Top row, from left: Soul City Church in Chicago celebrates a baptism in Lake Michigan, and performers take the stage at a Soul Slam music event at The Sanctuaries in Washington, D.C. Bottom row, from left: Soul City musicians lead the church in song on Easter Sunday; a dharma student guides a meditation at Zen Buddhist Temple in Chicago; and crowds at the Wild Goose Festival in Hot Springs, North Carolina, applaud the folk-rock duo Indigo Girls.

Are You There, GOD?

It's Us, *WH*

Scores of women are seeking a new kind of religious experience. One built more on kinship than worship and bearing little resemblance to the churches and temples in which they were raised. *Women's Health* explores the bold frontier of spiritual fluidity and how this faith revival is invigorating health, wellness, happiness.

BY BLAIRE BRIODY

FROM LEFT: SOUL CITY CHURCH (TOP AND BOTTOM); AUDREY GEMIGRANI; SUSIM ROBERT KESSLER; SCOTT GRIESSEL/CREATISA (2)

After breaking away from the evangelical Christian religion of her childhood, going back to church as a 30-year-old was the last thing Jennifer Allen* would have predicted. Then again, she didn't expect to get cancer either.

She left her religion in college because her gay friends felt spurned by its teachings; it was the second time the church had let her down (the first was in elementary school, when congregation members made callous—and untrue—remarks about the Holocaust). Since then, Jennifer hadn't adhered to a formal religion…until she got diagnosed with stage IV Hodgkin's lymphoma. On the way home from the doctor, she asked her boyfriend to drop her off at the beach, where she'd always felt a sacred presence. There, she realized how unfulfilling her life had become. She worked constantly, rushing between multiple appointments a day. "I thought, If I died, what was all this hustle for?" she says. "I needed to feel connected to something bigger."

To help refocus her life, Jennifer began looking for a spiritual home that would provide the guidance and friendships she enjoyed as a child, but without the ultraconservative doctrine she didn't agree with. A place that embraced people anywhere along the LGBTQ spectrum and that recognized ways in which religion and science could coexist. Her search led her to a Unitarian Universalist congregation. Though it stems from Christianity, Unitarian Universalism teaches that no single faith provides all the answers. The congregation has a lesbian pastor, as well as strong artistic and social justice elements, such as guest lectures on Black Lives Matter and a small group for women in which they discuss feminist symbols in religion. "It's a place where it's okay to be working through your faith instead of having faith," she says. "It validated that I can be artistic

*Name and identifying details have been changed.

and a little weird and still be spiritual."

Like Jennifer, as many as 42 percent of American adults today follow a different religion than the one they were raised in, according to a 2014 Pew survey of more than 35,000 people. But there's an even more striking generational shift occurring: One in three adults ages 18 to 34 don't claim a religious preference at all, up from one in four in 2007. But two-thirds believe in a higher power, and 40 percent of them pray or meditate. In essence: It's the difference between being formally "religious" and more broadly "spiritual."

This mass abandonment of organized religion came at a time when many of us saw a new source of enlightenment: fitness studio as church, where moments of clarity occurred not in pews, but on yoga mats and cycling bikes. Social media also started to permeate our lives; now our eyes and minds are constantly overstimulated. "We've lost the sustained peaceful silences in which we form a deeper understanding of the world," says Lisa Miller, Ph.D., a psychology professor at Columbia University. Yoga and meditation offer ways to quiet the mind, but they often lack the group-based support structures found in churches, synagogues, and the like.

The trend away from traditional practice is particularly apparent with those who came of age around 9/11, says religious historian Diana Butler Bass. "To those men and women, religion can be an excuse for people behaving in violent and destructive ways," she theorizes. "So they've been looking for a different path."

HIGHER CALLINGS

Twenty- and thirty-somethings are finding that path through like-minded friends, says Bass. Instead of gathering in a chapel to be preached at by an ordained leader, women are dialoguing over dinner with GFs in someone's living room, or joining spiritual groups via the website and app Meetup (there are 13,000 groups listed in the "spirituality" category across the country, with 62,000 RSVPs in a single month). At The Sanctuaries in Washington, D.C., gatherings look like an open-mic night at a bar, with improv and hip-hop acts that explore metaphysical themes from multiple spiritual POVs. And then there's the Wild Goose Festival, an annual event in rural North Carolina where spiritual leaders, rock singers, and yoga teachers all share top billing.

"Many women feel isolated. They've been turned off by organized religion, but they're seeking a community to give [the same kind of] meaning to their lives," says Harold G. Koenig, M.D., a professor of psychiatry and behavioral sciences at Duke University and the director of the Center for Spirituality, Theology and Health. "It's just more free-flowing as opposed to structured."

Ashlee Piper, 34, who lives in Chicago, discusses religion with her girlfriends over brunch, for example. Though she grew up in a loosely Christian family, one day she attended a meditation session at a Zen Buddhist temple out of curiosity. The next time, she invited a few other religious orphans, and they decided to explore other faiths. Today, the seven-person crew gathers regularly to attend services, whether that's observing prayer at a mosque or clapping along to a rock band at a church, where the average weekly attendance tops 1,300.

They don't always agree with everything they hear—like the time a pastor praised Chick-fil-A for its "great values," referring to the chain's anti-gay marriage stance—but other times, a service will spark conversations about a recent breakup or tough time at the office. "On Sundays, when you start feeling like, Uhhh, I've gotta go to work—it's nice to have something that knocks you back into the perspective of what really matters," says Ashlee.

In 2014, Tania Rezai, 30, took an even more DIY approach, launching a casual interfaith group in Northern California after she realized many of her friends felt lost spiritually (or had difficulty fitting a Sunday a.m. service into their lives). Now about 10 adults in their late twenties and early thirties, who grew up in various faiths, meet once a month in each other's homes. Members agree on a topic like "the afterlife" or "suffering" and research how different religions interpret the idea. They start with a moment of silence and end with a member sharing a prayer or song, often from his or her own faith. "I figured together we could create our own spiritual home," says Tania. "I walk away almost high off of the connection and the love."

NOT-SO-FRINGE BENEFITS

The perks of participating in a religious community have been documented in reams of scientific research. Koenig reviewed more than 3,000 studies looking at the link between religion and health. In most cases, religious involvement strongly correlated with higher levels of hope and self-esteem. But beyond mental health, "attendance at religious services is a powerful predictor of physical health," said Koenig. "There's no question it's related to longevity." (Specifically: more exercising, a healthier diet, less smoking and drug use.)

Miller has seen the advantages of more generalized spirituality in her own research on depression. The brain's cortex—which guards against the disease—thickens when people develop a spiritual practice, she says. Another study from Columbia University supports the idea. Scientists there found that the risk of developing depression was 90 percent lower if religion or spirituality was important to a participant. Those already suffering from depression or PTSD can benefit as well, says Koenig: "The beliefs and practices are stress-relieving and help people take better care of themselves."

All these ideas have proved true for Jennifer Allen, who felt a renewed sense of hope that she could survive cancer once she found her spiritual community in that Unitarian Universalist congregation. She began attending services every Sunday, and this past February, the doctor told her the chemotherapy was working. That next Sunday, her pastor's sermon was about the "in between" times—when you know where you want to go but need to bide your time before taking action. The preacher spoke of how these periods require patience and courage, and the words resonated so deeply with Jennifer that she burst into tears. She knew it'd take more rounds of treatment before she could be cancer-free, but now she had the tools and support to carry her through.

Top row, from left: The altar at Zen Buddhist Temple in Chicago is decorated for Buddha's birthday, and crowd members embrace at the Wild Goose Festival. Bottom, from left: Soul City Church's creative team huddles up before their Sunday morning gatherings; a member of The Sanctuaries recites a poem during a Soul Slam event.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP RIGHT: SCOTT GRIESSEL/CREATISA; AUBREY GEMIGNANI; SOUL CITY CHURCH; SUSIM ROBERT KESSLER

RELIGION, YOUR WAY

Tailoring a spiritual practice to your life can take several forms, depending on what agrees with your schedule and personal convictions. A few strategies:

- **Talk to your friends.** "See if there are others who are feeling that same sense of hunger," says Bass. A good entry point is asking how pals' past religious experiences have influenced them. Your beliefs don't need to be the same, but look for people with common values, and be sure to honor their faith tradition.
- **Include your children.** Bass suggests starting simple, like discussing who key historical figures are. (Only want to share the parts of religion you enjoyed? That's cool too.) You can also use small moments (like a squabble on the playground) to teach right from wrong. Just "be authentic with your child about your understanding," she says.
- **Get outside the pew.** Find creative locations to meet—backyards, the park, your favorite dive bar—and don't feel beholden to a weekly schedule. If you think of your arrangement as a moving, breathing thing, it ensures it stays invigorating. When there, "make an effort to participate often," says Koenig.
- **Create rituals.** It's okay to copy some of what organized religion does without the theological aspects, says Linda Mercadante, Ph.D., a professor of theology at Ohio's Methodist Theological School. Try starting meetings with a "centering moment," like group meditation or a song.
- **Explore communities.** There's value in being spiritually multilingual, says Miller. Familiarity with the major religions expands your context for global news, and it may spark ideas for your own group study. ■

Keeping the Faith

Two women put modern spins on their traditional religions.

"Hi, I'm Catholic."

Specifically, I'm the daughter of a Catholic priest. My father is an exception to one of the strictest rules of organized religion, an ex-Episcopalian who converted and was allowed to retain his ministry *and* his marriage. He was my first role model—an example of selflessness and sacrifice with a razor-sharp wit. As I got older, his tenets of dedication and service continued to resonate with me. I go to Mass almost every Sunday at a church that combines traditional liturgy and music with an intellectual, inclusive culture. I don't agree with every pronouncement from Rome, but I respect and value 2,000 years of theology and teaching. And I'm a big fan of Pope Francis: He has reenergized the church and emphasized mercy over judgment.

When people make assumptions about my belief in science (nope, I'm not a Creationist), my feminism (yes, you can be Catholic and believe in gender equality), and my political affiliation (I hew to the left), I say: All of us 1.2 billion Catholics are individuals. Get to know us as human beings—you might be surprised by what you find.

—Benedicta Cipolla, 42

"Hi, I'm Jewish."

My Jewish identity is a defining one for me, for my family, and for my career, but it isn't guided strictly by Torah. It's an instinct, a culture, a tradition. Luckily, I am living at a moment that lets me choose the pieces that ring true to me.

On my second date with my now-husband, I made it clear that I would be raising my family Jewish. We wake up on Saturday mornings and eat (totally unkosher) bacon and eggs, though we don't have leavened bread on Passover. Nor do we go to synagogue, except on the Jewish high holidays, and the worship community we connect with (on those three days a year) is both radically inclusive and steeped in custom. My favorite Shabbat every year is at Burning Man. And while I swore that Christmas at my in-laws wouldn't trump Hanukkah (my ethnically Jewish husband was adopted by gentiles), I now fully embrace it. We just refuse to eat pork that day.

—Stefanie Rhodes, 40