

Way,” an eight-week series of gatherings that links scripture and vocational reflection. “It turned into a wonderful conversation,” says Dee Bernhardt, assistant director of campus ministry. “We’ve learned that the more personal we can make the conversations, the more successful they are.”

There’s a powerful opportunity here for congregations, parishes and other faith communities to learn what it means to be a Christian community today. But just as importantly, this generation of young people needs to step in and lead transformation for the sake of the church’s future, says Baikauskas.

“What makes me sad is when a former student calls me after graduation to say that he’s settled in his first job but he can’t find a church as welcoming as St. Tom’s,” he says. “My response is: ‘Then make it like St. Tom’s! Don’t sit in the back pew and do nothing. Take the experiences that you’ve had on campus and put them into practice wherever you are. That’s what you are called to do.’”



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Pres House, a ministry serving University of Wisconsin students in Madison, is rooted in an apartment complex that builds community around conversation, faith and service.

## To Be Continued: The Religious Lives of Young People



For more than a decade, University of Notre Dame sociologist Christian Smith (left) has been following American

millennials. His mission: to chart the landscape of their religious lives and offer insights to church leaders who must reach and engage them to keep their communities vibrant in the decades to come.

**The National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR)** began in 2002 when Smith led a team of sociologists in surveying and interviewing adolescents (ages 13 to 17) and their parents. They followed up with the same cohort in late adolescence (ages 16 to 20) and again when the young people were entering early adulthood (ages 18 to 23). In 2013 Smith and his team wrapped up field work with those men and women in their mid- and late-20s, an age when people have historically moved into careers and formed families of their own. In 2014 the team began analyzing the results of this fourth and final wave of surveys and interviews, and in 2015 researchers plan to release results.

“In this fourth wave, a major focus of ours is on understanding how family formation – settling into a career, having children, etc. – affects their religious faith and practice,” Smith says. “We want to learn whether or not transitioning from emerging adulthood into ‘real’ adulthood is accompanied by greater religious commitment and practice. In short, can communities of faith count on young people returning for greater involvement when they begin to settle down or not?”

**Funded by Lilly Endowment** from the start, the NSYR is the first broad, nationally representative mapping of the religious and spiritual practices and commitments of contemporary young people in America. Some 3,300 young people have participated in the project, which strives to reflect the nation's economic, racial, ethnic and geographic diversity.

There's a widespread sense across many religious traditions that religious communities lack connection to these young people, according to Smith. By understanding long-term trends from NSYR, pastors, youth ministers, theological educators and parents will have a better understanding of the deep social and cultural transformations affecting young people, their families and larger communities, he says.

Each set of findings from the influential project has challenged assumptions religious leaders have about young people. For example, the first phase challenged the notion that American youth were not particularly religious. In fact, NSYR teens were quite religiously active and typically reflected the beliefs and practices of their parents. But subsequent research phases have caused faith leaders to question how they can keep those affiliations going through turbulent college years and young adulthood.

The second and third phases of NSYR revealed some "ungluing" of faith in later adolescence, Smith says.

"During the years 13 to 17, most teenagers we interviewed were fairly closely tied to the religious tradition in which they were raised. The way they talked about religion reflected a certain assurance about what they thought, even if the assurance was not terribly articulate or even reflected doubt," Smith says. "As they got older, however, their attachment to the faith of their families of origin grew weaker, and their assurance seemed to become more tenuous. I interpret that as their having more experience with the difficulties and ambiguities of emerging adult life, forcing them to get more complex, perhaps more confused."

In the fourth wave, researchers want to know if young adults are returning to religious practices or religious communities in their mid- to late-20s as their lives enter a stage that has traditionally meant increased stability. Smith and his team know from earlier waves of their research that rapid social change will likely influence what the participants reveal about their journey. The insights will be important for religious leaders and the future of faith communities.

"What's worked in the past is probably not going to work in the future. The world is changing dramatically and more rapidly than ever before. Some people in church circles want to create programs to fix the problem, but that's too shallow an approach," Smith says.

**"It's important to understand the depth of challenges so as not to come up with solutions that are not really solutions. It's going to take some real rethinking, and I hope our research provides the information needed for that."**



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Christian Smith with students at the University of Notre Dame, where his work includes the study of the religious and spiritual lives of young people ages 13 to 29.