Formation in a Fragmented World: An Exploration of Generation Alpha Adolescents' Identity, Belonging, Purpose, and Faith Development and How We Can Respond with Discipleship

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Generation Alpha Project

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Introduction

Generation Alpha, born between approximately 2010 and 2024 (McCrindle and Fell 2021), is coming of age in a time marked by profound social, technological, and global transformation. Their formative years have been shaped by the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, declining trust in institutions, increased political polarization, and the constant presence of digital media. Peer-reviewed research on Generation Alpha is still emergent. However, early findings across education, marketing, media, psychology, and sociology reveal a developmental trajectory that is both distinct from prior generations and deeply embedded in today's cultural landscape, suggesting that this generation is navigating identity, belonging, purpose (referenced collectively as IBP), and faith in complex and unprecedented ways (Adegboye et al. 2021; Barna Group and Impact 360 Institute 2024; McCrindle and Fell 2021).

Roughly three-quarters of Generation Alpha adolescents are being raised by Millennial parents, with the remainder primarily parented by members of Generation X (Bureau 2024). A growing body of literature identifies Millennial parenting as a pivotal influence in cultivating this generation's secure sense of identity in their children (Dretsch 2021), with strong familial bonds serving as a key source of belonging (Gilmour and Maginn 2024). However, these secure developmental foundations exist alongside ideological division, concerns about youth mental health, and inconsistent institutional support, complicating how Generation Alpha engages in self-understanding and social connection, the core tasks of IBP (Haidt 2024a; Moore 2023; OneHope 2025).

Alongside their psychosocial development, individuals begin to form a more personal understanding of faith and spirituality during adolescence. The adoption of particular identities, beliefs, and behaviors is influenced by dynamic factors such as family, peers, and culture,

making faith and spiritual development a complex and layered experience that varies from person to person (King et al. 2021). For Generation Alpha, faith formation unfolds within an increasingly diverse and technologically integrated society, producing new pressures and challenges.

Aims

Noting the significance of adolescence as formative years, in this review we sought to explore how Generation Alpha youth are currently engaging with the big questions of identity, belonging, purpose, and faith. In particular, we aimed to identify: (1) the primary influences shaping their IBP developmental experiences; (2) their evolving relationship with faith, spirituality, and the church; and (3) the implications for leaders, mentors, and caregivers seeking to disciple this generation. The findings highlight the crucial role of belonging, particularly within family systems and faith communities, for both psychosocial development and faith formation. Young people today are navigating IBP and faith in complex and challenging social, digital, and cultural environments. We found that supportive relationships, personal meaning-making, and spiritual engagement play central roles in their overall well-being and spiritual development.

Methodology

Our literature review was attentive to the diverse adolescent experiences shaped by ethnic and racial diversity, socioeconomic status, and other lived realities of today's young people in America. In order to capture the most relevant, recent, and inclusive research on Generation Alpha in relation to our research questions, our review was guided by the following parameters:

- Research articles and books containing samples primarily within the United States
- Adolescent samples that focus primarily on adolescents born 2010 or later

- Articles published from 2020 to the present (2025)

A total of 121 sources were reviewed, including articles, reports, and book chapters. Of the 121 sources, 59 contained original research. 29 quantified the racial and ethnic representation of the adolescents and individuals in their samples. On average, the samples from these sources consisted of 53% White (Non-Hispanic), 21.46% Hispanic/Latinx, 16.27% Black or African American, 6.3% Asian, 6.89% two or more races, 2.28% American Indian or Alaska Native, 0.58% Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islanders, 1% Middle Eastern or North African, and 7.86% Other (either undefined or defined as more than one race or having missing data).

The racial and ethnic demographics of our literature review were selected to best resemble the U.S. Census Bureau's 2060 National Population Projections (Vespa et al. 2020). 48% of the articles directly included adolescents within Generation Alpha. 18% of the articles included parents, caregivers, and teachers who are actively engaged with this population. 9% of the articles were specifically focused on young people within sexual and gender minority groups. Additionally, about 7% of the sources reviewed included samples from outside of the United States for comparative insights on global trends.

Identity, Belonging, and Purpose

Identity

The literature suggests that Generation Alpha's understanding of identity, belonging, and purpose is uniquely informed by close family relationships, digital immersion, and exposure to issues around race, gender, economics, and justice in a deeply divided sociopolitical climate. While digital saturation and ideological conflict continue to be trends observed in Generation Z, research indicates that Millennial parenting contributes to a more secure emotional foundation, potentially reducing anxiety and equipping Generation Alpha to navigate these questions with

greater resilience than their generational predecessors (Barna Group and Impact 360 Institute 2024; Skiera 2024; Young Life 2024).[2]

Identity Formation in a Shifting World

Unlike previous generational cohorts, Generation Alpha does not (yet) appear to be asking broad or existential questions of identity.[3] Instead, early research suggests that this generation is navigating identity from a place of relative security, shaped by intentional Millennial parenting that emphasizes emotional awareness, individuality, and voice. Rather than embarking on a search for identity, Generation Alpha is negotiating its expression across three primary environments: within the home, among peers and educators in school settings, and in the expansive realm of digital media.

Identity Foundations with Parents

Market research underscores the formative role of Millennial parents in cultivating Generation Alpha's sense of identity. Many Millennial parents view their children as active participants in family life, inviting them to express opinions and make choices from an early age. This approach fosters a strong sense of agency in Generation Alpha, who are developing in relational environments that prioritize authenticity, emotional well-being, and personal conviction (Gilmour and Maginn 2024). As Dretsch (2021) notes, "They're curious. They're savvy. They're confident. And it's not just that they view themselves this way—it's that their parents have made them feel that way." These identity foundations are further shaped by parents' critical stance toward traditional institutions. By modeling autonomy, challenging systemic

[2] While this difference is influenced by factors such as different family dynamics and their relationship to social media, research also suggests these differences may be due to developmental stages. For example, Young Life (2024) found that Gen Z are experiencing increased emotional instability due to various life stage transitions.
[3] This may be a result of limited research focused on how Generation Alpha is asking questions of identity. Another contributing factor may be that a majority of this generation is not in the developmental stage of individuation yet, which is when young people begin to ask questions of identity, belonging and purpose. These questions may be too advanced for the majority of the cohort.

norms, and emphasizing fulfillment over conformity, Millennial parents empower their children to form values-based identities that align with their lived experiences and personal priorities (Gilmour and Maginn 2024).

Millennial parents not only encourage their children to assert their individuality but also to recognize and respect the identities of others. According to Scholastic's *Kids and Family Reading Report* (7th Edition), 95% of Millennial parents believe characters in books can help their children develop positive qualities, 47% believe books support understanding of people who are different from them, and 24% see literature as a tool to break stereotypes (Tarshis 2019; Wolf 2021). While educational media and publishing industries emphasize the agency of Generation Alpha, sociological research offers a more grounded view. At age thirteen, the oldest members of Generation Alpha identified their most important identity markers in this order: age, gender, family relationships, and race or ethnicity. They placed less importance on religion, nationality, or sexual orientation (Bruce et al. 2024). In opposition to market research, faith-based OneHope (2025) found that 76% of Generation Alpha adolescents they surveyed say faith, religion, or spirituality are important to their identity. Notably, 89% of Black preteens agreed or somewhat agreed to this. This may be because young people's identity narratives are highly shaped by the groups they belong to (Granic et al. 2020).

These findings suggest that while adults may be projecting a certain level of sophistication onto Generation Alpha, more empirical, cross-disciplinary research is needed to understand how identity is being formed in this cohort.

Identity Development at School

In school contexts, Generation Alpha is engaging with identity formation amid increasingly complex social dynamics. Particularly, issues of gender and race reflect the

contested nature of educational spaces. While 25% of teens believe schools should teach that gender can differ from sex assigned at birth, another 26% believe the opposite, and nearly half (48%) believe gender identity should not be taught in schools at all (Lin, Horowitz, et al. 2024). These divisions highlight how school remains both a site of identity development and a space of ideological tension.

Despite the presence of polarized discourse, peer relationships remain central to adolescent self-understanding. Generation Alpha is growing up in digitally mediated environments, yet in-person relationships continue to play a critical role in shaping identity (Bruce et al. 2024). Among racially diverse peer groups, experiences of belonging vary. While most Generation Alpha youth value diversity and maintain cross-racial friendships, BIPOC adolescents are more likely than their White peers to view race as a disadvantage, indicating that racial identity continues to affect access to acceptance and opportunity in school settings (Bruce et al. 2024). The research shows that schools are places where Generation Alpha is negotiating conflicting messages, assessing their place in diverse social settings, and attempting to reconcile institutional expectations with their personal and peer-driven understandings of the world.

Seeking Safety in Belonging

Belonging is a foundational developmental and psychological need in childhood and adolescence, essential to mental health and to how individuals develop identity and purpose (Allen et al. 2022; Granic et al. 2020). Rather than being static, belonging is a dynamic process shaped by experiences, social contexts, and reflection (Novak et al. 2022). For Generation Alpha, this process is deeply influenced by relationships across family systems, school environments, religious institutions, extracurriculars, and online spaces. As they navigate these spaces, Alpha

adolescents seek affirmation, safety, and recognition—often asking, *Am I safe to be myself? Will I be seen and valued here?*

Belonging Foundations in Family Systems

Belonging begins within the family system, where relationships play a central role in shaping developmental outcomes for children and adolescents (Houltberg et al. 2023). Research consistently emphasizes the importance of family belonging in promoting positive adolescent outcomes (King et al. 2018). In particular, intergenerational connections—such as storytelling—have been shown to support youth mental well-being, with emerging evidence suggesting benefits for both cognitive and emotional development (Elias and Brown 2022).

Millennial parents, in particular, are often described as highly intentional, encouraging their children to be contributors in the household and to assert their own identities (Razorfish 2023). This parenting style reinforces a sense of agency and belonging within the family, fostering environments where emotional expression and mutual respect are normalized. Such early relational dynamics often serve as a model for how children approach belonging in other contexts. Media designed for early childhood can also play a formative role. For example, adolescents who watched *Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood* as young children report retaining lessons on empathy, emotional regulation, and problem-solving, skills that contributed to both family bonding and social-emotional competence (Pueschel et al., n.d.). These findings underscore how emotional literacy, nurtured at home and through media, can lay a foundation for long-term belonging.

Intergenerational family systems are a source of belonging for young people. Particularly during and after the pandemic, children and adolescents connected with immediate family, as well as extended family, in uniquely intimate ways (Dretsch 2021). Although pandemic-related

stress was significant due to job loss, housing instability, and other hardships, this period also created opportunities to strengthen relationships, discover new hobbies, and develop a new sense of gratitude and appreciation. (Evans et al. 2020; Adegboye et al. 2021).

Belonging in Institutions

In educational settings, belonging is shaped by students' desire to be accepted, respected, and valued (Allen et al. 2022). For children and adolescents, school becomes a critical environment for identity negotiation and social learning. As the most racially and ethnically diverse generation to date, Alpha youth increasingly navigate belonging through cross-cultural relationships. When schools prioritize developmental relationships and inclusive diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) practices, students tend to thrive both socially and emotionally (Search Institute 2020). Springtide's research confirms that many Alpha adolescents form friendships across racial and ethnic lines, reflecting both openness to difference and increased exposure to diversity (Bruce et al. 2024).

Still, institutional belonging is not uniformly experienced. According to CDC data, 32% of high school students, representing members of Generation Z, reported experiencing racism in school, with higher rates among Asian, LGBTQ+, and female students (Akkas 2023). While this research focuses on Gen Z, the lack of literature on Generation Alpha makes these findings insightful of the institutional challenges younger cohorts may also face. Such disparities reveal the conditional nature of belonging and the persistent need for equity in school environments. Despite these challenges, many students report feeling close to peers, particularly when positive peer relationships or inclusive school cultures are present (Akkas 2023).

Religious institutions, once central to communal belonging, present more complexity for today's youth. Research suggests that many young people feel uncomfortable expressing doubts

or raising difficult questions in church settings (Davis and Graham 2023), weakening trust and diminishing opportunities for authentic connection. Smith (2021) proposes that the level of adolescent religiosity (and sense of belonging and trust in religious institutions), or lack thereof, is largely influenced by parenting style and parents' personal integration of religious practices into their everyday lives, which are in turn models their faith to their children (Smith and Adamczyk 2021). Nevertheless, faith communities that prioritize openness and support can still foster meaningful belonging by reducing isolation and reinforcing shared values (Hardy and King 2019). For example, Smith (2021) has also found that adolescents who have consistent relational bonds with non-familial adults with whom they can have deep conversations feel that their religious institutions are like a community or extended family. Having such congregational relationships not only influences adolescents' belonging in such institutions, but it also reinforces their faith development (Smith 2021).

Belonging in Extracurricular Activities

Extracurricular activities such as sports, performing and fine arts, clubs, languages, Scouts, or other lessons offer critical spaces for adolescents to cultivate social capital, life skills, and experience a sense of belonging (DiLascio 2024; Solomon 2024; Mayol-García 2022). These settings provide consistent peer interaction and serve as third spaces outside of school and the home. According to the US Census Bureau's report, *A Child's Day: Historical Tables and Figures* (2022), in 2020, there was higher participation in extracurricular activities of sports and lessons for children 6-17 compared to 1998 (US Census Bureau 2022). Generation Alpha accounted for the 6-to-10-year-olds segment. In 2023, 39.8% of children ages 6-17 regularly participated in a team sport, the highest rate since 2015 and a 6% increase from the previous year (Sports & Fitness Industry Association 2023). Similarly, during the 2023 - 2024 school year,

over 8 million students were involved in high school sports, with 4,638,785 boys and 3,423,517 girls, marking the second year of increased participation since the pandemic (NFHS 2024).

Notably, there are significant differences in participation based on gender. While boys' participation in sports has declined over the years, Census Bureau data shows that in 2020, boys were still more involved in sports, 44% compared to girls at 35%. Conversely, girls were more involved in clubs and lessons such as music, dance, and languages (29%) compared to boys (24%) (Mayol-García 2022). These distinctions suggest that extracurricular engagement is not only a developmental experience but also one shaped by cultural and gendered norms.

Participating in social extracurricular activities like sports, clubs, and the arts provides enriching opportunities for friendship, skill development, and adult mentorship. However, these activities can also become a source of stress for adolescents and their families due to overscheduling, high performance expectations, and the financial expenses of participation (DiLascio 2024). As with social media, participation in extracurricular activities can have both positive and negative effects on adolescents' identity, belonging, and purpose. For example, reasons for dropping out of a sport can range from not having fun, prioritizing academics or a singular sport, and injuries, to financial stress, interpersonal conflicts with teammates, or even being abused by a coach (Solomon 2024). These findings underscore the complexity of these spaces, revealing how the same activities can foster connection and skill-building but also heighten social vulnerability and mental health strain.

Recent trends indicate a potential rebalancing of online and offline belonging. Since early 2023, trends show that more youth are spending time with friends in person outside of school, while online gaming rates have somewhat declined (Walsh 2023). While 75% of children regularly play online, most are not allowed to play outside in public; yet, this is the freedom they

desire. Recent research from the Harris Poll surveyed 8–12-year-olds and found that many prefer unstructured, in-person play (45%) over organized activities (30%) or online socializing (25%) (Skenazy et al. 2025).

The increase in extracurricular activity engagement also supports this shift (US Census Bureau 2022; DiLascio 2024; Solomon 2024; NFHS 2024). This suggests that Generation Alpha is becoming increasingly aware of the importance of embodied, in-person relationships. While more research is needed to understand Gen Alpha's desires for in-person community, Gen Z demonstrates an overwhelming desire for these connections (YPulse 2025). Over three-quarters of Gen Z girls express a desire for more community. Younger girls (ages 13–16), in particular, are more likely to seek this connection than older teens (17–18).

Overall, Generation Alpha's pursuit of belonging unfolds across multiple dimensions, including family, school, faith, extracurriculars, and digital spaces, each shaped by Millennial parents' emphasis on emotionally attuned parenting, evolving institutional trust, and the realities of a hybrid social landscape.

The Pressure of Purpose

Generation Alpha's sense of purpose appears to be largely shaped by external influences, particularly Millennial parenting, the social aftershocks of the COVID-19 pandemic, and increased awareness of global and societal issues. These influences orient this generation toward a purpose grounded in social concern while simultaneously contributing to heightened pressure and emotional strain.

Millennial parents play a key role in cultivating purpose. In one study, 87% reported encouraging their children to stand up for their beliefs (Gilmour and Maginn 2024). These values align with what 12–15-year-olds identified as important: helping others (61%), preventing

bullying (51%), and ensuring equal treatment for all (51%) (GWI 2023). Religious or values-driven homes also contribute to children linking purpose with service and compassion (Peterson 2020). Additionally, research has found that adolescent girls who report higher levels of parental trust and communication (regardless of parental generation) are more likely to have purpose aims that are both self-oriented (individual successes such as having fun, academics, having a good career) and others-oriented (contributing to others and commitments to prosocial causes) (Lund et al. 2021).

This socially attuned purpose orientation is reinforced by Generation Alpha's awareness of systemic issues and global crises. They are exposed to unprecedented levels of digital global information and increasingly perceive injustice and inequality, which may inform their desire to "create a safer world for all" (GWI 2023). But this also contributes to emotional burden and a growing sense of hopelessness (Youvan 2024).

This externally driven sense of purpose is often accompanied by significant psychological strain. Social comparison via digital media, coupled with high academic and social expectations, creates a climate of perfectionism. Seventy-nine percent of girls report overwhelming pressure tied to grades, social relationships, and family demands (Hinkelman 2023). Additionally, 61% of teens report feeling intense pressure to succeed academically, while 56% feel they should already have their future planned out (Graf 2019; Lenhart 2024; Weinstein et al. 2024). Pew Research Center found that teens are more likely than parents to cite expectations, overachieving, and having to look a certain way, not technology, as primary reasons it's harder to grow up today (Faverio et al. 2024). These findings align with rising rates of socially prescribed perfectionism, especially among youth immersed in image-driven digital culture (Haidt 2024b).

Ultimately, while Generation Alpha's orientation toward purpose is rooted in empathy and collective responsibility, it also reflects the emotional complexity of growing up in a world that demands constant performance. Their sense of purpose is, therefore, both a source of empowerment and a site of pressure. However, research suggests that if both a sense of self-oriented and other-oriented purpose can be cultivated in adolescents, with support from parents, peers, teachers, and other caring adults, they may experience more positive outcomes such as meaning, motivation to succeed in academics, well-being, and self-realization.

Lack of Trust in Adults and Institutions

Generation Alpha's engagement with identity, belonging, and purpose is also shaped by a trend strongly influenced by Gen X and Millennial parents: growing distrust in institutions. Many parents in this cohort have expressed skepticism toward schools and religious institutions, often seeking alternative systems that better align with their values. For example, nearly three-quarters of Millennial parents are open to alternative schooling, with 41% still considering homeschooling, even after the pandemic. Compared to 37% of Gen X parents, 47% of Millennial parents intentionally educated themselves in order to select a parenting style (Gilmour and Maginn 2024; Manning 2015). But Millennials choosing alternatives for their children goes beyond systems and institutions of education or religion. For example, rather than simply teaching their children the values their parents instilled in them (reported as mainly focused on intelligence and education), Millennial parents are intentionally inculcating values such as independence, empathy, collaboration, emotional intelligence, and creativity to their children. And this orientation is being passed down. Generation Alpha is not broadly distrustful of adults but tends to rely more heavily on emotionally supportive relationships within their families, thereby reducing the perceived need for institutional adult mentorship (Gilmour and Maginn

2024).

In particular, religious institutions are facing growing disengagement. While some parents return to faith communities for familial continuity, others emphasize autonomy, allowing children to explore religion independently (Manning 2015). This dynamic contributes to Generation Alpha's more fluid relationship with organized religion. Additionally, schools and churches are perceived by many youth as unsafe due to the rise in gun violence and political tensions (The Trevor Project 2024).

Technology further complicates trust in institutions. The shift toward smartphone-based social life has created increasingly curated individualized spaces that may feel more trustworthy than public or institutional ones. Yet, as Haidt (2024a) warns, these structureless environments may leave adolescents vulnerable to online radicalization or echo chambers that provide a false sense of community.

While there is not yet enough research to make definitive claims about Generation Alpha's overall attitudes toward adults and institutions, current trends suggest a reorientation rather than a rejection. Alpha youth are not withdrawing from adult support altogether; rather, they are turning toward relationships and environments they feel are emotionally safe and that align with their values, most often within the family. Their posture toward institutions is shaped not by apathy but by a critical awareness of systems that appear inconsistent or untrustworthy (Moore 2023).

Shifting Social and Cultural Realities

Generation Alpha's understanding of identity, belonging, and purpose is unfolding in a highly polarized cultural landscape in the US, where social attitudes surrounding categories such

as race, gender, and ideology are deeply contested. These dynamics both expand opportunities for exploration and constrict expression in environments marked by division.

One of the most influential shifts is the politicization of identity itself. As Moore (2023) observes, contemporary political culture often defines identity not only by affiliation but by antagonism, creating environments where expressing or exploring identity may provoke conflict. In this climate, young people often turn to family for guidance. According to OneHope (2025), 76% of Generation Alpha teens go to family members with questions about gender and sexuality. This trend reflects both strong familial bonds and a lack of consistent institutional guidance, particularly in schools. This inconsistency is also reported by teachers. Pew Research Center (2024) found that 82% of K–12 school teachers believe the education system has worsened in the past five years due to political factors, pandemic aftereffects and resource constraints (Lin, Parker, et al. 2024).

Nationally, conversations around identity in education remain limited. Most teachers (68%) report that issues of gender and sexual orientation rarely or never arise in classrooms, while discussions about race are somewhat more frequent but still uneven (Lin, Horowitz, et al. 2024). Political affiliation shapes these dynamics further; Democratic-leaning teens are more likely to feel comfortable discussing race in school than their Republican-leaning peers (Lin, Horowitz, et al. 2024). Teachers themselves often express frustration with limited curricular autonomy, with 71% feeling they lack adequate influence over what is taught, while 58% report excessive state interference (Lin, Parker, et al. 2024). These constraints create an atmosphere in which identity-related topics are politicized or avoided, leaving young people with limited institutional support for identity development.

In this fragmented sociopolitical context, family remains a central source of belonging,

but institutional environments such as schools and religious spaces frequently fail to provide consistent, trusted affirmation. As a result, young people are navigating questions of identity and purpose amid conflicting cultural signals. They may either rely heavily on close relationships while critically engaging with the polarized world around them, or unconsciously follow prescribed politicized narratives.

Differences between Generation Z and Generation Alpha

While Generation Alpha and Generation Z share many contextual influences such as pandemic disruption, digital saturation, and sociopolitical instability, their developmental trajectories reflect distinct shifts in values, identity formation, and institutional engagement. As McCrindle (2021) notes, Generation Alpha are "upagers": they experience earlier physical, emotional, and cognitive development than previous cohorts, which accelerates both their exposure to and navigation of complex social realities.

Both generations seek meaning through identity, belonging, and purpose, but they do so with different orientations. Gen Z tends to approach identity as multifaceted and self-directed, shaped by heritage, personal interests, gender/sexuality, and achievements (Barna Group and Impact 360 Institute 2024). However, this exploration often takes place outside of or in tension with traditional institutions. For example, Gen Z young adult women are increasingly disaffiliating from churches, even as they maintain personal spiritual practices such as prayer (Barna Group and Impact 360 Institute 2024). Their disengagement is often rooted not in disbelief but in a distrust of spaces that appear politically or morally inconsistent (Moore 2023). Pew Research suggests that this disaffiliation may intensify as Gen Z moves more into adulthood and gains greater independence (Pew Research Center 2020).

By contrast, Generation Alpha is growing up with a stronger relational foundation. The pandemic deepened parent-child relationships, and Millennial parenting, characterized by emotional attunement and values-based guidance, has provided Alpha youth with a more secure sense of self (Dretsch 2021; Bruce et al. 2024). Whereas Gen Z often looks to peers or online communities for guidance, Generation Alpha tends to turn first to family: 76% report going to family with questions about identity-related topics (OneHope 2025). This signals a shift toward family-centered identity development, in contrast to Gen Z's more peer- and self-driven processes.

Social media remains a dominant force for both generations, though with different effects. Gen Z girls often associate social media with isolation and self-doubt (Skiera 2024). Having come of age during its rise, many Gen Z youth express fatigue and ambivalence toward its impact (Gelles-Watnick 2023). Generation Alpha, by contrast, was introduced to digital platforms even earlier but often with more parental supervision and post-pandemic balance through offline family routines (Dretsch 2021). This may lead to more moderated digital engagement, though it is too early to assess long-term outcomes.

In summary, Generation Alpha is emerging as a cohort marked by earlier maturity, stronger family bonds, and a value-driven orientation toward purpose. While Gen Z reflects a generation shaped by institutional disillusionment and digital overexposure, Generation Alpha appears to be navigating similar terrains with more relational support and emotional resilience. These shifts suggest a generational pivot toward family-based identity development and adaptive engagement with an unpredictable world (Szymańska 2024).

Faith, Spirituality, and Church Engagement

Religious and spiritual development shape a young person's beliefs, provide meaning, and influence identity, worldview, and behavior (King et al. 2021). As today's young people form a personal understanding of faith and spirituality, it is important to consider how this process unfolds within their broader social and cultural environment, especially since meaning-making is not limited to religious or spiritual contexts alone (King et al. 2023). For example, King et al. (2021) explain this through the Relational Developmental Systems perspective, which views moral and spiritual development as a natural and ongoing part of human development that must align with each individual's context. Therefore, it is essential to understand how and why Generation Alpha is forming faith in the ways they are so that their spiritual development can be meaningfully supported within the realities of their everyday lives.

Generation Alpha is growing up as the most diverse generation yet, and they see that diversity as something to be valued (Bruce et al. 2024; GWI 2023). With a greater emphasis on racial, ethnic, gender, and sexual diversity comes a wide range of perspectives, values, and beliefs. At the same time, they are coming of age in a world where heightened adult polarization and politicized rhetoric around these topics are increasing (Pew Research Center 2023). Because of this, Gen Alpha needs thoughtful and responsive support that reflects the diverse realities and priorities they bring into conversations around faith and spirituality.

As previously mentioned, mental health is becoming increasingly important to this generation (McCrindle & Fell 2021). Research points to an ongoing mental health crisis among adolescents today (Heffernan and Macy 2025; US Surgeon General's Advisory 2023; Garthe et al. 2023; Hoffmann et al. 2022; Graf 2019). Mental health problems particularly increased in young children during the COVID-19 pandemic (Adegboye et al. 2021; Prichett et al. 2024).

Depression, anxiety, and suicidal thoughts continued to increase post-pandemic (Prichett et al. 2024). Adolescents today need increased support to navigate the growing mental and emotional challenges they face, especially through faith and spiritual development.

Despite limited research, current studies suggest that many adolescents in Generation Alpha value faith and religion as an important part of their identity. Over 60% of US teens identify as Christian, and while nearly 75% of Gen Alpha youth consider themselves religious, an even greater number identify as spiritual (Bruce et al. 2024; Pew Research Center 2023).[4] OneHope's (2025) study found that self-identified Christians in this generation regularly engage in practices like Bible reading and prayer. Additionally, 42% of parents living with minor children report praying or reading scripture with their children (Smith et al. 2025).

Parents and caregivers play an integral role in influencing adolescent faith and spiritual development. Interestingly, the largest cohort of religiously unaffiliated adults are now the ones parenting the next generation (Smith et al. 2024; TryTank Research Institute 2024). Famously known as the "nones," young adult parents are distancing themselves from religious institutions. Using data from the Pew Research Center and the US Census Bureau, we can estimate that about 33–40% of the parents of Gen Alpha are religiously unaffiliated (Smith et al. 2025; Bureau 2024). Nones now make up about one-third of the US adult population. Most of the nones reject religion and many believe it to be harmful. While reasons for these beliefs vary, 80% of nones view religion as a cause for division and intolerance (Smith et al. 2024). Burge and Jones (2024) categorize nones into four categories: Nones in Name Only (NiNOs), Spiritual But Not Religious (SBNR), Religious Dones, and Zealous Atheists. SBNR nones make up 36% of non-affiliated adults in the US and believe in some form of higher power, but reject traditional religious

[4] It is still unclear what young people mean when they identify as "spiritual," though studies suggest it often includes a belief in God or a universal spirit.

institutions. The NiNOs, who make up about 20% of nones in the US, still engage in religious practices regularly. Burge and Jones's research highlights the significant diversity among nones, particularly in how they engage, or do not engage, with religion. Many nones may not be interested in their children's faith and spiritual development at all.

It is important to note the prevalence of spirituality across the younger generations. While we lack substantial research on Gen Alpha, understanding their predecessors, Generation Z, might be useful. 82% of young adults (ages 18–24) report that they believe they have a soul or spirit in addition to their physical body (Smith et al. 2025). Religious disaffiliation is rising, with Gen Z being the least affiliated generation (Moore 2023). However, according to the Barna Group and Impact 360 Institute's (2024) study on Gen Z's beliefs and values, 49% say they have made a personal commitment to Jesus Christ.

Gen Z also exhibits major distrust of institutions. Interestingly, nearly 73% report a belief in God or a higher power; however, nearly half (47%) have not attended a church service in the last six months (Barna Group and Impact 360 Institute 2024). Gen Z seeks identity through community, but when community feels exclusionary or political, they disengage (Moore 2023). This continues to be the experience for young people today as they desire a faith community that feels more inclusive. Despite this trend of disaffiliation, many Gen Alpha youth remain open to faith engagement. The Pew Research Center (2025) found 26% of families with minor children attend religious services weekly. The literature shows that the majority of Gen Alpha are willing to attend religious services and that many already do (Bruce et al. 2024; OneHope 2025). More research is needed to gain a significant understanding of Gen Alpha's church engagement.

Emerging research continues to show a connection between religion, spirituality, and human flourishing among Gen Alpha (Bruce et al. 2024). Religious and spiritual development

involve an active process of meaning-making, where personal beliefs begin to shape how young people live. As they form and internalize values, these become part of their narrative identity and are expressed through actions that benefit others. These kinds of behaviors are often linked to thriving (King et al. 2023). Ryan Burge (2025) analyzed data from a 2024 survey conducted by the Springtide Research Institute and found that even those who consider themselves just slightly religious report greater life satisfaction, belonging, and purpose. Additional studies support the idea that religion and spirituality serve as protective factors against mental illness and maladaptive behaviors (Hardy and King 2019; Papaleontiou-Louca 2021; 2025). Research with younger Gen Z individuals also shows distinct differences in well-being between those who are "very religious" and those who are "not religious," with the former reporting higher levels of flourishing across physical and mental health (Springtide Research Institute 2023).

Building on these findings, Burge's (2025) analysis also revealed a notable difference in flourishing between adolescents (ages 13–17) and young adults (ages 18–24), with the younger group showing significantly higher levels of well-being. While the reasons for this disparity are still unclear, the findings highlight the need for further research to understand the experiences of this current generation of young people.

Beliefs and Theological Understandings

The latest Religious Landscape study published by the Pew Research Center highlights a relative stabilization in the decline of Christianity in the United States (Smith et al. 2025). While this study does not include adolescents, it is still beneficial to understand the trajectory of faith and religion as a possible indicator of how young people are exploring spirituality. The youngest age group in the survey of adults (ages 19–25, born between 2000 and 2006) appear no less religious than survey participants born in the 1990s. This is leveling out a downward trend of

Christian identity previously seen in generations. At the same time, the percentage of adults who are religiously unaffiliated has appeared to level off. Currently, about 63% of U.S. adults identify as Christians. However, younger adults are more likely to be religiously unaffiliated when compared to older adults (Smith et al. 2025). These trends might inform how Generation Alpha experiences faith, spirituality, and church. While U.S. teens are largely influenced by their parents' belief systems, they are less likely to express those beliefs with confidence. Still, as recently as 2020, a majority of teens, including many who are unaffiliated with any religion, say that religion is at least somewhat important in their lives (Pew Research Center 2020).

Religiously affiliated teens are more likely to believe in a divine being, but even unaffiliated teens report belief in a "higher power." In fact, 85% of adolescents say they believe in God or a universal spirit (Pew Research Center 2020). Generation Z is considered spiritually "open," with many unaffiliated youth engaging in spiritual practices (Barna Group and Impact 360 Institute, 2024). Although Gen Z is the least religiously affiliated generation to date, more than eight in ten still view humans as spiritual beings (Moore 2023; Smith et al. 2025).

The Pew Research Center (2020) also found that teens tend to hold a view of morality that is independent of both the Church and God. Across all religious groups, most teenagers do not believe that belief in God is necessary in order to have good morals or values. Roughly half (47%) of U.S. teens hold a pluralistic view of religion, while the majority of evangelical Protestant teens maintain an exclusivist perspective.

A study by OneHope focused on Generation Alpha, ages 11–13, to gain a clearer picture of their beliefs about Jesus, God, and the Bible. Among Christian participants, 89% believe Jesus is the Son of God, and 86% agree that the forgiveness of sins is only possible through Jesus Christ. Additionally, 84% believe in God and in the possibility of having a personal relationship

with God. Regarding the Bible, 73% of Christian preteens believe it is the Word of God. Like Gen Z, nearly half (48%) of non-religious preteens report being spiritually open. While they do not regularly attend church, 58% of non-Christian participants said they would be open to visiting a Christian church service if invited by a friend, and 28% were unsure (OneHope 2025). Interestingly, some trends reflect an increase in young women leaving religion and the church at higher rates than men (Cox and Hammond 2024). This trend first emerged with Gen Z, raising important questions about how it may continue or shift with Gen Alpha. However, Springtide Research Institute's 2024 Study of Young People and Civic Life found no significant gender differences on most religion or spirituality measures (Springtide Research Institute 2024).

Teenagers show mixed motivation when it comes to church attendance. Among Christian teens, 46% say they attend worship services primarily because they want to, while another 46% say they attend mainly because their parents expect them to (Pew Research Center 2020). Although the Pew Research Center's 2020 study focused on individuals aged 11 to 17, technically the youngest of Generation Z, it offers relevant insights that may inform our understanding of Generation Alpha.

Influences on Faith and Spirituality

Novak et al. (2024) explain adolescent faith development through two processes: *adopting* and *adapting*. Teenagers' faith practices and beliefs are initially influenced by their upbringing and tend to be adopted. Then teens subsequently adapt their faith by engaging with religious teachings and communities and by negotiating their faith within their society. The study argues that faith formation is deeply shaped by social interactions. In shaping their beliefs, young people rarely accept religious teachings passively. Instead, they reinterpret, adapt, or selectively engage with spiritual ideas to align with their lived experiences and through consistent

relationships. Faith development for today's adolescents is an ongoing interaction between religious teachings, upbringing, personal reflection, and cultural context.

While peers and mentors have a strong influence on religious identity formation among adolescents, parents and family members continue to play the most crucial role in their moral and spiritual development (Novak et al. 2024). Children and adolescents typically enter into the faith traditions of their families, with parents and caregivers serving as the earliest and most consistent influencers in shaping religious belief (Peterson 2020; Pew Research Center 2020). This remains true across ethnicities and religious affiliations, as the family continues to be the strongest developmental context for religious formation (Sam A. Hardy et al. 2022; Pew Research Center 2020). Drawing on data from the 2024 Pew Religious Landscape Survey, Ryan Burge (2025) reinforces the idea that adult churchgoing habits are largely shaped in early childhood. In fact, most adult individuals who now identify as nones were not particularly religious during their formative years. For example, only 10% of adult practicing Christians report attending church less than once a year during childhood, while just 40% of today's nones say they attended weekly as kids (Burge, 2025).

Current research focused on Generation Alpha finds that preteens report turning to family more than any other source for spiritual guidance (OneHope 2025). According to OneHope (2025), when asked who they listen to on topics like right and wrong or religion and God, the majority of Gen Alpha preteens indicated family members as their primary source.

While much of the literature highlights the strong influence of parents and family members on faith and spiritual development, peers also play an increasingly important role, particularly during adolescence. Most Gen Alpha youth report having meaningful friendships (OneHope 2025), and these peer relationships can significantly shape beliefs, values, and

religious involvement. Adolescents who have close friends who are religious are more likely to stay engaged in their own faith over time (Sam A. Hardy et al. 2022). These friendships often provide shared experiences, accountability, and encouragement in spiritual practices. Research also shows that positive peer relationships contribute to the overall quality of adolescent development, including the formation of identity and purpose (Houltberg et al. 2023).

Church and religious communities remain critical contributors to young people's religious formation (Dyer et al. 2022; Stanford et al. 2024). Local leaders and personal mentors hold a meaningful role, especially when young people feel supported by them (Sam A. Hardy et al. 2022). The majority of Gen Alpha does report having at least one trusted adult outside of the home; however, further research is needed to understand how today's young people are engaging with adults (OneHope 2025). While church attendance among the U.S. population demonstrates a general decline, the church continues to be a place for discipleship, spiritual exploration, and community for young people (Barna Group and Impact 360 Institute 2024; Dyer et al. 2022; King et al. 2023; OneHope 2025; Smith et al. 2025).

Notably, as mentioned in previous sections, today's young people are growing up in a fully digital age. Despite this growing influence, there is limited research exploring how social media and digital culture are specifically shaping Gen Alpha's understanding and experience of faith, spirituality, and religion. There is an opportunity for leaders and churches to enter into this dynamic environment with today's young people and offer guidance in navigating the online world. Digital spaces are a core part of young people's lives and they shape how teenagers see themselves, relate to others, and make sense of the world around them.

Alongside many opportunities, there are many challenges for the church as they disciple young people today. In an increasingly globalized world, the church must recognize that faith is

being shaped across a variety of spaces, including the home, peer relationships, digital environments, and the broader culture. Faith communities that aim to support lasting spiritual formation in Gen Alpha must invest in building strong relationships and may find it valuable to remain present and credible within the digital environments where young people now live. Nonetheless, in-person gatherings and communities continue to be influential and paramount to the development of faith among young people.

Key Faith Crossroads in Teenagers' Faith Journeys

There is a significant gap in the literature in understanding how Generation Alpha is experiencing faith. Today's teenagers are navigating faith development in a culture shaped by widespread access to technology and social media, which allows them to learn and engage beyond their immediate physical environment. As they form their spiritual identity, they are responding to various cultural pressures that compete for their time and attention.

One of the most significant cultural influences is activism. Nearly one in three teens report feeling pressure "to do good for their community or the world or to be informed about different issues" (Weinstein et al. 2024). This sense of obligation is shaped by the constant flow of information through social media. While technology offers educational resources and opportunities for social connection, it also exposes teens to overwhelming global crises. Teenagers often feel the need to keep up with current events and take action; however, when they do not know how to respond, their self-efficacy and self-perception may be impacted (Weinstein et al. 2024; Youvan 2024).

As evident in Gen Z, many young people today emphasize inclusivity and social justice. Though we are still learning about Gen Alpha's faith priorities, research shows Gen Z has a desire for a faith community that is both *true* and *good*: good for their friends, their communities,

and the world (Barna Group and Impact 360 Institute 2024). With a rise in conversations pertaining to sexual and gender identity, this may continue to be true for Gen Alpha, as they are influenced by peers and digital communities that value justice and belonging.

Even though individuals typically report higher religious interest in their teenage years than young adult years, this period of adolescence tends to be one of the hardest to maintain a personal faith. Many who have left the church later report that high school years were the most difficult to maintain their faith, often because of competing priorities (Davis and Graham 2023). As teenagers are developing their faith identity, they are juggling the pressures experienced from their peers, parents, and culture. More than half of American teens feel pressure to have their life plans figured out (56%) and to maintain a certain image in social circles (51%) (Weinstein et al. 2024). While they manage the life they want to live and the image they might hope to curate, faith and religion are fighting for importance among their priorities. This reflects what Pearce et al. (2017) describe as religious salience: the importance of religion in one's hierarchy of identities. Salience is a particularly central dimension of religiosity in adolescence and is often the strongest indicator of religious engagement, as it captures not just whether religion matters, but how it ranks compared to other meaningful identities and commitments in a young person's life. While current research offers insight into the ongoing process of faith development in adolescents, we still lack a clear understanding of how Generation Alpha is uniquely experiencing and forming their faith.

Emerging Expressions of Church and Faith Communities

While parental influence remains significant, the church continues to play a critical role in adolescent faith development (OneHope 2025). The literature continues to demonstrate that local leaders and personal mentors are a strong source of guidance (Novak et al. 2024; OneHope

2025; White et al. 2021). Ministries such as youth groups foster environments for the discussion of abstract ideas, contributing to identity formation and helping young people make meaning of their experiences (King et al. 2023). Through this process of meaning-making, the church has a valuable opportunity to support young people in developing a deeper sense of purpose.

Although the current research on Gen Alpha's religious involvement is limited, Bruce et al. (2024) offer an early look into the beliefs, behaviors, and values of today's 13-year-olds. Their findings indicate that over half of this group attends religious services regularly. Similarly, OneHope (2025) reports that 84% of committed 11–13-year-olds within the Christian faith attend church weekly. While these attendance figures are encouraging, they do not capture what Gen Alpha seeks from a faith community or how they hope to engage it. Moreover, the current research does not expect the decline in Christianity to reverse with Generation Alpha (Graham 2025; Smith et al. 2025).

One emerging tension is the growing distrust in institutions (Gilmour and Maginn 2024). Future of Faith (2025) found that only 16% of teenagers, across Gen Z and Gen Alpha, trust large organizations. This low institutional trust may influence how young people perceive the church. Consistent and authentic support from the community is now even more important for healthy spiritual development. This distrust might explain the shift from traditional institutional communities to emerging online communities.

Implications for Ministry and Discipleship

Leaders, parents, and mentors must adjust their approaches to reach, accompany, and disciple today's teenagers. In general, adolescents require trusted adults to guide and lead them through their faith and spiritual development. Generation Alpha is the most diverse generation

yet, especially in terms of race, ethnicity, and gender and sexual identity (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2024). Moreover, they seek inclusivity in many aspects of their lives. Their development unfolds alongside rapid technological advancement, increased social pressures, and distrust for institutions. These shifts require discipleship to evolve with a focus on relationships, conversation, flexibility, and socio-cultural awareness.

Addressing Institutional Distrust

One way to counter distrust in our discipleship efforts is to increase our focus on attentive listening. Listening not only informs teaching and discipleship strategies, but the act itself allows adolescents to remain engaged in their faith. In general, there is a gap between what leaders believe students are experiencing and what young people are actually experiencing within institutions and organizations (Houltberg et al. 2023; Search Institute 2020; Winthrop et al. 2025). This discrepancy perpetuates a learning environment incompatible with the current needs of this generation. Faith communities become a space where young people may not be comfortable expressing doubts or questions of faith. When leaders and institutions demonstrate their attentive listening through actionable responsiveness, young people remain engaged (Stanford et al. 2024; Winthrop et al. 2025). Further research is needed to explore how churches and youth leaders can effectively cultivate this kind of responsive and supportive environment for Gen Alpha.

The Role of Trusted Adults

As mentioned, adults play an integral role in supporting adolescents through their faith, religious, and spiritual development. They can have a meaningful impact on the overall thriving and flourishing of young people. Spiritual development requires experiencing transcendence,

which often takes place in relationships with others. Supportive adults can assist young people as they sort through what is meaningful to them while navigating their individuality within broader contexts. This is pertinent even on a neurobiological level. Young people typically begin developing the capacity for transcendent thinking between the ages of 14–18 (Rebecca J. M. Gotlieb et al. 2024).

Transcendent thinking refers to the ability to explore broader understandings beyond the self and consider abstract ideas. Gotlieb et al.'s (2024) findings on adolescent brain development underscore the importance of helping adolescents explore different perspectives and emotions, especially on issues that feel important to them. Teenagers need support from adults to create more opportunities for reflection and guidance (Immordino-Yang et al. 2019). Moreover, developing the ability to engage in transcendent thinking supports identity development and life satisfaction in later adolescence. The more frequently young people engage in this type of thinking, the more they physically and neurobiologically develop the skills to face challenges and live a meaningful life (Gotlieb et al., 2024a, 2024b). In other words, transcendent experiences help adolescents develop into thriving individuals (King et al. 2023).

Young people in religious social contexts have increased access to such positive relationships. Spiritual and purpose development are more strongly shaped by relational spiritual engagement than by individual practices alone. Adults have a meaningful opportunity to mentor and model behaviors and practices that support this kind of growth. By listening well and engaging in honest conversations, caring adults can help adolescents navigate challenges and build resilience. Research shows that supportive relationships play a key role in helping young people deepen their personal commitment to their goals, values, and beliefs (Vaughn and King 2024).

Relationships have a significant influence on the developmental success of young people. The Search Institute defines developmental relationships as "close connections through which young people discover who they are, cultivate abilities to shape their own lives, and learn how to engage with, and contribute to the world around them" (Search Institute 2025, 13). Their research with 4th–12th graders indicates how relationships support the development of character strengths and social-emotional competencies. Characteristics such as consistency, safe and supportive spaces, and providing scaffolding are common in successful, positive relationships with adolescents (Vaughn and King 2024). This sense of being valued encourages them to take risks and build resilience (Search Institute 2025). When adults, leaders, and parents build relationships grounded in trust and respect, teenagers are more likely to feel seen and understood. Additionally, an increase in developmental relationships supports a sense of purpose, self-efficacy, and emotional competence (Houltberg et al. 2023). These developmental connections help equip teenagers to grow into healthy, capable, and purpose-guided young people.

Guidance and support from adults has always been a key need during adolescence. However, 69% of parents and 44% of teens believe it is more difficult to be a teenager today than it was twenty years ago (Faverio et al. 2024). They attribute this to challenges related to technology, social media, and increased social pressures. Many adolescents might describe their current context as a "grind culture" (Lenhart 2024; Faverio et al. 2024). They are constantly experiencing pressure to plan their futures, achieve goals, and maintain a certain appearance. While these may be typical experiences during adolescence, social media and technology amplify these pressures. Teenagers now can compare themselves to the rest of the world, which can lead to feelings of incompetence (Faverio et al. 2024). Even if young people are not

receiving intense pressure from their parents or other adults, social media and technology continue to elevate those feelings. Teenagers need trusted adults to support them through the weight of these ongoing pressures and support their emotional health and well-being.

Young people need adults in their lives who model lived faith. Research conducted by YPulse (2025) found that Gen Z girls who have mentors show higher confidence (87% vs. 69%), greater joy (86% vs. 73%), more optimism about their future (90% vs. 78%), and feel much more comfortable asking for help (92% vs. 57%). Adults who walk relationally with youth can support their ability to develop spiritually and integrate faith into their identity (King et al. 2021). This includes modeling healthy behaviors and participating in meaning-making dialogue. In *Faith Beyond Youth Group*, Powell, Griffin, and Bradbury (2023) define modeling as "showing others who we are every day" (p. 87). They emphasize that young people are unlikely to live out a faith they have not seen demonstrated in the lives of others around them. Moreover, research shows the practice of inviting youth into spiritual activities might lead to their own meaningful engagement with faith over time (Sam A Hardy et al. 2022; Stanford et al. 2024). Powell et al. (2023) emphasize that shared spiritual practices, or forms of meaning-making, offer essential support for young people's internal formation of identity, belonging, and purpose.

Cultivating Lasting Faith in Today's Young People

Parents and leaders are actively navigating how to best minister to and disciple young people to cultivate a lasting faith. While more research is needed to identify specific strategies for Generation Alpha, existing literature highlights one essential approach: directly listening to and seeking to understand the experiences of young people on their own terms.

In concordance with Future of Faith's (2025) research, being heard is a direct catalyst for belief. Their study found that "two-thirds of participants experience a deeper faith when they feel

heard" (Future of Faith 2025). Moreover, 67% of teenagers report spiritual growth when they share their beliefs and are received with listening rather than judgment, compared to only 33% who report the same after listening to a sermon. As the report elaborates:

> These findings confirm that listening is not only a tool for gaining trust—it is an act of faith formation itself. It is a mistake to assume that listening simply prepares people to receive "real" instruction later. Instead, listening facilitates immediate faith development by helping people name, articulate, and integrate their beliefs. As a whole, these results highlight listening as a direct and immediate catalyst for spiritual growth, rather than a mere precursor to teaching. Investing in genuine, dialogical encounters acknowledges the profound way individuals grow in faith when they are heard—reminding leaders that transforming hearts often begins with simply offering a receptive ear (Future of Faith 2025, p. 9).

To provide meaningful support, youth leaders must continually invite young people to share their perceptions about the support they are receiving in order for adults to shift and adjust their approach to better support their faith development (White et al. 2021). Adults and leaders can assist young people in cultivating a lasting faith by intentionally integrating youth into their religious communities. When youth experience a strong sense of belonging and engagement in faith communities, they report higher levels of faith devotion in emerging adulthood (Stanford et al. 2024).

Youth engagement with a local religious congregation clearly impacts faith development (Stanford et al. 2024). Youth groups are most influential when they create opportunities for young people to explore faith openly. These gatherings invoke abstract thinking and help adolescents integrate their faith into their context (King et al. 2023). It is essential, however, to

understand how young people are experiencing life and how these experiences shape their faith journeys. When adults engage with teenagers in their lived environments, they are better positioned to offer guidance and support through authentic and personal relationships.

To develop a lasting faith, adolescents must make their faith and religion personally meaningful. While young people have to be taught about faith and religion, leaders must carefully avoid imposing pressure that creates an external motivation for pursuing their faith. Szymańska (2024) outlines an important difference between authoritarian and authoritative teaching styles beneficial in faith development. Authoritative approaches are collaborative and involve open communication, whereas authoritarian styles are authority-driven, typically with one-way communication. When adolescents follow religious behaviors based on pressure, these behaviors are poorer quality, and ultimately, unsustainable.

As adolescents mature, they begin to reflect on which beliefs and traditions they personally connect with and choose to pursue on their own. When young people develop a personal and internalized religious motivation, they are more likely to experience sustained and meaningful faith outcomes (Sam A Hardy et al. 2022). Hardy et al (2024) utilize the Self-Determination Theory (SDT), an established framework for understanding motivation. Their findings emphasize that the more autonomous or self-directed an individual feels, the more internalized their motivation becomes. This highlights the significance of a personal faith that is lasting and sustainable. Recent research suggests that adolescents may disengage from religion even while church attendance remains steady. Ages 13–14, in particular, demonstrate lower consistency in church attendance, prayer, and religious salience than in mid-adolescence and/or in late adolescence, which makes these early teen years critical in shaping their faith trajectory (Dyer et al. 2022).

The SDT continuum explains that engaging with faith or religious practices for autonomous reasons is associated with better outcomes than doing so for controlled reasons, such as acting out of social pressure or shame. When youth decide for themselves to be religiously involved, their religiosity is much stronger (Hardy, Nelson, et al. 2022). Individual religiousness and personal faith is the strongest predictor of a long-lasting faith (Hardy, Hatch, et al. 2022).

Discipleship Pathways for a Diverse Generation

Current research suggests that many people who left the church between the ages of 15 and 25 did not feel safe to share their doubts or ask their most pressing questions in their faith community (J. Davis & Graham 2023). In order for teens to be responsive to the work of youth leaders, they must be heard and taken seriously. The researchers at Future of Faith (2025) suggest that rebuilding faith in our culture and communities may have more to do with how well we listen to others than how well we preach or teach (while there is still a place for both). Leaders should adopt a ministry posture of being relatable, reliable, and curious in their conversations, listening, and interactions (Future of Faith 2025). Youth who demonstrate higher levels of engagement and open dialogue in religious communities are less likely to disengage from their faith traditions (Hardy, Hatch, et al. 2022). Especially as young people increasingly struggle to trust institutions, including churches, it is important to rebuild that trust and confidence.

The authors of *Faith Beyond Youth Group* (2023) highlight two essential foundations for rebuilding trust: showing up consistently and developing closeness in relationships. It takes time and regular demonstrations of empathy and authenticity in relationships for young people to feel safe. Powell et al. (2023) highlight the importance of humility and accountability in building trust with others. Research shows that many individuals who leave their faith often report

negative experiences with religious people and institutions as a key reason (Smith et al. 2024). This underscores the importance of being intentional in building genuine relationships, especially as young people continue to approach faith communities with skepticism.

Lamb et al. (2021) highlight the importance of creating affirming religious and spiritual spaces where sexual minority individuals can integrate both their faith and sexual identity. Affirmation is necessary to speak into a young person's life as it supports their development of purpose and direction. It is difficult to foster trust without an individual feeling safe to bring their full identity and beliefs into a relationship, and trust is an integral aspect of forming relationships (Future of Faith 2025; White et al. 2021).

While more research is needed to understand the specific desires of Generation Alpha, findings from the Barna Group and Impact 360 Institute (2024) on what Gen Z seeks in discipleship may offer insight into the direction Gen Alpha is heading. Gen Z desires to "experience truth, goodness, and beauty and must be discipled in multifaceted, relational ways" (Barna Group and Impact 360 Institute 2024, p. 39). We know that Gen Alpha is highly relational and might express similar interests (Allen et al. 2022; Parilakova & Babincak 2023; Search Institute, 2020). In a culture that is increasingly polarizing and divisive, young people want to hear a gospel message that is inclusive and welcoming.

It is important for youth leaders today to focus on guiding students into a more embodied and personal faith. While the novelty and excitement of technology is undeniable, post-pandemic adolescents show a stronger preference for face-to-face connection and shared, in-person experiences (Rideout et al. 2021; YPulse 2025; Skenazy et al. 2025). This shift presents an opportunity for youth leaders to guide students toward a more grounded and experiential faith. In order to meet this desire, leaders must adopt dynamic and flexible teaching strategies. Emerging

literature on Generation Alpha's learning styles suggests demonstration and multimedia utilization are highly useful (Cimene et al. 2024). This includes note-taking, drawing, or any other form of visual aids. While preaching is typically considered an essential component to learning in faith communities, young people might be more apt to grow in faith through personalized meaning-making activities. For example, young people might use images to create metaphors or parables related to their own lives, offering symbolic expressions of how they perceive and experience the Spirit. Creating space for ongoing conversations can facilitate opportunities to explore the self and enter into a relationship with God (Sewell 2020).

Discipleship happens within the context of whole-person reflection and well-being (Sewell 2020). Sewell's (2020) study highlights how spiritual well-being occurs naturally when the right conditions are met in a space—for example, asking young people to engage deeply on works of art and equipping them with journals for reflectio,n followed by group discussion. Young people's meaning-making may include profound encounters with the sacred, as well as embodied responses, such as an awareness of body consciousness, change, and growth. Using objects as symbols allows young people to use their bodies in a way that explores meaning-making (Powell et al. 2023). These embodied and sensory experiences create opportunities for youth to connect their inner beliefs with outward expression. It may deepen spiritual development in ways that resonate with their stage of life and cultural context.

Conclusion

In this increasingly complex environment, meaningful relationships and responsive discipleship become essential. Ministry leaders, mentors, and parents supporting youth must

grapple with how to balance digital spaces with embodied, relational discipleship experiences. Listening and understanding were repeatedly identified as foundational for discipleship (Future of Faith 2025). A lasting faith is cultivated through genuine dialogue within an inclusive and safe learning environment that supports young people's explorations. Faith development is more effective and sustainable when young people develop an internalized motivation and feel integrated into their leaders' religious worldview (Sam A Hardy et al. 2022; Stanford et al. 2024). Creating opportunities for youth to present and explore their doubts, questions, and concerns is essential for their faith and spiritual journey.

Ultimately, this literature review reveals that Generation Alpha's journey through identity, belonging, purpose, and faith is profoundly shaped by both cultural continuity and rupture. Belonging, particularly in family systems, grounds their self-concept (identity), relational development, and faith formation. Identity, purpose, and faith are increasingly formed in a hybrid manner where online and offline life intersect. While the digital landscape invites leaders to explore online discipleship pathways, it is vital to prioritize in-person, embodied experiences that foster grounding tangible connections, community, and accountability. Purpose, while deeply valued, is often challenged by external pressures. These intertwined dynamics underscore ministry practitioners' need for future research that not only centers an integration and balance of these developmental realities but also accounts for the rich diversity and evolving contexts of this emerging generation.

Due to length, the implications, discussion, and part of the references have been omitted. These will be shared in detail during our in-person conference presentation.

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