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Young people say they're more spiritual, less religious

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Ian is a Christian who says he is highly spiritual but not at all religious.

Unfortunately for churches, there are a lot of Ians out there.

A new benchmark survey finds that 55% of young people ages 12 to 25 say they are more spiritual now than two years ago. But nearly one-third of the young people said they don't trust organized religion.

"If that's the way they really feel, it means that we have some serious questions that we need to ask ourselves," said Terry Dittmer, the director of youth ministry for the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod.

The survey, believed to be the first of its kind in the world, was conducted by the Minneapolis-based Search Institute and released last week. Peter Benson and Gene Roehlkepartain, codirectors of the institute's Center for Spiritual Development in Childhood and Adolescence, said that it will take several months to figure out all of the study's implications.

The survey included 6,853 subjects. The first question was, "What does it mean to be spiritual?" There were nine choices, running from "believing in God" to "being true to one's inner self." They also could say that there is no spiritual dimension, and there was an "I don't know" option.

The good news for faith communities is that 93% of the young people surveyed believe there is a spiritual aspect to life.

But the disconnect between spirituality and religion was clear in the comments from Ian and other young people interviewed for the survey.

Gaurav said he is "practically religious" in that he follows his Hindu faith's traditions but he's not "spiritually religious." Amneh has rejected many of her religion's traditions as sexist, but said she still adheres to the teachings of Islam.

Benson said he wasn't surprised that many young people drew a line between spirituality and religion.

"Spirituality is bigger than religion," he said. "One of the things we have to focus on now is disentangling spiritual development from religious development."

If young people don't feel spiritual in church, where do they?

"Spending time in nature" topped the list of responses. "Listening to or playing music" was No. 2, and "helping other people or the community" was third. "Attending religious services" was ninth.

Many young people are turning to meditation -- so many, in fact, that the Mindfulness Meditation Club at the University of Minnesota soon may be forced to find a bigger space for its weekly introductory

yoga classes. None of the students at Friday's class were surprised by the news that spirituality is growing or by the finding that there's a line being drawn between that and religion.

"For me, that's very true," said junior Jon Delperdang. "I've developed a strong belief in the interconnectedness of the world."

That theory that everything and everyone is part of a larger whole is what sets spirituality off from most religions, senior David Horn said. "It doesn't make distinctions, and religion is all about making distinctions," he said.

Junior Ava Rostampour said her quest for spirituality is fueled by an increase in knowledge. "As you meet different people, as you are educated in different kinds of cultures, it opens your mind beyond what you were taught as a child," she said.

So, how do faith communities respond to this trend? The Center for Spiritual Development stopped short of offering specific advice for how churches can reach more young people, but it did conclude its report with the suggestion that the place to start is with conversations. The report recommends asking young people open-ended questions, such as "What does being spiritual mean to you?" and "What is most important in your life?"

"We're not paying enough attention to what our kids are saying," Roehlkepartain said. "We need to listen more and talk less."
