When affiliation fades, community still matters



Highland Views
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Guest columnist

Statistics can be slippery, but I was fascinated to read:

"Twenty-nine percent of Americans now identify as religiously unaffiliated – the largest single 'religious' group in the country. That number rises to nearly 40% among Gen Z." (American Humanist Association). Not identifying with any specific faith doesn't mean a person has no faith or chooses not to believe in God. Yet, it does suggest that being a member of an "organized" religion is not important to a large number of Americans.

Why call these unaffiliated people a "religious group"? Because we don't know if they hold some kind of faith or practice personal beliefs outside of "official" traditions. Shouldn't a person with non-traditional beliefs still be counted across the spectrum of religious experience? They may believe in something supernatural, a spiritual or paranormal reality not directly related to an established faith, so when asked their religious identity they respond they are unaffiliated. They don't belong in a neat religious package.

The stats also make it fairly clear there are lots of individuals who don't hold any religious beliefs. The numbers include agnostics, atheists, humanists, freethinkers and skeptics. As a member of this group, I sense an opportunity to "affiliate" with others beyond the divides that normally split people into religious/non-religious. Though the black/white kind of thinking prevails in many faith groups – our side/their side mentality – those of us who stand outside the walls of religion can be constructive with our status as outsiders.

What might the unattached, the "nones" (none of the above), find in common? Could it be as simple as the fact they choose not to join a faith group? Why not work to find ways to challenge the powerful position religion holds over everyone else? In other words, what good does it do to identify as a "not one of them"? Focusing on the common good presents a path forward that isn't resisting so much as offering a more inclusive way.

An example of what I'm suggesting is interfaith organizations I've worked with in the past. Committees, boards, inclusive services, social actions, each brought community members together for the common good. This wasn't a collection of "bleeding heart liberals"; these were people of many faiths and ethnicities, rich and poor, conservative and liberal (though we usually had no idea what a person's political persuasion was). The intent and goal was to get something done, understanding that no one else was going to take these necessary humanitarian actions in our city, our town, our neighborhood, our community. Everything we did together was under the banner of "Our." Not to exclude anyone, but to strengthen the bond of humanity for the benefit of all.

This is hard work. It means not getting tripped up by the labels – religious, racial, societal, political – worried that "our group" might have to change somehow to bring about a greater good. My specific engagement in this work concerned the poorest people in our area, those who can get stuck in cycles of poverty perhaps including physical or mental illness, addiction or hopelessness. Though the faith communities were often leaders in this work, there was no intentional exclusion of the "outsiders" (the unaffiliated nones). We served and struggled together, seeking the most efficient and effectual ways to address the issues – "issues" that were really human beings, our neighbors. Most often we had to learn by listening, paying attention to those directly impacted by the downward spiral of poverty.

Are we willing to break from our own cycles of thinking, beyond the numbers, the statistics? The numbers can be useful, but only if we choose to see beyond herding human beings into insiders and outsiders.

Consider the 40% of younger people who claim no affiliation. Are they disillusioned by what they see, or merely have other things to think about and be concerned with? Maybe they see too much religion in politics and politics in religion; maybe they've seen too much hypocrisy, a discouraging disconnect between what believers say and what they do; maybe they witness the abuses of the "prosperity gospel," wondering how that relates to the teachings of Jesus; maybe they simply don't see the relevance of faith in their lives. Many other factors may be turning youth away from joining a religious group.

The bottom line? There is no bottom, no lines, when it comes to "our community" and going beyond the numbers.

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