

FAITH OVERVIEW

Almost all American teenagers believe in God. The Gallup Youth Survey interviewed a representative national cross section of 502 13-18 year-olds in late 1985. Ninety-six percent of the teens polled say they believe in God. Females are only 1% more positive than males. Catholics are 1% above Protestants and 16-18 year-olds only 3% lower than 13-15 year-olds. Among those not attending church regularly, 92% affirm belief in God.

But faith in a personal God is not as universally held. Eighty-seven percent of regular church attendees and 64% of irregular attendees profess belief in a personal God. Belief in life after death has risen from 57% in 1977 to 66%. Gender and church attendance seem to make a difference about belief in life after death. Seventy-one percent of males and church attendees so believe; 61% of females and 62% of those not regular church attendees believe in life after death.

Fifty-three percent of American teenagers attend church regularly, according to this survey. Only 40% of adults do so, and fewer adults (66%) believe in a personal God. More teens than adults, however, feel that religion is losing ground in American life. Religious faith and church attendance seem to be strongest in the South and Midwest, and weaker in the East and West.

Another Gallup Youth Survey shows that 60% of American teenagers now favor prayer in schools, whereas only 45% did in 1981. Church attendance does make a significant difference on this issue (72% of regular attendees in favor, in contrast to only 47% of irregulars). Many teenagers would like to be able to talk more about religion with their parents. There are obvious limitations to such telephone interviews. The results do stand with other types of studies and reveal important trends within the youth culture. Deeper relationships with young people, however, and probing into subtler and more specific questions reveal many doubts and struggles of faith development during the junior and senior high and college ages.

Faith in junior high years can still be experienced in concrete, conventional, and even legalistic terms. They need to see models, participate in activities, and listen to stories of lifelike characters. Usually around the sophomore year, young people are ready to see faith in its personal and relational aspects. Their minds are also probing abstract questions, searching for universal truths and exploring alternative positions. They need leaders who can have fun with them, unite them, think with them, and can lead them into an active faith.

During the college and early working years, adolescents are rushing into adulthood. Leaders one-on-one and small groups are needed to demonstrate faith to be "the right way to go" and a practical support for one's life. Little faith development goes on for most adolescents without a supportive community of faith.

Issues of faith involve questions such as these:

1. What am I to believe in a world of so many different faiths?
2. How can I know God cares about me?
3. How can I believe in a good God over such an evil world?
4. How do I reconcile my high faith ideals with my compromised living?

5. How can I feel forgiven for such failures by a holy God?

6. How can my faith make a difference in this world?

IMPLICATIONS

* It simply is not true that there is little faith among today's young people. There is at least as much faith among teenagers as among adults.

* Faith needs clear content, exemplary leadership, and a supportive community. It also needs expression. Young folks want to put faith into practice in a way that fosters their own personal growth and serves a human need.

* Faith is different at different ages. Adults should be sensitive to and understand development of faith.

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