm Sunday, and the waving of red streamers on Pentecost are a break in the usual worship routine. The novelty of these events attracts children's attention if they have been regular participants in more ordinary services of worship. This is childhood immersion in the reality of our faith, a form of contemplating who and whose we are from the inside of the Christian story.

Preschool

- **Participation:** We can encourage the faithfulness of preschool children by nurturing both their observational skills and their imaginative play. They need regular opportunities to witness their faith community in action, which means they need to spend time every week in worship and in the midst of a congregation's activities. They need to hear the vocabulary and see the symbols of their faith tradition used frequently so they can identify the particular structures and practices that characterize this social system and distinguish it from other social settings in their lives. They need opportunities to explore the environment where they worship, learn, and serve, and chances to ask questions about objects used in worship and images in stained glass windows.
- **Imagination:** As we draw preschoolers further into the world of our faith tradition, we must appeal to their imagination by inviting them to engage in pretend play with the stories, symbols, and practices of the Christian community.

- **Prayer:** The practice of centering prayer is a means of taking a spiritual timeout to be with God. Younger elementary age children appreciate the simple structure of this ancient prayer practice. They are capable of selecting a simple word or phrase as a centering device and repeating that word or phrase slowly over and over again as they let their bodies relax. Another prayer form younger elementary children can embrace is pausing to acknowledge God's presence in the world on a regular basis. This simple spiritual practice involves selecting a repetitive sound or event in one's day and then, whenever that sound or event occurs, stopping one's activity for a moment to take note of God's presence. The common practice of saying grace before meals is an example of such acknowledgement, but practicing the presence of God is best extended to encompass other elements of the child's day.

Grade School

- **Bible:** We ask older elementary children to dialogue with the Bible by using three different types of questions in relation to faith stories. We ask clarifying questions, which focus the child's attention on the biblical text itself. Who are the characters in the story? What happens in the beginning, middle, and end of the story? We also ask experiential questions, which invite children to relate the story to their contemporary experiences. How are the characters in this story like you or someone you know? If Jesus was going to talk with people who are social outcasts at your school, who would they be? We pair these two modes of inquiry with a third approach: responsive questions, which ask children to consider how the story might transform their lives and inform their beliefs and actions. These questions invite children to live out faith stories in their own lives, to become the embodiment of the Scriptures in their interactions with others.
- **Experiential:** Children ages nine to twelve continue to enjoy and require experiential learning opportunities. They can identify basic characters and plot movement by sketching out individual scenes from a biblical story on newsprint and then putting the scenes in order, or by writing dramatic scripts based on careful research into the people and historical period of the story. They might translate the story into contemporary times through skits, comic strip creations, or links to popular music or culture. Their response explorations might involve participating in outreach activities, composing intercessory prayers, developing blessing rituals, or covenanting in worship to hold one another accountable to personal and communal commitments.
- **Lectio Divina:** The ancient contemplative practice of lectio divina, or holy reading, is also a helpful spiritual discipline to introduce to this age group. Because older elementary children's primary learning systems are skewed toward scientific modes of reasoning, they need the balance of a more mystical approach to learning to prevent them from equating religious belief solely with right doctrine. As a companion experience alongside critical study of the Bible, this contemplative encounter with Scripture helps remind children that God's wisdom comes through both study and prayer.

Adolescence

Young Adolescents

Mary Lee Becker (“Goldilocks in Our Midst: Ministry with Young Adolescents,” *Lifelong Faith* Volume 6.2 , Summer 2012)

Young adolescents want and need:

1. To be respected and accepted for who they are at this stage of life.
2. To be involved and active (physically, mentally and socially).
3. To know the expectations and guidelines in a clear, concise and concrete manner.
4. To understand the “why” of matters: they are curious beings, often questioning and yet still struggling to comprehend abstract concepts.
5. To be challenged to grow and stretch their abilities, with the guidance and support of caring adults.
6. To matter to someone and know they matter; to feel connected and cared about—relationships are a priority.
7. To be acknowledged and valued for who they are as well as what they do.
8. To contribute in positive ways and given opportunities to share their gifts and make a difference for good.
9. To be affirmed and appreciated in their attempts, successes and even failures.
10. To express themselves through ideas, opinions, preferences, doubts, and dreams.

Five Things Young People Need

Kenda Creasy Dean (Chapter 4, *Almost Christian*, Oxford University Press, 2010)

The community of faith should give five things to young people:

1. A creed to believe in: the articulated beliefs that young people develop and defend. Young people need a sense of certainty about their faith. Statements of faith from their community of faith are powerful statements of God’s involvement and concern for their lives.
2. A community to belong to—peer involvement as well as relationships with other adults who befriend them, and who give them lots of encouragement.
3. A call to live out—a sense that students exist for a purpose greater than themselves, that they are on earth to be the hands and feet of Jesus in helping and serving others.
4. A hope to build on—inspire and equip toward a confidence that this world is not all there is, that there is a promised “next,” and that God controls the future of this world and the next.
5. A world to share with—an essential mark of maturity in Christians is generativity. Mature faith bears fruit.

Characteristics of a Healthy Youth Ministry

Kenda Creasy Dean (*Leading Ideas*, March 12, 2012) (Excerpts from the eleven characteristics)

- **Integration into a congregation’s worship, mission, and discipleship formation at every level.** Teenagers need people to reflect back to them who they are. This “mirroring” is basic to the process

of identity formation. Only in the church do young people begin to see themselves through the eyes of people who try to see them as God sees them: beloved, blessed, called. Interaction with Christian peers is part of this process, but adults are significant mirrors as well. Separating youth out from the larger congregation is both theologically irresponsible and a pragmatic mistake. Segmenting youth exclusively into “youth activities” leads young people to associate church with their peer groups — making “graduation” into the intergenerational faith community extremely difficult.

- **An authentic, fun, and passionate community of belonging.** It doesn’t really matter if youth participate in a youth group, a choir, a drama troupe, a Bible study, a parachurch organization, or even the congregation as a whole. But teenagers need to feel like the church is a place they belong, and not just attend — a place where they joyfully participate alongside others living in the same direction.
- **A culture of creativity.** Young people need practice in multiple “faith languages” — words and actions, art and prayer. Young people today live in a participatory culture, where they create cultural content as well as consume it. Treating youth primarily as consumers of worship, programming, and mission fails to recognize their creativity and makes church seem unwelcoming and archaic.
- **A culture of theological awareness.** Youth ministry ought to help youth see their lives the way God sees them — which means becoming aware of theological categories like grace, forgiveness, redemption, sin, and hope. Because so few churches do this well, kids growing up in churches today frame their lives in pretty much the same way as anybody else, which makes it tough to buck cultural norms that run contrary to the Gospel. Healthy youth ministry teaches young people to imagine themselves as participants in God’s story.

Critical Reflection

Young people need the experiences, skills, and supportive environments for:

- *Critical reflection on our religious traditions, including practices and beliefs.* To wrestle with, try on, and eventually become shaped by the tradition.
- *Critical reflection on our individual lives in Christ.* To reflect:
 - on vocation (what God is call youth to do within the purpose and kingdom of God)
 - on who they are and what they are called to
 - on their inner passions and to see the things God has placed inside them
 - on how to use what God has given them for God’s glory
- *Critical reflection on the world around us.*
 - to transforming the world
 - to see their vocation to transform the world
 - to transform how they see the world around them and awaken within them the ability to critically reflect on the world (conditions) and take action in the world to reflect the light of Christ in the world

Engaging Youth in Thinking Theologically

Jeffrey Kaster (“How to Empower Youth to Do Theology,” Faith and Leadership, January 24, 2017 <https://www.faithandleadership.com/jeffrey-kaster-how-empower-youth-do-theology>)

How effectively is your congregation engaging high school youth in thinking theologically? How might the pedagogical lesson learned from Lilly Youth and Theology Network prepare your congregation’s soil for an abundant harvest? Through decades of work with high school youth, we at LYTN recommend the following strategies to pastors, youth ministers and other pastoral leaders who want to move their youth ministry beyond pizza and volleyball to effectively engaging youth in thinking about Christian faith.

- Use experiential learning within your teaching. Design disorienting or dislocating experiences that surprise young people. Use poetry, movement, arts and activities that encourage multisensory engagement in a theological topic.
- Clarify the one big theological idea you want youth to remember five years from now, and focus on that. Do not dumb down the theology. The TED Talk principles can be helpful in preparing 18-minute lectures. (See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RVDfWfUSBIM&feature=youtu.be>)
- Ask yourself the following questions as you develop your presentation or course: What am I prepared to learn from these teens? How does my presentation help create community and relationships?
- Give youth a voice in the theological argument being covered. Don’t just prepare lessons for them; prepare lessons that engage them in thinking theologically.
- Develop a process of reflection for your sessions that establishes a dialogue between the lived experience of high school youth and the theological content.
- Empower youth to do theology. Shift from teaching content only to teaching practices and skills.
- Integrate the personal aspects of the theological topic. Young people love to hear how you as a theologian or youth minister live out this theology in your everyday life -- and to think about how they might live it out in theirs.
- Understand the socio-religious contextual issues facing young people.

Discipleship in Adolescence

(*Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry*, EYM 2010)

One could sum up the purpose of the Exemplary Youth Ministry congregations’ youth ministries in a single goal: *making disciples of Jesus Christ*. These congregations focus their youth ministries on Jesus Christ and engage young people in discipleship, witness, and service that transforms their lives. Several “marks and means” of discipleship emerge in the study. These elements describe the core attributes of the congregations, their youth ministries, and their young people.

- **Disciples Know Jesus Christ:** Discipleship is grounded in the teachings, life, death, resurrection and Lordship of Jesus Christ alive and present. Disciples are in relationship with Christ, learn about Christ and follow Christ’s leading. In the vast majority of congregations in the study, youth ministry is consciously designed to cultivate a relationship with Jesus Christ through worship, prayer, community-building, study, retreats, and service.

- **Disciples Know the Bible:** Discipleship is anchored in Bible study. It is in the Bible that youth learn the story, the truth that shapes the life of faith. Bible studies take many shapes and forms. Most popular are small group conversational explorations of the Scripture texts in which youth and their leaders “hear” God speaking truth to their lives.
- **Disciples Know the Christian Faith:** Discipleship is learning the Christian faith. The Christian faith has a history, traditions, beliefs and values that are critical to its shaping and transforming power. Congregations are committed to teaching young people the content of the Christian faith through a variety of ministry experiences. Adult leaders guide young people in exploring the long and rich life of the people of God, creating more sturdy beliefs, engaging the tough questions, and assisting youth in finding their own “faith voice.”
- **Disciples Make Faith a Way of Life:** Discipleship is the “knowledge of faith” becoming a way of life. Discipleship is regularly described as much in languages of the “heart” and the “hands” as of the “head.” For the congregations in the study, it was not enough for young people to know the content of Scripture or to understand the richness of Christian beliefs. Whether small or large these churches developed expansive ministries with youth for the purpose of participating in faith as a way of life. The adults and youth in these ministries seemed to be “living into” faith that is simultaneously centered in God yet genuinely their own. They spoke about what they believed with conviction and in fresh language. Compassion, honesty, respect, integrity, service to others and justice were evident in their speech, life styles and relationships with others. All this was carried on with an eye on both tradition and experience; text and context; faith and life.
- **Disciples are Mentored:** Discipleship is formed in relationships with mentoring individuals and communities. Even though discipleship is primarily a faith-relationship in which Christ is at the center, adolescent disciples are formed in relationship with other Christians. Whole congregations become intergenerational crucibles in which conversation, relationships and practices wrap youth in a culture of “knowing and doing God.” Within these congregations, people walk intentionally and directly along side young people providing diverse, concrete “snapshots” of following Jesus Christ as these mentors encourage and teach through their presence, speech and action.
- **Disciples are Equipped:** A young person’s strengths and gifts of the Spirit are integral to discipleship. To follow Christ involves a call to witness and to serve others. To make disciples is to identify a teenager’s spiritual gifts and equip that teenager for service in the church and the world. Congregations combine study, fellowship, personal strengths and spiritual gifts discovery with service to equip young disciples to follow Jesus Christ in the church and into the world.

Adulthood

(From *The Seasons of Adult Faith Formation*, edited by John Roberto, LifelongFaith Associates, 2015.)

Key Characteristics of Young Adults

- ✓ Exploring their identity: trying out various possibilities, especially in love and work, developing an individual sense of autonomy, and stabilizing a self-concept and body image
- ✓ “Tinkering”—putting together a life from the skills, ideas, and resources that are readily at hand
- ✓ Developing and maintaining intimate relationships with trust, love, and caring
- ✓ Transitioning from their family of origin toward establishing independence in living arrangement, finances, career, and other aspects of their lives
- ✓ Differentiating self without repudiating or replacing their family of origin—sorting out emotionally what they take from their family of origin, what they leave behind, and what they will create for themselves
- ✓ Developing a career and occupational identity and working to establish a work-life balance.
- ✓ Adjusting to the expectations and responsibilities of the “adult” world
- ✓ Committing to a marital partner, defining and learning the roles of married life
- ✓ Starting families and having children; establishing a new family with its own rules, roles, responsibilities, values, and traditions, and developing parenting roles and skills
- ✓ Engaging in a religious-theological reevaluation and, sometimes, reinvention

Key Characteristics of Midlife Adults

- ✓ Exploring how the self is adjusted in the context of committed family, work, and civic relationships and to the roles of parents, colleagues, leaders, team members, and more.
- ✓ Anchoring themselves in a particular way of life filled with commitments and relationships
- ✓ Maintaining intimate relationships with other midlife adults while developing the capacity for new kinds of relationships with those younger and older than themselves.
- ✓ Caring and guiding the next generation and often caring for the older generation
- ✓ Building extensive personal networks for themselves and their families—traditional networks around their families, coworkers, churches, and other organizations, supplemented by digital social networks that allow more frequent conversations
- ✓ Evaluating their lives at its midpoint and often growing beyond the pressures of the present moment toward an appreciation of the deeper meanings symbolized in religious tradition.
- ✓ Reflecting on “What are we spending and being spent for? What commands and receives our best time and energy? What causes, dreams, goals, or institutions are pouring out our life for? To what or whom are we committed in life and in death? What are our most sacred hopes, our most compelling goals, and purposes in life?”
- ✓ Engaging in family life and parenting children, adolescents, and, often, young adults: working to allow for the increasing independence of adolescents while maintaining enough structure to foster continued family development; adjusting patterns of family communication, traditions, and celebrations for adolescent and young adult children; adapting to an empty-nest household and redefining the marriage relationship and roles now that children are no longer at home full-time

- ✓ Seeking a religion that emphasizes personal identity, religious experience, and a quest for religious identity in community; seeking an authentic religious experience that acknowledges the ambiguities, trials, and successes of life

Key Characteristics of Mature Adults

- ✓ Addressing the challenge of generativity (or its failure, stagnation)—establishing and guiding the next generation, striving to create or nurture things that will outlast them through caring for others, and creating and accomplishing things that make the world a better place
- ✓ Addressing the challenge of integrity—reflecting on the life they have lived and coming away with either a sense of fulfillment from a life well lived or a sense of regret and despair
- ✓ Experiencing physical changes and decline, coming to terms with the cognitive changes related to a changed perspective on time and a personal, existential awareness of death; seeking to stay physically and mentally fit
- ✓ Thinking about, planning for, and disengaging from their primary career occupations, launching second or third careers, and developing new identities and new ways to be productively engaged
- ✓ Retiring from full-time work and planning for sufficient income that will last into their later adult years
- ✓ Blending (part-time) work, volunteering and civic engagement, pursuit of new interests, travel, and their role as grandparent into a new lifestyle for the mature adult years
- ✓ Having adequate health care into later life and providing for their own or a spouse/partner's long-term care needs
- ✓ Establishing new patterns of relating to spouses, children, siblings, parents, and friends; and leaving some existing relationships and beginning new ones
- ✓ Experiencing changes in the marital relationship now that parenting responsibilities are minimal, developing adult-to-adult relationships between grown children and their parents, becoming grandparents, realigning relationships to include in-laws and grandchildren, and caring for the older generation and dealing with disabilities and death.
- ✓ Moving to the very core of their faith tradition, while appreciating other religious traditions; seeking a self-reflective quest for individual wholeness, a search for depth and meaning, as well as guidance for living one's life; recognizing that spirituality must be cultivated through sustained practice
- ✓ Seeking to be in service to others that is mission driven and can make a difference; doing things that give their lives purpose, meaning, and fulfillment
- ✓ Seeking spiritual growth in a time of significant life transitions and in a time when they are searching for meaning and purpose in life as they enter the second half of life and evaluating the things that really provide lasting fulfillment; connecting with others to talk about spiritual and life issues
- ✓ Seeking intergenerational relationships to share their lives, stories, and faith across generations, and to be united with the whole faith community

Key Characteristics of Older Adults

- ✓ Remaining vital and actively engaged in the lives of their community, church, social network, and family well into their 80s and 90s
- ✓ Experiencing changes in their body and a decline in mental and physical ability, such as a loss of hearing or vision or dexterity

- ✓ Continuing to learn and process new information, and many live well into their 90s with memory and logic intact
- ✓ Addressing the challenge of integrity—reflecting on the life they have lived and coming away with either a sense of fulfillment from a life well lived or a sense of regret and despair. They are cultivating wisdom in which one’s perspective on the world and human relationships reflect an inner sense of liberation from the rules, roles, and rituals of the past
- ✓ Taking on new roles as senior citizens and adjusting to the role of mentor and sage in their extended family
- ✓ Experiencing losses of friends and loved ones: death of a spouse, family members, and close friends
- ✓ Facing the growing and continuous challenge of maintaining their independence and desiring to stay in their own homes (“aging in place”) or coming to accept being cared for by their family and moving from their own home into other living arrangements (with their children or in senior living or assisted living situations)
- ✓ Becoming reconciled to their impending death and accepting their personal mortality; dealing with questions coming from the nearness of death: What is life about? How do we want to die?
- ✓ Growing into a deeper, more personal faith that is clearly their own and desire ways to continually enrich their faith life
- ✓ Being engaged in the life of faith communities with a more traditional worship experience
- ✓ Valuing the Bible and the Christian tradition and desiring to continue their learning as Christians

Spiritual-Religious Identities

Vibrant Faith and Engaged in the Congregation

A religious faith is central to the lives of the engaged. These are who are actively engaged in a Christian church, are spiritually committed, and growing in their faith. These are parents who are transmitting this faith to their children and are actively engaged as a family in a church community. These are children, adolescents, adults, and parents/grandparents who are spiritually committed and growing in their faith. They have found their spiritual home within an established Christian tradition and a local faith community that provides ways for them to grow in faith, worship God, and live their faith in the world. They are practicing their faith at home and in daily life.

Moderate Faith Practice and Occasionally Engaged in the Congregation

These are adults and families (children, adolescents, parents/grandparents) who participate occasionally in church life—in seasonal celebrations, sacraments and milestones, major events, and age-group programs. For parents transmitting a religious faith primarily means bringing their children to educational programs at church. Some may even attend worship regularly and send their children to religious education classes. Their spiritual commitment is low and their connection to the church is more social and utilitarian than spiritual. While receptive to an established church, they do not have a faith commitment that would make their relationship with God and participation in a faith community a priority in their lives. Their occasional engagement in church life does not lead them toward spiritual commitment.

Spiritual, but Not Religious

These are adults who are spiritually engaged (relationship with God, meaningful spiritual life), but involved in organized religion and an established Christian tradition. Some may join a nondenominational Christian church focused on their spiritual needs, while others may find an outlet for their spiritual hunger in small communities of like-minded spiritual seekers, in local or global acts of service, or in online spiritual resources and communities. The Spiritual but Not Religious reflect a growing minority of the American population, especially among young adults.

Unaffiliated

For the unaffiliated religion is not personally important in their lives (and their family's life). They are not affiliated with organized religion and established Christian churches. The Unaffiliated reject all forms of organized religion and reflect a steadily increasing percentage of the American population, especially among young adults. Many adults (Millennials and Gen X) left organized religion because they stopped believing in the religion's teachings (top reason) or their family was never that religious when they were growing up or their experience of negative religious teaching about or treatment of gay and lesbian people (PRRI research, 2016). Many parents are "first generation Nones" and are now raising their children in religiously uninvolved and unaffiliated homes creating a "second generation of Nones."