First Place

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The Stuart News
MEET THE MILLENNIALS

They are a generation with a spirituality all their own

They came before the sun was up, some of them with their hair still damp from showers. About 25 of them formed a circle around Martin County High School’s flag pole, and joined hands, bowed their heads and started to pray. By the time they were done 30 minutes later, their ranks had grown by more than 100.

They prayed for safety from a culture of violence that has claimed victims of their generation in places like Paducah, Ky., Littleton, Colo., and Fort Worth, Texas. They prayed for their teachers, school officials and friends. More than anything, they prayed to be a generation on fire for God.

Youth leaders and scholars say the millions of teenagers who gathered around flag poles for “See You At The Pole” across the country are part of a generation unlike any before them. They are more optimistic about the future and more vocal about their faith. Raised on computers, they are savvy consumers of information.

Like their predecessors in Generation X, they remain suspicious of institutions but are not as quick to dismiss them when they disagree. While many Gen Xers yearned for authentic relationships, these teens yearn to be part of something larger than themselves. In short, they don’t want to go it alone.

Youth leaders say teen spirituality seems to be more genuine, more heartfelt than 10 or 15 years ago. And what is more genuine is more likely to last longer, they say.

“It’s more real,” said Robert Bradshaw, 34, the youth pastor of First Baptist Church in Jensen Beach who joined the praying teens at Martin County High School this week. “They’re not playing church like my generation did.”

Millennials say they are ready to take on the world. So is the world ready for the millennials?

‘Instant responses’

If nothing else, their sheer size is impressive. There are about 70 million Americans younger than 18. They are almost as large as their parent’s baby boom generation, which makes up about 29 percent of the U.S. population. Millennials are just shy of that, at 26 percent.

Generational boundaries are inherently fuzzy. Most define the Millennial generation as anyone born between about 1980 and 1995. Members of Generation X, or the Baby Busters, are much smaller. They were born roughly between 1965 and 1975 and make up only about 16 percent of the population, according to U.S. Census figures.

Millennials are the people who are checking out your videos at Blockbuster, bagging your groceries at Publix and filling the airwaves with the Backstreet Boys and ‘N Sync.

They are a generation raised on and with computers at home and in school. Nearly half - 47 percent - of teenagers use a computer to surf the Internet regularly. The technological saturation has had a profound impact on this generation, experts say. They have been exposed to more information, and have more access to it, than any other generation by the time they reach adulthood.

One of the most important effects of the technology culture is the way millennials process information and make choices. The Internet offers any number of choices. Don’t like what you see? Click a button and move on. Researchers say the attention span of millennials has been so shortened that it’s hard for them to keep focused on much of anything.

And it’s affecting the way they approach spirituality. Sister Jude Ruggeri, director of youth and young adult ministry for the Roman Catholic Diocese of Palm Beach, said it can be a challenge to ask teens to invest time and energy in an ongoing spiritual evolution.

“They literally are used to instant responses,” Ruggeri said. “And we live in a throwaway society. If it’s broke, we don’t fix it. We get rid of it. We’re trying to teach them to change that. They need long-term commitments.”

There is also a more philosophical, hard-to-document change in culture that has influenced the way millennials see the world, and how they approach their faith.

It’s called “post-modernism,” a philosophical shift in the second half of the 20th Century. At its core, post-modernism is a rejection of rationalistic scientific reason. Faith, with post-modernism, has become more experiential, more personal and harder to explain in traditional terms. Faith is no longer what the church says it is - for many, it’s whatever they feel it is.

Generation X was really the first group to embrace a post-modern mindset in matters of faith. But millennials have come of age in a faith culture dominated by post-modernism. Faith and spirituality are served up in a “spiritual marketplace” with a little bit of this, a little bit of that. What may not have been acceptable for their parents is kosher for millennials, in part because who’s to say what’s right or wrong?

“They are being raised in a time where there’s much more spiritual influence everywhere,” said Mark Oestreicher, the general editor for the Teen Devotional Bible, recently released by Zondervan Publishing House. “They’re not just more open to new things, but their assumptions assume a spiritual marketplace.”

WHAT’S OLD IS NEW

Part of what defines millennials is not what they are but rather what they aren’t. Oestreicher said it’s common for each generation to be a reaction to the one that came before. Millennials are as much a rejection of Generation X cynicism and baby boom individualism as they are anything else.

“They want to be part of something larger, they want to leave a mark,” Oestreicher said. “They believe they can make a difference. Xers don’t believe they can make a difference because they were told for so long that they couldn’t.”
In addition, millennials are less likely to reject an institution or tradition they may not entirely agree with. Youth leaders say teenagers are looking for stability and security, and are finding it in the institutions and organizations that have not really changed. They're also delving into traditional practices that were rejected by many of their parents and members of Generation X. Religious leaders say they're finding teens are becoming more conservative and instead of looking outside for meaning, they are trying to find it within the institutions they already know.

Brian Singer Towns, the editor of the new Catholic Youth Bible (St. Mary's Press), said teens are leading movements that have embraced ancient practices, such as saying the rosary and conducting all-night prayer vigils to venerate the Communion host. "For them, what's old is new," he said.

And it's not just Christian youths who are breathing new life into established traditions. "I wouldn't say that I see a lot of experimentation with spirituality," said Sam Fisher, international director of the Jewish B'nai B'rith Youth Organization, which represents about 30,000 Jewish teenagers around the world. "They're not wandering as much. Security and safety are very important to them, and they're looking in what's familiar, what they know."

Much of the evidence of a surge in teen spirituality is anecdotal. It's hard, if not impossible, to quantify religious fervor. In addition, experts say teens are more in tune with spiritual matters, not necessarily religious expressions.

"We know where we're going"

Perhaps it's more real because this generation's faith has come with the threat of violence than their predecessors. Cassie Bernall, the Colorado girl who was shot at Columbine High School after being asked if she believed in God, was a millennial. So were the four teenagers who died at a Fort Worth, Texas, church in a shooting spree at a "See You At The Pole" rally last week.

"It's made me realize that at any moment I could die and I definitely want to be ready," said 17-year-old Sarah Belford of Stuart Belford attends the Christian Family Ministries Church in Stuart, where teens gather at "The Rock," a youth center that attracts about 150 teens a week with a sodas-only bar, pool table and Nintendo. The young believers who frequent the center say it is a welcome haven from a society saturated with peer pressure and violence.

Belford's influence on these teens who she never knew is heavy. They know her story, they know her answer to her life-or-death question and they know they want to follow her example. She has become an icon for their generation, Belford said.

The kids at "The Rock" aren't sure what to make of the generational labels, and looking at their non-Christian peers, they say they're not sure their generation is any more spiritual than anyone else's. Belford said they refuse to be seen and not heard, and her friend Jonathan Cordero, 16, said they want their devotion to be "contagious" throughout the city.

But they do seem to have an idea about their future. Like many of their peers, they are bullish about the outlook they see for themselves. Times are good, they've got money in their pockets and they know what they want. "I definitely know where I want to go, where my life is going," said 16-year-old Ben Brooks of Stuart. "If anything, we as a generation know exactly where we're going."

The Millennials at a Glance:
There are about 69.5 million Americans under the age of 18 (a quarter of the entire population), and about 29 million of them are between the ages of 13 and 19.

- Spending power: Teenagers spent $103 billion in 1997, $70 billion from their own pockets.
- Home life: Nearly 25% of millennials live in single-parent homes. In two-parent homes, 70% of both parents work outside the home.
- In the bedroom: By age 18, 60% of teenagers say they have had sex. 20% will remain virgins by age 20. But fewer than half date regularly.
- Wired: 47% of teens use a computer to surf the Internet.
- Diversity: 33% of teenagers are minorities, compared to 28% of Americans of all ages. By the time they retire, minorities will make up a majority of the U.S. population.
- What's in a name? The most popular names for today's teenagers are Michael, Jason, Christopher, Jennifer, Jessica, and Ashley.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Associated Press, Newsweek, Teenage Research Unlimited

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CARING FOR GOD'S CHILDREN
For Ambassador Lindy Boggs, public service is a divine mission

ROME - When President Clinton offered the job of U.S. Ambassador to the Vatican to former Congresswoman Lindy Boggs in 1997, she was understandably hesitant. She was 81 years old and had left the public arena in 1990 after two decades in Congress. She enjoyed her grandchildren and her retirement.

As usual, she sought guidance at her parish church, the stately St. Louis Cathedral, nearby her Bourbon Street home in New Orleans. She scanned the cathedral and saw a statue of Our Lady of Prompt Succor, the patron saint of New Orleans, and a statue of Joan of Arc wielding a sword.

Recognizing their courage, Boggs says she realized her foolishness.

"I said to myself, 'Lindy Boggs, you are a sissy. If the president thinks you can do this, you at least ought to give this a try,'" Boggs, now 83, said last week in her office at the U.S. Embassy to the Vatican.

Boggs never envisioned a public life for herself until her husband Hale, the powerful Democratic leader of the House of Representatives, was lost in a plane crash over Alaska in 1972. She was elected to replace him and retired after nine terms.

"I had finished my career," she said in her spacious office which overlooks the ruins of the Circus Maximus, an ancient chariot-racing arena. "This is a P.S."

It seems that representing the world's most powerful nation to one of the world's most powerful churches suits Boggs just fine. The largely ceremonial post blends Boggs' interest in politics with her deep faith that has sustained her through both triumph and tragedy.

"I don't think I would be in public service if it weren't for a feeling of being able to help all of God's children," she said. "It's about creating a better way of life for as many people as possible."

'They're coming around ...'

Making the transition from legislating to diplomacy has been an easy one, Boggs said. There are times, however, when Boggs' personal views clash with those of the Clinton administration.

Pope John Paul II has announced plans to visit holy sites in Iraq early next year, including Ur, the birthplace of the biblical patriarch Abraham. Part of the visit will include a meeting near Mt. Sinai with leaders of the world's monotheistic religions - Judaism, Islam and Christianity.

U.S. officials have asked the pontiff to reconsider the trip, saying that a meeting with Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein could be used to legitimize Hussein's regime. No world leader has visited Iraq since the Persian Gulf War in 1991.

Boggs said U.S. leaders need to understand that the Pope's mission of peace to the heart of Christendom bears no political intent.

"They would prefer that there not be a visit to Iraq, but his desire for peace and his strong wish to have the monotheistic religions meet together and to put them under the cloak of Abraham is something that supersedes my own or anyone else's views," she said.

In addition, Boggs said the U.S. should follow the Pope's lead in wanting to cancel the foreign debts of the world's poorest nations as part of the new millennium. U.S. officials, as well as members of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, are skeptical about the campaign being led by a broad coalition of religious leaders.

"They're coming around," Boggs said. "The president and congress have come a long way toward the third world debt issue."

The U.S. has maintained an embassy at the Vatican only since 1984. The world's smallest sovereign state contains about 450 residents and 3,000 "foreigners" who work within the Vatican walls but do not live there. The pope is the supreme legislative, executive and judicial power at the Vatican.

Boggs' position in Rome has allowed her to develop a close friendship with the pope, although their interaction is limited. She accompanies official U.S. visitors to meet the holy father, and earlier this year traveled with the pope on his visit to St. Louis.

John Paul II is regarded by some as the most influential man of the 20th Century because of his aggressive stand against communism that contributed to its demise. Boggs, however, said the pope's lasting legacy will not include the rich and powerful.

"His greatest legacy is going to be with his rapport with young people," she said. "It's tough love ... that's what he has for them, and that's why they respect and adore him so much. Everything he has done, everything he has wished for, in some ways crystallizes his hope for the next generation."

'My mother wrote that law!'

The Boggs generation was one tempered by hard times and tested by war, but yet saw unlimited possibilities in America's Century. And from their privileged perspective within Washington, the Boggs family saw it all.

If ever there was a Washington power couple, Hale and Lindy Boggs were it. Jack Kennedy, a young senator from Massachusetts, was a frequent dinner guest. Boggs still counts Lady Bird Johnson as a close personal friend and former House Speaker Sam Rayburn was practically family.

While her husband shuffled legislation through Congress during his 30-year career, Lindy took an active role volunteering in civic activities and helping her husband maintain ties to the downtown New Orleans district.

She also raised three children. The oldest, Barbara, was mayor of Princeton, N.J. until her death in 1990. Their son, Tommy, is one of Washington's most powerful lobbyists while the youngest, Cokie Roberts, is a well known reporter and commentator for ABC News and National Public Radio. Boggs single-handedly catered the Roberts wedding - at home - for 1,500 guests, including President and
Mrs. Johnson.

Politics was practically second nature for Lindy Boggs. Every generation of her family included an elected official since William Claiborne stepped ashore in Jamestown, Va. in 1607. So it seemed almost natural following her husband's disappearance that she would run for his seat. Still dazed from the plane crash, Boggs won the election to become the first woman elected to Congress from Louisiana.

During her two decades in Washington, Boggs became a crusader for women's equality in housing and banking. In 1977, Boggs sold her suburban Washington home to her daughter, Cokie, and her husband, Steve. She recounted the story in her 1994 memoir, Washington Through a Purple Veil: Memoirs of a Southern Woman.

When she applied for a mortgage on a new condo, a bank officer told her a federal requirement demanded she provide exhaustive financial and insurance statements because she was a single woman.

"My dear," Boggs recalls telling the officer in the book, "I am the author of the law that forbids this type of requirement for female persons and the elderly. You are not complying with federal requirement, you are in defiance of it."

Several years later, when Cokie Roberts went to refinance the house, a bank officer casually handed her a form described as "nothing" that prohibited discrimination because of sex, race or age.

"Nothing! It's not nothing! My mother wrote that law!" Roberts shot back.

'When I get old enough ...'

Throughout her two decades in Congress, Boggs' public positions were molded by her deep religious faith. In some ways her political views are paradoxical. Conservatives applaud her strong anti-abortion stance, while liberals champion her commitment to social services and family health.

Those who know her say her positions are "totally consistent" when one considers her faith.

"It animates everything she does," said her son-in-law, Steve Roberts, who writes a column with his wife Cokie for the New York Daily News and teaches at George Washington University. "She is one of the few people who really believe that the right to life ... does not end at birth and leads to a very strong sense of Christian charity and mutual responsibility."

Her predecessor at the Vatican embassy, former Boston mayor Ray Flynn, said Boggs has resisted pressure to soften her political views at the expense of her religious convictions.

"I'm really pleased that she is following in the tradition of a strong Catholic mother," Flynn said recently. "She's not backing off on her religious beliefs and values. It can be a tough position to represent the United States to a religion you believe very strongly in without compromising your values and principles, and at the same time being loyal to your government."

Boggs, in her signature gracious Southern style, shies from such accolades. She says she is simply doing what God has called her to do. And even at 83 years old, Boggs says she has no plans to slow down, either. Her advice for other older Americans?

"When I get old enough, I'll answer that question," she said.

LINDY BOGGS
• 1916: Marie Corinne Morrison (Lindy) Claiborne is born on Brunswick Plantation, La.
• 1937: Lindy Claiborne marries Hale Boggs.
• 1940: Hale Boggs is elected to Congress from Louisiana's Second Congressional District.
• 1972: Hale Boggs is lost in a plane crash over Alaska. He is never found.
• 1973: Lindy Boggs is elected to replace her late husband in Congress.
• 1976: Lindy Boggs becomes the first woman to chair a national party (Democratic) convention.
• 1990: Lindy Boggs retires from Congress.
• 1997: President Clinton names Lindy Boggs U.S. Ambassador to the Vatican.

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A PLACE AT THE TABLE
Boston's former mayor says Republicans, Democrats will no longer ignore Catholic voters

BOSTON - Rosary beads from Rome swung gently from the rear-view mirror of Ray Flynn's Jeep Cherokee as the former mayor weaved through the streets of South Boston. His eyes were on the road, but his thoughts were on Catholic voters in the United States. "Catholics have a great potential to be an effective voice in the political elections in 2000," he said. "We are the strongest, most important swing vote in America today. But we're not solidified, we're not unified."

After a decade running Boston's City Hall and four years as Bill Clinton's envoy to the Vatican, Flynn, 60, has a new mission: trying to mold Roman Catholics—the country's largest religious body and a quarter of all U.S. voters—into a cohesive and formidable voting bloc.

What's more, Flynn says it's time Catholics got a little respect from the country's two main political parties. "Catholics have been betrayed by both parties," he said.
"One party has taken advantage of them, and the other has ignored them."
Those are tough words coming from one of the Democratic party's most popular public officials. But Flynn has never been one to mince words. He made it clear years ago that his love for his Catholic faith came before his love for politics. "I am a Catholic before I'm a Democrat," he says.

In April he found a way to blend his personal faith and his public politicking when he became president of the Catholic Alliance, a lay-run political advocacy group that was an offshoot of the much larger Christian Coalition. The non-profit organization severed ties with the Christian Coalition in 1997.

Flynn's main goal is to re-establish Catholics as a body of voters that politicians listen to, much as they listen to blacks, Jews or Hispanics. The Washington-based group has 125,000 active members; Flynn hopes to raise that number to around 400,000.

Flynn said Catholics need to field and support candidates who are "pro-life, pro-family, pro-needy and pro-immigrant." Finding a candidate who embodies all the social teachings of the Catholic Church is challenging, Flynn admits, but not impossible.

A 'very naïve' proposition

But perhaps the hardest part of Flynn's mission will be trying to mobilize 43 million Catholics of voting age who are as diverse as they are numerous. American Catholics are fiercely independent in matters of faith. Many see the pope as a worthy example but never would follow him into a voting booth.

U.S. Catholics were the backbone of New Deal liberalism until the 1980s when the abortion issue pushed large numbers to the Republican party. Bishop Anthony J. O'Connell of the Palm Beach Diocese said the abortion issue permanently altered the allegiances of Catholic voters.

"Certainly there was a time when a majority of Catholics who put the social teaching of the church up high ... coincided with the agenda of the Democratic party," O'Connell said. "But enter the question of abortion, and this drove a tremendous cleavage in the Catholic community ... because it depended on whether you came down heavily on the social teaching of the church excluding the life issues or you came down heavily on the life issues and cared less about the social teaching."

Despite the rise of the anti-abortion "Reagan Democrat" in the 1980s, Catholics are still heavily Democratic and gave Bill Clinton 54 percent of their votes in 1996, compared to 33 percent for Bob Dole, according to a Gallup poll.

Catholics are now roughly evenly divided on party registration, although a critical 34 percent of Catholics who say they belong to neither party frequently vote for the Democratic ticket, according to a 1996 study by the Pew Charitable Trusts.

Leaders in the church and experts who have studied Catholic voting patterns say unifying the Catholic vote—whatever that means—may be almost impossible.

"Not all Catholics vote on the basis of social issues," said Prof. Mark Rozell, a professor of politics at the Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C. "Many Catholics have other salient issues that drive their voting decisions.

"I think it's very naïve to think that such a large segment of the U.S. population can be mobilized as a coherent unit to vote on the basis of one issue."

Neither party embodies the entire catalogue of Catholic social teaching that Flynn and the Alliance are promoting, a fact that Flynn readily admits. "The Democratic party is pro-poor but is certainly not pro-life. And the Republican party is pro-life but is certainly not pro-poor," he concedes.

There are Catholic-friendly candidates out there—Republican or Democrat, Catholic, Protestant or none of the above—that Catholics could support, Flynn said. The problem is whether or not they could win.

Flynn said a massive wealth of untapped leadership in church pews is hesitant to enter the political arena because they feel they have neither "the money nor the media" needed to win, much less the support of the "party elite" if they are against abortion.

Much of Flynn's political life after Boston has been defined by the abortion issue. While serving as U.S. Ambassador to the Vatican from 1993-1997, he chided the Clinton administration over the president's veto of a bill that would ban so-called "partial birth" abortions.

Last year he lost a race for Congress, in part because of his anti-abortion stance in an overwhelming liberal Boston congressional district.

Msgr. Francis Maniscalco, director of communications for the U.S. Conference on Catholic Bishops, said leadership by groups like the Catholic Alliance have helped keep the Catholic agenda alive even though the courts and the Democratic party platform run...
counter to church teachings.

Maniscalco, however, was doubtful all Catholic voters would ever vote in lockstep with each other or the church, and the church would never tell them how to vote.

"It's hard to define it as a bloc because it's so large," Maniscalco said. "That's 62 million people who come from a variety of backgrounds and have different issues."

' A worker priest at heart'

Flynn, however, has a strategy he says worked for him as president of the U.S. Conference of Mayors. He is inviting each presidential candidate from each party to meet with the Catholic Alliance and present their views on social issues. He said candidates are already itching to get time on his daily radio show in Boston.

Flynn also wants each party to devote a prime time slot at next summer's conventions to a pro-life speaker, something Democrats have been hesitant to do in the past. Finally, Flynn is urging Catholic voters to withhold their support—not their votes—from candidates until they address Catholic social issues.

The Catholic Alliance will not endorse any candidates of either party, nor would Flynn offer his assessment on anyone in the current crop of candidates, even Catholic candidates like commentator Pat Buchanan.

"It's not about electing a Catholic," he said. "It's about electing a person who can identify with Catholic values."

Whether it's possible or not, people who have watched both Flynn and the Catholic church certainly give him credit for trying to mobilize an entire church.

"I think he's right to suggest that U.S. Catholics could be doing more to establish an identity as a core voting bloc in this country," said Catholic University's Rozell. "You hear of the labor vote, the African American vote, but very rarely do you hear references to the Catholic vote because it is so hard to get ahold of."

Mike Barnicle, a former columnist for The Boston Globe who followed Flynn's political career in Boston, said what made Flynn such a successful mayor will be what helps him lead the Catholic Alliance.

"Basically, he's a worker priest at heart," Barnicle said. "He could have had a great second career in Latin America as a worker priest. He's very good at organizing, the nuts and bolts, the street corner organizing. He's not really a global thinker in terms, and not exactly a philosopher, but he's an activist in the best sense of the word and in the best history of the Catholic church."

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- The Catholic Vote In 1996
  - Clinton 54%
  - Dole 33%
  - Perot 13%

- Catholic Party registration:
  - (1996 figures)
  - Republican 30%
  - Democrat 32%
  - Independent 34%

- Catholic voter profile:
  * 24% of "traditional" Catholics favor gay marriage
  * 81% of "traditional" Catholics favor gay marriage
  * 43% of "traditional" Catholics favor abortion rights
  * 73% of "progressive" Catholics favor abortion rights

The Catholic Church in politics
What Catholic voters have to say about the church's involvement in politics.

- Should the church stay out of political matters?
  - Yes 49
  - No 51

- Should the church express its view on political matters?
  - Yes 50
  - No 50

- Should clergy discuss political issues in the pulpit?
  - Yes 28
  - No 70

Sources: Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, Gallup Poll
In Central Florida’s Spiritualist mecca, curious pilgrims find guidance from those “in spirit.”

“In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit upon all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, and old men will dream dreams.” Acts 2:17

CASSADAGA - Kit Hoffman-Dittner dabbed at her eyes with a tissue as the tears started to fall. Helen, a cousin from her mother’s side of the family, was telling her it was time to make a change in her life. Helen recalled the time Kit fell off a horse at age 11, though the details were sketchy.

Helen saw the 48-year-old woman’s life at a crossroads of sorts. It was almost as if Kit were on that horse again, but nervous about tearing out of the starting gate.

Kit nodded with a smile and thanked Helen for her guidance. But Helen was not in the room. She was “in spirit.” She died years ago.

Welcome to Florida’s little corner of the Twilight Zone.

In this Central Florida hamlet, messages from people like Helen are entirely normal. In fact, they are what built this town and continue to draw curious pilgrims by the thousands each year. Believers subscribe to an entire religion based on such spiritual messages.

Later, after the reading, Kit said Helen was a cousin she never knew who had died young. The message about the horse stemmed from a childhood incident when Kit was thrown from a horse that galloped into a clothesline. Perhaps her continued fear of horses represented her hesitation in making a major life decision, she said.

Helen’s message - translated through medium Nick Sourant - was accurate enough to make Kit think that maybe all this Spiritualist talk about mediums and those “in spirit” is more than just a bunch of hocus pocus.

“I feel as though we all tap into that spirit source,” she said. “And (mediums) can tap into it in a different way, and when they do, they’re tapping into my spirit. The spirit speaks to us so clearly, if we are open to hearing.”

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A sign near the entrance to this 105-year-old village pretty much says it all: “Welcome to Cassadaga. Certified psychic mediums. 5 in duty.”

A walk through this 55-acre community nestled between Daytona Beach and Orlando is a stroll through Florida’s past. Quaint Cracker homes from the 1920s dot the rolling hills and quiet streets of Cassadaga. Clumps of Spanish moss loiter in the branches of grand oak trees like ghostly apparitions of the deceased.

Most of Cassadaga is owned by the Southern Cassadaga Spiritualist Camp Meeting Association, a group of Spiritualists whose predecessors founded the camp in 1894 as a winter retreat for Northern mediums. The group owns the land, and allows only Spiritualists to live in Cassadaga to maintain “the ecclesiastical integrity” of the area.

At the entrance to the camp sits the Cassadaga Hotel, housed in a old-style Florida building with the Lost in Time Cafe. Across the street is the Andrew Jackson Davis Building, the group’s social hall and meeting facility. It houses the camp’s bookstore and offices.

About 400 people call this small town home. It would be hard to distinguish a medium from anyone else in town, except for small signs that swing gently from a medium’s porch. Few make the readings their full-time job, although it can be profitable - as much as $80 an hour, depending on demand.

Many are retired, but many others hold regular jobs. Steve Adkins, the group’s current president, is an utility electrician in Orlando.

“If I had to rely on this for a living, I’d lose a lot of my love for it,” he said.

It’s that love for the supernatural that draws most of the people here. They say they failed to find the answers they were looking for in traditional religions, and Spiritualism was big enough for their questions, and sometimes their doubts.

They are people like Oy Geeringh, a Zephyrhills woman who still can’t swim at age 41. Maybe her fear of swimming stems from a bad experience with water in a previous life, she thought. She came to Cassadaga to find out.

Raised a Buddhist in Thailand, Geeringh said America’s heavy Christian influence stifles alternative paths to God and discourages asking questions. In Cassadaga, she said, there is a different spiritual energy.

“For some reason this feels welcoming to me,” Gerringh said as she circumnavigated an American Indian medicine wheel laid out with stones in a small park. “If we can remember what our past lives were, we can fix it so that the next life won’t be so hard.”

Believers say the messages from the souls of the deceased are proof that life continues after physical death. Spiritualism is built on the belief that communication with the souls of the departed is not only possible but enriches the lives of those remaining on “the earth plane.”

Past lives, mediums and crystals may sound like some Shirley MacLaine New Age mantra, but Spiritualists insist they are anything but new. After all, they’ve been doing all this for more than 150 years.

Modern spiritualism began in 1848 in upstate New York when two teenage sisters, Margaret and Kate Fox, claimed to communicate with unseen forces living in their house. Initially rejected, the Fox sisters gradually developed a following and incorporated their beliefs into the doctrines of Spiritualism.

Spiritualists believe in a God, but not the God of Judeo-Christian traditions. God is “Spirit,” not a person or being, and can be different for each person. Jesus is not worshipped as divine but is respected as a great prophet and teacher. Spiritualists do not believe in God as savior or redeemer.

Additionally, the concept of Heaven or hell is not found in Spiritualism. People determine Their own destiny and are accountable
only to themselves for their actions. Heaven and hell can exist on earth as a result of a person's behavior.

Mediums are people who, either through training or natural talent, are attuned to the vibrations of the Spirit and use that ability to relay messages from deceased relatives.

In many ways, Spiritualists are not much different than Unitarian-Universalists, the liberal Christian denomination that offers a self-conforming spirituality, except for the belief in mediums.

"Religion is for people who are afraid of going to hell," said Leslie Mednick of Daytona Beach, a Spiritualist who was raised as a Jew. "Spiritualism is for people who have already been there."

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Six women, including Mednick, sat in a semi-circle in the Andrew Jackson Davis building as Nick and Jean Sourant performed an American Indian "smudging" ceremony around them.

Using burnt cedar, sage and sweetgrass, each woman stood as the retired engineer and kindergarten teacher used a large feather to bathe them in the sweet smoke and cleanse them of negative energy.

They joined in an American Indian chant calling on the spirits of the east, south, west and north to offer discernment, enlightenment and intuition.


The six-hour workshop on "Exploring and Developing Your Potential" was a Spiritualist smorgasbord combining elements of meditation, American Indian spirituality and New Age healing intended to help the women carve their individual spiritual path.

Nick Sourant, the medium who channeled the voice of Helen for Kit Hoffman-Dittner, led the group in 45 minutes of meditation using seven large quartz crystal bowls. Using sticks to rub the surface of the bowls, Sourant summoned sound waves ranging from a low hum to a high-pitched scream that played pingpong between your ears.

Each soundwave corresponds to a series of "chakras," or energy centers running from the base of the spine to the crown of the head and a color of the rainbow. Several of the women were overcome by the sounds. Debby Marino, a 34-year-old business owner from New Smyrna Beach, said the vibrations stirred a tornado inside her head that threatened to knock her over.

Nick Sourant, 73, said the overpowering wave of emotion was the cry of the soul "trying to tell your body that you are a separate being who wants to do your own thing."

"Let me out!" squealed Mary Rose Gray, a registered nurse and massage therapist from Eustis who frequents the camp.

Nick Sourant said the workshop was intended to teach the women they did not have to rely on God or Jesus or anyone else to save them. "We have been pre-programmed by conventional religions to depend on someone else to save us. Each one of us as individuals are our own guidemakers and we are in control."

Later, over lunch at the Feed Store Restaurant in nearby Lake Helen, the women said what attracted them to Spiritualism was the ability to find the answers they had looked so long to find somewhere else, but had come up empty-handed.

"We say it's not necessary to have blind faith because we can prove it to you," said Nell Edwards of Deland, a Spiritualist who was brought up as a Catholic and Episcopalian. She plans to move to Cassadaga soon.

Mary Rose Gray, the nurse who wanted to escape the confines of her physical body, said others, including her own profession, are finally realizing the positive benefits of energy-centered spirituality on health and wellness.

"It's amazing how the medical community claims to be "discovering' all these things when we've been saying it all along," she said. "I don't perceive ourselves as New Age. I perceive ourselves as being validated by science."

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For years, Kathy Groseclose was convinced she was right and everyone else was wrong. A member of the mainline United Church of Christ, Groseclose said she "was always running around, trying to save everyone I knew."

But bit by bit she started to question her Protestant view of God, and couldn't reconcile a God who would save Christians but condemn non-believers to eternity in hell. She says she couldn't swallow the concept of a "narrow-minded" God.

"Who am I to say that you won't be saved?" Groseclose, 52, said as she organized a shelf of books at the camp's bookstore, where she works.

In 1995 Groseclose abandoned her Protestant upbringing and embraced Spiritualism. She says she's a lot happier now that she isn't wallowing in her failures to meet the standards of institutionalized religion. She still believes in Jesus, but not as her savior.

She lives outside Cassadaga and works at the bookstore, where she sells everything from oils and candles to books on alternative medicine and bumper sticks that say things like "The universe rearranges itself to accommodate your picture of reality."

Her spiritual journey is not unlike that of many other Spiritualists. For one reason or another, traditional religion wasn't answering their questions, or was providing answers they could not accept.

Spiritualism offers believers a hands-on faith with the chance to touch the divine in everyday life. God is not sequestered in the heavens but moves in and through the lives of those in tune with the spirit.

That was part of what drew the Rev. Jerry Frederich to Spiritualism. Frederich, the pastor of Colby Memorial Temple, dabbled in a number of Christian faiths, including Seventh-day Adventism and Mormonism. He grew disillusioned when his teachers said there were gifts of the spirit, but were available to only a certain few.

In Frederich's church, there's something available for everyone. Spiritualist services are divided into three parts and follow the form of many Protestant Christian services. The first section features a healing service for members. On a recent Sunday morning, eight
certified healers, including Frederich and Jean Sourant, gathered at the back of the church to place their hands on those needing healing.

Rotating speakers lecture on a number of topics, and then a medium provides messages from the spirit world to the audience. Nick Sourant, lecturing recently, told a family their infant daughter had an American Indian girl as a spiritual guide, and told a man named Robert that someone named Roberto was telling him to take up pottery.

Sourant, with wiry gray hair that matches his energetic personality, told the 70 or so parishioners that Spiritualism was much like the old gospel hymn they were singing, I Love to Tell the Story - except that in the Spiritualist hymnal, "angels and their love" had replaced "Jesus and his love."

"We as Spiritualists have just begun to break ground in the understanding of who and what we are," Sourant said with all the enthusiasm of a preschooler. "We like to tell the old, old story, but this is just the beginning of what we can do and what we can know."

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Melissa Kelley looked discouraged as she left the porch of medium Dorothy Wegelin. For $20, Kelley was expecting to find out something about her future, or perhaps her past, but left mostly disappointed.

"She seemed hugely uncomfortable the whole time I was there," said Kelley, a 31-year-old nurse from Tampa who had joined Oy Geeringh and two other friends for the day in Cassadaga.

Wegelin, sitting in a porch with pink curtains that matched her pink ensemble, told Kelley she would continue to stay in shape, could possibly get a new car and saw a man in her life soon. But other than a few generic details, Kelley and Wegelin were unable to form that psychic connection.

Her friend, Ann Arthur, had seen Wegelin earlier in the day. Overcome with emotion, she left Wegelin's porch almost in tears because her reading had been so accurate.

"I have a tendency to be more skeptical than Ann, so maybe that's the problem," Kelley sighed. "I guess it's all about chemistry, and we just didn't have it."

In a town of a few dozen mediums and thousands of tourists, there are bound to be a few hits and misses. Sometimes it works, and sometimes it just doesn't.

That doesn't keep the curious from making the trek to Cassadaga. Most aren't sure what - if anything - they will find, but they're hopeful nonetheless.

They are people like Ray and Nancy Chaney from Jasper, Ind., who visit relatives near Cassadaga several times a year and go to Cassadaga to see if they have luck. They say, like many other visitors, that traditional religions have lost the touch of the supernatural that Cassadaga has perfected.

Like so many others, they came to Cassadaga to see if they could find it again.

"What we've found out is that true religion is otherworldly," said Nancy Chaney, who was raised Catholic as she waited for her husband outside the Cassadaga Hotel. "That's what Jesus said, that it's not of this world. This is what people are hungry for, the otherworldly. Whether or not they find it here is anyone's guess."

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FRIENDS IN HIGH PLACES

Saints are as popular as ever, but can they survive diminishing interest with young Catholics?

When Peggy Meissner of Stuart wanted to sell her house, she buried a small statue of St. Joseph in the yard and prayed for his assistance. She says it worked.

Whenever Dan Hadlock, also of Stuart, finds himself in a bind, he shoots a prayer off to St. Jude. He's so grateful for Jude's assistance, his son's middle name is Jude, in honor of the first century martyr.

And before the Rev. Robert Magee, pastor of St. Martin de Porres Catholic Church in Jensen Beach, goes to bed each night, he prays to "The Little Flower," St. Teresa of Lisieux, for guidance and the hope that they may one day together worship God.

The devotion to saints has long been a trademark of the Catholic Church. For believers like Meissner, Hadlock, Magee and millions of other U.S. Catholics, the saints of long ago are an integral part of their faith. While they do not replace God, they are, Meissner said, "friends in high places."

"We keep all of them busy, the angels and saints, but it's wonderful God gives us all of these helps," said Meissner, who attends daily Mass at St. Joseph Catholic Church in Stuart.

The Roman Catholic Church has ushered in a flurry of new saints in the waning years of the 20th century. Pope John Paul II has beatified or canonized more saints than all of his 20th century predecessors combined. The pontiff is committed to recognizing as many modern would-be saints as possible from all corners of the globe.

Just months after Mother Teresa's death in 1997, John Paul II waived the traditional five-year waiting period before sainthood could be considered for the Calcutta nun. Other popular (and controversial) canonization campaigns involve Pope Pius XII, the pope during World War II, and Dorothy Day, the American-born Catholic convert who helped found the Catholic Worker Movement.

But even the saints increase their ranks, and continue to enjoy their prominence with U.S. Catholics, a new study expected to be released next year says the country's youngest Catholics - those under the age - feel little attachment to the saints who intercede for them with God.

As the Catholic Church prepares to enter its third millennium, some say adding saints will mean little if they are insignificant to the parishioners in the pews.

A special relationship

In the Catholic Church, saints are just about everywhere. Churches, schools and even cities have been named after them. Books about them occupy the top of Catholic bestseller lists and campaigns to canonize would-be saints have rallied millions of faithful to their cause.

Homage to the saints largely is shunned by Protestant churches, except for pockets of Lutheran and Episcopal churches that honor some saints but do not ask for their intercession as Catholics do. The prominent role of the saints was one of the fissures that led to the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century.

According to Catholic doctrine, saints are those whose lives were lived or sacrificed entirely for God. Their special devotion and connection to God has earned them a special place in heaven where they can intercede for the requests of humans.

Sainthood is anything but automatic. At least five years must pass after a person's death before he or she can be considered for sainthood. Once nominated, church leaders "investigate" the person's life and examine his or her "heroic exercise of virtue." The would-be saint must be credited with at least one miracle after death, and another Vatican panel will offer the candidate for "beatification," the penultimate step before sainthood.

The candidate must be credited with another miracle, unless he or she was martyred, before becoming an official saint of the church. The pope makes the ultimate decision on who will or will not be a saint.

Once officially recognized by the church, saints often develop a cult of followers and admirers. There are patron saints for just about everything - grave diggers (Anthony the Abbot), cab drivers (Fiacre), lost items (Anthony of Padua) and even ice skaters (Lidwina).

The idea of a patron saint for anything and everything does not devalue their importance, Catholics say. Rather, the idea is to create a connection with as many people as possible and strengthen their faith.

"It establishes a real bond between those two people," said the Rev. John Pallard, director of evangelization for the Diocese of Palm Beach. "That's a special relationship, and it doesn't mean that God's out of the picture or left aside. And it doesn't cheapen the relationship."

Some of the most popular books within the Catholic publishing industry are books by and about saints. Jay McKee, marketing director for N.J.-based Catholic Book Publishing Co., said the biggest surge seems to be in books about popular writers like Thomas Merton and modern Catholic heroes like Mother Teresa and Edith Stein, a Polish-born convert who died in Auschwitz and was canonized last year.

"People are seeing and hearing more and more about modern saints within our lifetime who they can identify with," McKee said.

A lost connection with young Catholics

Meissner, the 76-year-old Stuart woman who believes a buried statue of St. Joseph helped her sell her house, is a member of the older, more traditional generation of American Catholics. For older Catholics like Meissner, their Catholic identity has been molded by the influence of Vatican II - a watershed event that forever altered the modern Catholic Church.
The Vatican conference held from 1962-1965 made the Catholic Church more open by, among other things, increasing the role of the laity and changing the Mass from Latin to the native vernacular. Prior to Vatican II, saints played a much larger role in the life of the church.

But for the generation that came of age in the wake of Vatican II, the attention given to saints (and even statues of them) has noticeably declined. Like the rosary and the Latin Mass, saints got pushed down a peg or two after Vatican II.

"Generally, there's been a decline in the role that the saints play in people's sense of spirituality," said William Dinges, an assistant professor of religion at the Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C.

Dinges and a team of researchers have spent the past three years surveying young Catholics and how they relate to the modern Catholic Church. Their findings are expected to be released in a book next year.

Part of their research indicates that fewer and fewer young Catholics feel a connection to the saints that occupy a special place in the church. Dinges said he's not sure what that means for the future of the church, but he's worried that the virtuous examples found in the lives of the saints are not being applied to the lives of the next generation of Catholics.

"Part of the vitality of a tradition is its ability to reappropriate itself for a new generation," Dinges said. "There are things that are virtuous and heroic that we need to transform into our own culture."

It's a concern shared by several members of the clergy along the Treasure Coast. The Rev. Jack Barrow, pastor of St. Andrew Catholic Church in Port Salerno, said society has become so dominated by movie stars and sports heroes that it's no wonder people pay little attention to the lives of ancient clerics and martyrs.

"Our heroes today are heroes that are in society," Barrow said. "We're not concentrating on the moral issues but people who have made it financially. The most important thing to us is money, and those who make the most money are the people we pay attention to."

Church leaders say part of the reason for the influx of new saints by Pope John Paul II is his desire for modern Catholics to be able to connect with modern saints. The inability of younger Catholics to identify with ancient saints is not surprising for a culture that is saturated by Hollywood, not 14th century virgin martyrs, Barrow says.

For religious traditions where the saints have always figured prominently, a declining lack of interest is a troubling trend for religious leaders like the Rev. Michael Sopoliga.

Sopoliga is the pastor of Sts. Cyril and Methodius Byzantine Catholic Church in Fort Pierce. In the Byzantine rite - Catholics who share allegiance to and sacraments with Rome but celebrate a fourth century liturgy - saints always have played a large role.

Sopoliga's Bahama Avenue church is adorned with portraits and icons of the saints. He said he understands the lost connection, but said it would be a mistake for younger Catholics to forget their saintly heritage.

"Let's be honest, if the saints could have a hit single on MTV, they'd be popular with that age group," he said. "To ignore them or say they're irrelevant would be a big mistake."

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