
Engaging Millennials in Ministry

National Research Study of Effective Ministry Models

September 2015



Research Commissioned by:



Research Conducted and Reported by:



Every institution and system, and the ways we think and behave,
will **CHANGE** with this generation.

INTRODUCTION

The Siebert Foundation and Kern Family Foundation came together with a common objective: To understand practices and worship traditions that are most effective at reaching and engaging Millennials with the Gospel and developing Millennials as future church leaders. With this understanding, the Foundations strive to be in a better position to support Lutheran and other Christian ministries in effectively connecting with Millennials.

Partnering with Oversight Network, the Siebert Lutheran Foundation and Kern Family Foundation co-commissioned a qualitative research project to achieve these objectives:

- To lift up successful Christian ministry models that effectively engage Millennials;
- To make learnings available to and encourage Lutheran and other Christian ministry leaders;
- To provide practical ideas and applications of Millennials ministry best practices.
- To provide a framework to inform Foundation funding priorities and to attract other faith-based funders to support effective Millennials ministry practices.

METHODOLOGY

Researchers approached the project with a two-fold methodology to gather both primary and secondary data on Millennials and worship traditions. This included: a) in-depth interviews with thought leaders in the fields of ministry, discipleship and church leadership to identify best practices from real-life applications and experiences; and b) secondary research that gives a macro-level perspective on demographic, psychographic and behavioral trends of Millennials and their faith practices.

The primary data gathering phase called for the 10 initial telephone interviews to be scheduled with thought leaders across denominations, national thought leaders serving congregations and ministries that focus on Millennials, and others studying outreach to Millennials. During these initial interviews the research team requested referrals to other Millennial ministry leaders, with the goal of interviewing an additional 40 thought leaders and practitioners in a second round of in-depth interviews. For these second-round interviews, the team focused on interviewing those ministry leaders who had been identified as being particularly effective in reaching, engaging and growing Millennial leaders.

The following illustrates the total number of interviews by type:



Secondary research included reviews of work from the heavily researched Millennial generation. Studies from Pew Research, The American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS), Gallup, Barna, and others played a leading role in helping the research team identify a baseline picture of the generation and its multitude of facets. What's more, this work included reviews of recently published cross-sectional and longitudinal studies on Millennials and religion. The reviews included recent articles, talks, and publications and in-depth theoretical discourse on the allied topics from authors including Christian Smith, Ed Stetzer, Thom and Jess Rainer, Diana Butler Bass, David Brooks, and Raymond Paloutzian, all generally considered the leading authors and researchers on the subject of Millennial spirituality.

The Oversight Network research team was led by Kay Edwards, and included senior researchers Mary Reinders, Kerry Bural, and Jon De Master.

FINDINGS FROM SECONDARY RESEARCH ON MILLENNIALS

The secondary research opened up multiple avenues for exploration and gave the research team an excellent baseline view of the Millennial landscape. Being among the most researched of all generations, material is plentiful, though at times contradictory. One undeniable truth emerged from this work, however, that should be remembered throughout the reading of all findings: There is no single Millennial generation mindset or one-dimensional framework for predicting their behaviors, attitudes, or belief systems. This is particularly true for a concept as sensitive and transitory as religion.

Today there are 83 million members (or one-quarter of the total population) of the so-called Millennial generation living in the United States. This generation now surpasses the size of the “Baby Boomer” generation, which numbers 76 million according to U.S. census data. Millennials were raised on the internet and are the most diverse (and tolerant) generation yet.

Millennials are generally defined as those born between the early 1980’s to early 2000’s, making their 2015 age 18 to 34 (Pew Research). The U.S. Census tells us that the largest cohort of this generation is aged 23-25 and most Millennials are just finishing their college years.

At a summary level, the illustration on the right depicts the latest U.S. Census data on Millennials:

 **EMPLOYED**
MILLENNIALS REPRESENT
**ONE-THIRD OF THE
LABOR FORCE**

DIVERSE
56% WHITE
44% NON-WHITE



 **61%** **HIGHLY
EDUCATED**
**61% ATTENDED
COLLEGE**

 **SPIRITUAL BUT
NOT RELIGIOUS**
**32% OF ADULTS 30
& UNDER HAVE NO
SPIRITUAL AFFILIATION**

**URBAN
DWELLERS**
**73% OF
MILLENNIALS
LIVE IN MID-
LARGE CITIES**



 **UNMARRIED &
DELAYING MARRIAGE**
**(AVERAGE AGE FOR MEN
IS 29 & 27 FOR WOMEN)**

Initial exploration and findings from the research identified six key insights that were tested and reconfirmed through subsequent interviews. The insights have helped form our understanding of Millennial psychographics and behaviors and provide deep insights for understanding their religious preferences and engagement.

Insight 1: Millennials struggle with identity. They are highly transient and are likely to have grown up in a transient, fluid family structure, without a defined set of religious practices. They resist labeling and dislike being categorized as “Millennials” with all of the implications that suggests. With all of the world’s information on demand, at their fingertips, they experience tremendous pressure to find meaning. The “Quarter Life Crisis” has become the norm, when at the age of 25, if one has not become famous or accomplished anything meaningful, one questions one’s life direction.

Insight 2: The influence of Millennial mindset and behavior can be seen in urban areas, where they are highly concentrated and highly mobile. We see urban dwellers of all ages display more of the attitudes and behaviors we would typically ascribe to Millennials. This is the influence John Seel of the Templeton Foundation refers to as the Cultural Creatives, the top one tenth of one percent of Millennial thought leaders. Their influence, according to Seel, will create a broader paradigm shift in culture to a New Copernican world view, one in which we think in multiple dimensions, where intuition comes before theory.

Insight 3: Traditional membership models are meaningless to Millennials, who deeply desire to belong, but resist institutional membership and instead seek out relational belonging. They prefer to associate with “tribes” where they feel welcomed and accepted for who they are. They look for active involvement and opportunities to make a real difference.

Insight 4: Millennials seek a sense of belonging first, then conform behaviors to the norms of the group before finally changing their belief systems. This contrasts sharply with older generations who join worship communities based on shared belief. This also confounds traditional church models, where the primary emphasis is on beliefs rather than action.

Insight 5: Millennials are philanthropic, but they are philanthropic in different ways than their elders. They don’t give out of obligation or habit, they don’t give because someone tells them to, and they don’t give to institutions. If institutional membership is irrelevant and giving no longer automatic, the traditional financial model of the church must change as well. New models which are still emerging may include inter-church support, dramatically reduced structure and overhead, and social enterprises.

Insight 6: Millennials can spot a fake a mile away. While they desire mentorship and interaction with older generations, their greatest longing is for authentic leaders who seek out and welcome their input, who appreciate them, and who involve them in meaningful ways. Authentic imperfection is more important than perfect form, and what

the church typically thinks of as primary attractions for Millennials – contemporary worship styles, hipster fashion, coffee houses, and social media – are only compelling in the context of authentic relationship and leaders living authentic lives.

The Millennial Zeitgeist: Authenticity in the Digital World

The personality of the Millennial generation can be characterized as: confident, socially connected (yet socially untrusting), self expressive, liberal on social views, upbeat, open to change, accepting of new ideas, and new ways of living (Pew, 2010 and 2012).

Millennials are digital natives (83% reportedly sleep with their cell phones) who are more likely to adapt new technology and view transparency as a non-negotiable. They are more likely than older generations to view virtual connections through technology as a way to make life easier and bring family and friends closer together. At the same time, privacy is also important and they want to be in control of how much of their personal information is public. (Pew, 2009, 2010, and 2012)

The term, “Ambient Awareness” has been used to describe the way in which Millennials are aware of what is happening with their friends and family via social networking. It defines a kind of omnipresent knowledge that regular users of social media experience because these media allow an almost constant connection with one’s social network. By being constantly in contact with their mobile devices,

Millennials have an always updating stream of information about what their friends are doing, feeling, and where they are. Even if they are not together physically, and don’t speak, they are aware of what is happening in each other’s lives.

Millennials tend to pay attention to this constant stream of information peripherally, and detect those things that are creating “buzz” in their network, much like a spider can detect vibrations in its web, which will signal that something is happening that needs their direct attention.

Millennials and Religion

Millennials are open-minded. According to research, Millennials hold more open attitudes on historically controversial issues (Pew Research, 2010). Millennials are more accepting than older generations of the following:

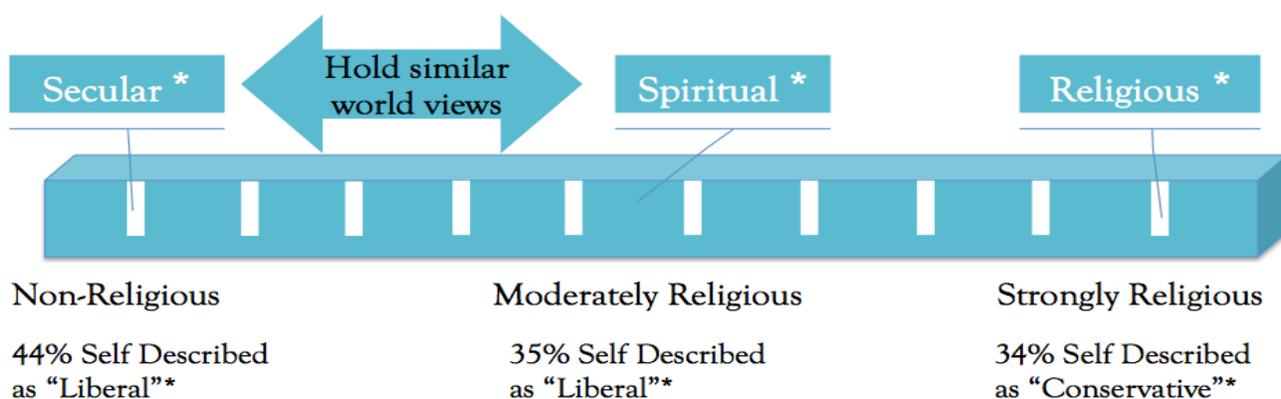
- Homosexuality (63% accepting compared to 47% of adults aged 30+)
- Gay marriage
- Marijuana legalization
- Abortion (52% agree it should be legal compared to 46% of adults aged 30+)
- Bigger government that provides more social services to those in need (67% compared to 41% of adults aged 30+)
- Bans on Bible reading and Lord’s Prayer being said in public schools (56%)

There is no single Millennial religious identity. Instead, data suggest a range of religiosity. Many commentators, researchers, and religious leaders studying Millennials focus on the space between Spiritual and Religious.

32.4% consider themselves Moderately Religious, and 31.8% consider themselves Strongly Religious.

The following diagram illustrates these data.

According to the American Religious Identification Survey, 28.2% of Millennials consider themselves Non-Religious,



Millennials are Spiritual without being Religious

From a review of research studies we see that the majority of Millennials express beliefs that are deeply spiritual in nature.

- **78% of Millennials believe in miracles**, compared with 79% of adults aged 30+ (Pew, 2010)
- **77% of Millennials reportedly believe in God** (The National Youth and Religion Study, 2008)
- **75% of Millennials believe in life after death**, compared with 74% of adults aged 30+ (Pew, 2010)
- **74% of Millennials believe in the existence of heaven**, identical to the proportion of adults aged 30+ who believe the same (Pew, 2010)

- **62% of Millennials believe in the existence of hell**, compared with 59% of adults aged 30+ (Pew, 2010)
- **64% of Millennials reportedly believe in the absolute existence of God** compared with 73% of adults aged 30+ (Pew, 2010)

Data indicate that belief patterns are more closely tied with age /progressive life changes. For example, The General Social Survey found that 53% of Millennials reportedly believe in God, similar to 56% of Gen-Xer's when surveyed at the same age.

- **28% of Millennials believe the Bible is a literal text** (Pew Forum, 2007)

According to the 2008 General Social Survey, Millennials display beliefs that closely resemble those of generations past. Roughly a quarter of Millennials (27%) said the Bible is the literal word of God, compared with 28% among Gen-Xer's when they were younger.

This is only slightly lower than among Baby Boomers in the early 1980's (33%) and is very similar to the 29% of Boomers in the late 1980's who said they viewed the Bible as the literal word of God. (General Social Survey, 1980-2008)

Research also suggests that many Millennials are actively seeking. What are they looking for?

- **59% of Millennials are somewhat to very interested in learning more about their own religion** while 14.5% exhibit the same level of interest in learning about religion in general. (National Survey on Youth and Religion, 2008)
- **52% of Millennials expect to be attending church regularly by the time they are 30 (regardless of whether they attend now at ages 19-24.)** (National Survey on Youth and Religion, 2008)

Independent Practice outweighs Church Attendance

Despite the high level of spiritual beliefs and interest in learning more, Millennials do not attend church in large numbers. Rather, they are more likely to engage in independent spiritual practices.

- **74% of affiliated Millennials say there is more than one true way to interpret the teachings of their faith**, compared with 67% of affiliated adults ages 30+ (Pew Forum, 2007)
- **62% of Millennials reportedly talk to God** (Carnegie Mellon's Integrated Innovated Institute Millennial Segmentation Study, 2014.) White Millennials are less likely than most other ethnicities to do so (compared with 78% of African Americans; 67% of Hispanics; and 57% of Asians)
- **45% of Millennials reportedly pray daily** (Pew, 2010) which is comparable to prior generations surveyed at the same age
- **43% of committed Millennials believe that going to church after leaving the "nest" of their childhood home is "optional"** (Kinnaman, David, "You Lost Me", 2014)
- **33% of young people aged 18 to 29 are affiliated and say they attend church at least once a week.** This result compares with 41% of adults aged 30 and older (Pew Forum, Religious Landscape Survey, 2007) and 39% of adults found by Gallup (Gallup polling, 2013)
- **25% of Millennials are practicing Christians** meaning they attend church at least once per month (Barna, 2014)

Millennials Believe but Don't Join

- **59% of Millennials who grew up in Christian churches** end up walking away from their faith OR the institutional church at some point in the first decade of adult life (Barna Research, 2014)

- **59% of Millennials believe that more than one religion may be true** (The National Study on Youth in Religion, 2008)
- **15% of Millennials or “emerging adults” are strongly religious and only 15% are solidly non-religious.** The vast middle ground -- estimated to be 60% of Millennials -- belongs to either the 1) indifferent; or 2) spiritual but not religious groups. (Smith, Christian, “Soul Searching,” 2009)

Thriving Spirituality yet Declining Religious Involvement

In other words, while Millennials believe and practice in large numbers, they also are not doing so within a traditional church context. But it’s not just Millennials. Intergenerational trends in religious affiliation point to thriving spirituality with declines in religious involvement. Multiple sources indicate that all generations are showing signs of leaving church, but not their spiritual beliefs behind.

- An average of 56% of Americans say that religion is “very important” in their lives, while another 22% said it is “fairly important,” and 22% said it is “not very important.” (Gallup polling, 2013)
- 68% of all Americans reportedly believe in God; 58% reportedly feel a deep connection to the earth and nature; and 37% classify themselves as “spiritual” but not “religious.” (Pew, 2012)

- In 2012, half (50%) of those who say they “seldom or never” attend religious services do retain a specific religious affiliation. However, researchers note that is a 10-point drop over five years of surveying. (Pew, 2012)

Researchers say that actual church attendance has been falling for years (most precipitously from 1961-1996), due to over reporting/positive bias in self reporting. In other words, in survey research, respondents tend to overstate their church attendance, which means that the total number of people who say they are in church is probably larger than the total number of people who are actually in church every week.

(Kirk Hadaway and P.L. Marler, “Did You Really go to Church This Week?” 1998 and Philip Brenner from University of Michigan)

Why Millennials have Low Religious Involvement

Common reasons researchers, commentators, and religious leaders offer to explain low involvement among the Millennial generation:

- **Attitude/beliefs gap.** Millennials are more open-minded about traditional “right-wrong” issues held by most church and religious groups.
- **Growing up in less religious households.** Religious engagement and affiliation have been on the decline for some time, meaning more children are growing up in non-religious households that would cement their early beliefs in God and church attendance.

- **Increasing politicization of religion.** Given their beliefs, age and lifestyles, Millennials may not be quick to blend politics with religion.
- **Negative pre-conceptions of what “church” and religion mean.** Judgment, control, and moral control are commonly held preconceptions that are antithetical to Millennial attitudes.
- **Religion is out of touch with the world and lacks context with modern life.** Experientialist Millennials may struggle to connect their lives with ancient Bible texts and teachings.
- **Value gap.** Modern churches no longer have the influence they once did over lives and households. It may be true that Millennials do not see the direct value they will receive from religious engagement.
- **Current life stages and increasing autonomy that occur when affiliated Millennials leave the nest** may also account for declining church attendance.

FINDINGS FROM MINISTRY INTERVIEWS

Profile of Ministries Interviewed

In framing best practices from the field, researchers intentionally targeted ministry leaders, pastors, and other faith leaders who were identified by thought leader interviews as being successful in reaching Millennials. We did not impose a definition of success on the process, but asked the interviewees to tell us how they define the success of their ministries.

From a faith perspective, we focused on Midwestern Lutherans from the ELCA, LCMS, and WELS denominations along with other mainline denominations. However, we also spoke with Evangelicals, Catholics, and members of other Christian faith traditions with significant impacts on youth programming and leadership development.

We also discovered a wide spectrum of worship styles – typically suited to their area’s cultural and demographic profiles. While many follow in the traditional “Sunday worship” format, there are others, such as young urban churches, dedicated youth ministries, and camps that have broken the mold and ventured into new territory. We heard about everything from ritualistic mysticism to small group Bible studies, as well as programs led by young people that happen outside of a church setting – in the community, at all hours, any day of the week.

We expected that technology would play a central role in Millennial ministries. However, for many of the ministry leaders we spoke to, technology is not the main focus, and some cautioned that too much focus on the latest technology would be a distraction from the relational emphasis of their ministries. Some ministries, like Pulse Outreach, which does large evangelistic outreaches, use text messaging as an integral part of their follow-up process. Most,

however, focus on personal, offline relationship building strategies as the central focus of their ministry.

Context: What do they bring to worship communities?

Millennials live in cities, and ministries in urban areas are more likely to be reaching them than ministries in the suburbs. A number of the interviewees we spoke to described how their ministries began attracting Millennials because their neighborhood was populated by Millennials, not because of a specific strategy to reach them.

“We fell into this focus by the nature of the congregation and its neighborhood.”

Yet their urban nature, combined with their life stage, means that Millennials are transient, and will likely continue to be for some time. This makes it a challenge to engage them in the life of a worship community over time. Many of those who live in urban areas now will likely move to the suburbs when they start to have children.

Millennials are the first generation to embody a broad cultural shift from two-dimensional to three-dimensional thinking. John Seel of the Templeton Foundation has coined the term, “New Copernicans” to describe this shift in thinking, because it mimics the way in which Copernicus was able to intuit a shift in thinking, long before formal theory affirmed his viewpoints. Interviewees also describe a shift in how Millennials, even those who grew up in the church, view membership in church. As

they describe it, the cycle that we assume happens in young people – leave the church when they get out of college, come back when they have kids – is not happening for Millennials. They have no sense of obligation to go back to the church. These descriptions affirm what studies of Millennials and religiosity tell us, that they don’t view church as something that needs to be a part of their lives.

According to interviewees, the traditional model of church is not something that is attractive to Millennials, for many of the reasons that we identified through secondary research.

“It’s a different territory and you can’t read it using an old map.”

“Millennials don’t get how the Gospel is relevant to their day-to-day life.”

“So much of congregational life looks archaic to these guys, out of step with the world they live in.”

At the same time, interviewees say church leadership is reluctant to change, or lacks the understanding or resources, to appeal to Millennials.

“Congregational leadership is overwhelmed, the last thing they want to hear is here is something new you should do.”

Current technology means that Millennials have access to all the knowledge and entertainment they want, on demand, in their pockets. They don’t need church for knowledge. They need church for relationship. Worship is the counterculture to technology and connectedness.

“They have access to every kind of media they could want, every program, every music, every show, on demand. When you have access to everything and you can go to Starbucks and they know your name and give you really good coffee, you don’t need church for that. Churches with fun music and good coffee aren’t anything special.”

“The church is the only social institution that can gather people across lines, because we have a particular way of talking about identity and relationships that other institutions don’t have.”

The “Quarter Life Crisis” has become a common turning point for Millennials. If they haven’t achieved fame and accomplishment at 25, where can they find meaning in their lives?

“What used to happen around age 50 now happens around age 25. Do I have a meaning and purpose if I’m not going to become rich and famous? Depression sets in.”

The greatest challenges in reaching Millennials, according to interviews, are apathy and individualism.

WHAT DO MILLENNIALS LOOK FOR IN A WORSHIP COMMUNITY?

Entry Points are Different

Denominations are no longer the centers of belief. For Millennials, God, and perhaps a worship community are the centers of belief. That means entry points are changing and multiple.

Traditional Sunday morning gathering doesn’t have to be the only entry point and worship is defined in multiple ways.

Service becomes an important entry point for Millennials who tend to be cause oriented and looking for ways to make an impact.

“In the past it started by walking into the door of a church. In this paradigm we start with service, vocation, music.”

Millennial involvement is episodic. Ministries have looked beyond the traditional Sunday worship to engage Millennials.

They are creating multiple ways for Millennials to be involved. From service opportunities to alternate worship forms, like “Beer and Hymns” and midnight prayer services, ministries are breaking out of the traditional mold of Sunday morning worship and preaching.

“The focus of our activities depends on the lifestage of the people in our neighborhood.”

Discipleship and mentoring relationships draw Millennials into the life of worship communities. Ministries are focusing on building relationships with individual Millennials, not just pointing them to a small group.

“Give me a way to experience God, a different starting point than what we’ve used in the past.”

Worship Styles are Different

Millennials don't need worship to be entertained. Many are attracted to ritual and high forms of worship.

“Contemporary worship was a Boomer response to their parents. Millennials are attracted to the ancient modern.”

Ritual and experience are seen as an antidote to culture.

Membership is No Longer the Metric

Millennials are not joining churches but they are connecting to worship communities that give them something they are looking for. They don't believe they have to become a member to be the church. Often there are multiple levels of engagement in the worship community, which make these communities look more porous and flexible, with a core group of leaders at the center of the community.

Millennials may episodically attend worship in one community, and at the same time be a part of a small discipleship group in another community.

Belonging, then Behavior, then Belief

The welcome comes first. Millennials first look for a place they belong, feel welcomed for who they are, and feel like their input is wanted. Then, they conform to the behaviors of the community. Then, they begin to understand the belief systems of the community.

This is in sharp contrast to Boomers, who tend to look for a worship community based on alignment of beliefs.

“If people feel like they belong in church, they start behaving like the church.”

Authentic Leadership is Critical

Millennials look for authentic leaders who are living out what they preach. Many say Pope Francis is the ideal example of this.

“He's an authentically genuine reflection of the life of Christ. His spontaneous actions are very effective.”

Ministry leaders must change their approach to be effective with Millennials. It is not about telling them what to believe, it is about modeling how they should live.

“We have to answer the question, what do disciples do? Can we teach our young people the skills of discipleship?”

Authenticity is more important to Millennials than excellence. They would rather connect to a worship community led by someone who is living an authentic life than one that is perfect in its worship form.

“Millennials don't want a fancy, polished place. They want to know the person in front is a real person.”

More than anything, we heard many times from interviewees that they are turned off by hypocrisy.

Millennials care most about authenticity. They want to know that the worship community cares more about authentic mission than about adding another “member” to its rolls.

A New Role for Pastoral Leadership

Many of those we spoke to describe their role as ministry leaders as servant leaders and relationship facilitators. To sum up these comments, the pastor in a ministry that includes Millennials will be:

- The keeper of the vision
- The orchestrator of gifts/talents
- The mobilizer of the village

The pastor's role is to identify Millennial leaders and equip them to lead others.

Millennials Want to be Engaged in Leadership

They want to contribute their skills to the community, and look to the church to help identify and make use of their skills. They want their gifts to be valued. For example, a writer may not want to do a church newsletter, they want their writing to be valued as a gift of worship.

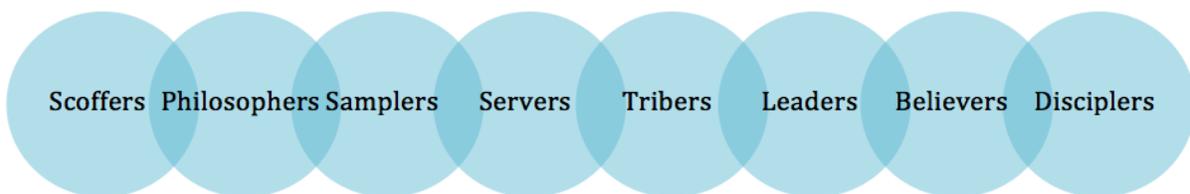
It's about Millennials doing ministry, not having ministry done to them. They want to

contribute to the community, and they want to be part of something where their contribution is noticed and valued.

The Spiritual Engagement of Millennials

Through our analysis of the secondary research, and interpretation of the interview findings, the research team has concluded that there exists a continuum of spiritual engagement for Millennials. These are stages that are described in both the secondary research and by those we interviewed. They do not necessarily describe how Millennials progress in their spiritual beliefs, nor can we assume that the path is linear. It is, however, a helpful way to categorize the level of connection (or lack thereof) to a worship community and to a set of beliefs.

Below is an illustration of this continuum, pictured as a path along which Millennials lie.



This path describes eight different categories of Millennials based on their spiritual identity, including:

Scoffers: Anti-Religion – Those who are antagonistic to God and/or religion. These are individuals who are either atheist, agnostic, or in some other way specifically

opposed to religious involvement and spirituality.

Philosophers: Spiritual but Not Religious – This category describes the large number of Millennials who describe themselves as spiritual but not religious. They tend to hold an individualistic set of religious beliefs.

They may say that they engage in spiritual behaviors such as prayer, but they do not attend church or ascribe to any specific religious tradition.

Samplers: Trying Out Faith Practices – These Millennials attend church occasionally, particularly during holidays, weddings and baptisms. They may have come from a specific church tradition and visit it periodically, or they may be sampling other churches or religions, some for the first time.

Servers: There for a Cause – For these Millennials, church is about a cause. They may get involved in a church food drive, an event to eliminate sex trafficking, or a blanket drive for the homeless. For them, the cause is primary and is what connects them to the worship community.

Tribers: There to Belong – Millennials seek out relational communities, or tribes, where they feel a sense of belonging. Tribers are those who have found that welcoming community in a church or worship community. They may not ascribe to, or even understand the underlying beliefs, but they have made a commitment to each other, within the tribe.

Leaders: Making a Contribution – Whether formal or informal, leaders have taken on some responsibility within the worship community. They have invested in the life of the community and its purpose by contributing in an intentional way. For example, they may be a part of the worship team, serve on a church committee, teach

Sunday School, or lead in some other area of the church.

Believers: Change of Heart – These Millennials are growing in their understanding and adoption of the theology and beliefs of the worship community. This likely has happened as a result of a mentoring/discipling relationship with one or more others in the community over time.

Disciplers: Engaging Others – Having fully internalized the beliefs of the worship community, these Millennials are actively evangelizing and discipling others in those beliefs.

Note that the first two of these “connections” are not connections at all, but rather happen on one’s own. Being antagonistic to religion, or spiritual but not religious can happen totally apart from a community. In particular, those who say they are spiritual but not religious engage in solitary spiritual practices, like prayer, according to most studies we reviewed.

In contrast, all other connections happen within the context of a relationship, generally within a worship community, however nontraditional.

It is also important to note that Millennials don’t leave behind previous ways of connecting to the worship community when they adopt new connection methods. For example, a Millennial who has become a leader in a spiritual community does not give up serving, or the need for a sense of belonging.

What attracts Millennials?

- Connection to causes and people they care about.
- A welcome community that values them as they are.
- Leaders and members living authentic lives.

According to longitudinal research on religious engagement conducted by Notre Dame researcher Christian Smith, Millennials most likely to engage in religion have grown up with an established faith tradition in their households. Parents not only encouraged and modeled church attendance but they also created “wrap around” religious touchpoints in their children’s lives. According to Smith’s research, this commonly included: religiously affiliated school, clubs, sports, friends, friends’ parents, and later college. This frames a general picture of individuals who are “primed” for religious involvement or a return to the church. The research tells us that these Millennials who are primed for religious involvement are the ones who will return later, after some time away as young adults.

As one interviewee reminds us, “For lots of Millennials, they have been out of a relationship with their church for 5-10 years. So, we have to do some relationship building to reconnect with them.”

But the question remains, what are the most effective ways to attract Millennials to the church?

The research tells us that Millennials value family, friends, helping others, and making

an impact on the world around them. This generation has entered early adulthood fully steeped in technology, popular culture, social media, and a constant, 24-hour news cycle with short blasts of streamed information delivered on their phones, computers, laptops and tablets. We should not be surprised, then, when we hear from interviewees that Millennials come to faith with a deep desire for relationship and to get involved in social causes. Yet they also display short attention spans and cravings for religious experiences that are brief, illustrative (with stories), relevant, and couched in the popular culture around them. In short, they are attracted to a context that they already know and love.

Pastors and practitioners at the forefront of pioneering change tell us that this runs exactly counter to what the traditional church experience has been: long on words and shorter on action. We heard that traditional definitions of “church” are being questioned and reshaped by Millennials, who have many questions but are relatively naive when it comes to understanding the scripture. Consider this quote from one interviewee:

“The number one thing I have learned is that young adults think about church engagement as a spoke on a wheel. Traditionally, denominations and churches have been at the center. Now, young adults say God, community is the center.” Being unapologetically Lutheran and Christian, she goes on to say, “We have to change. I want my denomination to exist in the future, though the kingdom of God will exist regardless. We have to expand our

definition of church...it may look more like the Book of Acts than people joining and giving to a congregation.”

Interview feedback strongly echoes the secondary research’s emphasis on Millennial focus on social activism and, essentially, opportunities to live out the Gospel. Thus, the most successful Millennial ministries are in fact those with an actively caring focus on community. Doing good works outside the church doors is in line with Jesus’ own example.

What Engages Millennials?

- Opportunities to contribute to the community in meaningful ways.
- A Gospel message that is relevant to their lives.
- Intergenerational, authentic relationships with those willing to mentor and disciple them.

In the research, we asked interviewees to think beyond just the initial attraction and talk more about true engagement. We were looking for practices and offerings that effectively engage Millennials. Though Millennials place less emphasis on formal membership in institutions, we asked interviewees to tell us what motivates Millennials to make an enduring connection to their worship communities.

In addition to the opportunity to become “hands on” in the community – we also heard about the continually emerging trend of Authenticity. Millennials seem to be quite savvy when it comes to seeing right to the core of any institution, organization, or agency, past the sales pitch and shiny

vener. Though they may be critical (even more so than their Boomer parents), they seek out the real thing. As one interviewee stated,

“The authenticity piece is a real thing. Observationally, when Millennials encounter churches who are authentically concerned about the things Millennials are concerned about, it makes all the difference in the world....They’ve grown up with people always trying to sell things to them...Churches that care more about selling church to them. Many Millennials will be most attracted to the church that doesn’t actually need them. A church that says ‘I’m welcome, but I’m not the target of the church.’ Without that sense of desperation.”

But leaders advise us that engaging Millennials doesn’t have to mean changing the church to conform to popular culture. A college chaplain, described it, “Young people have access to every type of media imaginable. They don’t need church for that. They are looking for authentic relationship and a place to find meaning. Churches with fun music and fancy coffee aren’t anything special. Luther called that ‘Adiophora’ or form with no content.”

Millennials seek a community in which they see themselves as well as a diverse array of older, established adults who can serve as personal mentors to them. This mentoring connection can be viewed as central to Millennials’ perceived value proposition of church, as they search for more modern updates on the Gospel as it relates to their lives. Life is increasingly

complex, particularly so for young adults who may not have had adequate faith or life mentoring. According to interviewees, they commonly hear questions from later-stage Millennials related to family, sex, marriage, child rearing, budgeting and finances, topics they may not have learned in their childhood home. However, well-intentioned their parents or guardians were, the demands on dual working parents, single-parent head-of-households, and increasingly geographically-fractured multi-generational families have complicated the picture of a child learning life skills. These authentic relationships with “life mentors” are seen as highly valuable to Millennials.

Though they seek mentors, they are mistrustful of ready answers. In fact, Millennials are most deeply engaged when they feel that the church leaders don’t have all the answers in life and in Scripture. Though a counterpoint to many traditional church approaches, successful leaders understand that sometimes just being present with young congregation members and praying over difficult issues are the most valuable things they can offer. A church pastor and co-author of a book on Millennials observed, “We have found that one-on-one mentoring is most effective. Just figuring out what makes that Millennial tick. You don’t need all the answers. That’s not what they are looking for.”

Along with community, Millennials are attracted to content. Practically speaking, there are other things pastors can learn from both youth leaders and camp directors to help build and engage a significant Millennial voice in their congregations. The

following quotes represent advice capsules for replicating their recipe for success. They include:

- “Give people space and time to commit”
- “Make the church experience relational”
- “Provide service in action and opportunities to live out the Gospel”
- “Provide small group study and activity options”
- “Get people out of their heads, into their bodies, provide ritual that allows space for reflection and silence...less wordy”
- “Create a sense of belonging” and “Be inclusive”
- “Contextualize the Gospel”
- “Be relevant. Connect sermons to everyday life and the world”

What Sustains Millennial Involvement?

- A sense of belonging, supported and affirmed through tangible symbols and faith practices.
- Activities and community engagement appropriate for their life stage.
- Deepening of their faith in the context of community, through relationships, small groups and discipleship.

A great deal has been said about the practices that lead to successful engagement. However, pastors and practitioners pointed out that the real proof in the pudding is sustained engagement in the worship community. As a national leader of a denominational youth ministry pointed out, “Engagement is the real issue and we haven’t done that well in our communities.”

What we heard, not surprisingly, is that the very things that attract Millennials (e.g., authenticity, community, social activism, leadership opportunities, and opportunities for growth) are also the things that keep them around. Millennials are looking for ways to be useful and active within the Church. One interviewee described a “circle of engagement” and “multiple points of relationship.” In this paradigm, she recommends options, starting with, “service, vocation and music. Then offering a variety of things like retreats, Bible studies, topical studies, service trips.”

As engagement deepens, interviewees observed that Millennials begin to establish even deeper connections to their peers and multiple generations within their congregation. This enhancement of the human connections telegraphs the dual desires for authentic interaction and the concept of community.

A number of interviewees talked about the importance of visible symbols of connection to the community as a way of confirming belonging for Millennials. Among evangelical outreach ministries and camps the traditional “altar call” often serves as a tangible expression of a desire to become part of the community. A pastor of a church in an all African-American community, describes the importance of rites of passage for young people as symbols of their growing maturity and faith, and he incorporates an altar call in his services to give congregants a way to demonstrate their commitment to the community. These are not calls to membership in the

institution of the church, but calls to belonging in the community.

Though typically a transient community, older married Millennials are settling down and starting to have families of their own. For one pastor with many of these married Millennials in his church, he understands that life stage has a great deal of impact on sustained church engagement. He explained:

“Millennials have a real drive to make a difference in the world so the Church needs to align themselves with that. It is about engaging them in a Christian way of life. Churches doing a good job with Millennials are really connecting with them around service and social justice....they don't want to be parking cars or serving as ushers...”

We heard a great deal about the value in the type of enduring faith that “follows the young adult through various trials and life stages.” This involves careful listening and ongoing cultivation to understand Millennials and continuing to meet them where they are. Some have found small-group mentoring sessions and Bible studies a welcomed way to deepen the trust and relationship with Millennial congregants. As this pastor suggested:

“Millennials want a tight-knit community, even when they move away. They want a deep relationship with Jesus – real – so they can ask real questions. They want mentors rallying round them to help them grow their faith and their families. We need to further engage them in a faith perspective

in Jesus Christ...this is very much about growing the relationship.”

In the conversations about what successful churches do to promote sustained engagement, interview feedback naturally coalesced around what churches can do to make a real difference.

We gathered these ideas and experiences and reframed them as questions churches should be asking themselves to see if they are ready and on their way to effectively engaging new generations of disciples. They include:

Questions for Churches to Answer

- 1. How often do you listen to what your congregation members really want/need?**
- 2. What types of changes are “right” for your community based on demographics, life stages, interests, and geography of your congregation?**
- 3. What program offerings are relevant to the lives of the populations you serve?**
- 4. How often does your church emphasize positive action over words?**
- 5. How do you focus on the local and global community? How many opportunities do you offer for leadership as well as local/international mission service?**
- 6. In what ways are your pastors/church leaders out there in the community beyond the doors of the church, living the life of the Gospel and gaining visibility for the Church?**
- 7. Aside from Sunday service, how many events do you invite the community to?**
- 8. What is the real value that you have to offer Millennials and other generations that think like them?**
- 9. What are you willing to change about your church’s structure and traditions to make it more open and adaptable to younger members?**
- 10. Are you trying too hard? How much emphasis are you putting on “contemporary” worship styles that may be turning off Millennials? How often do Millennials design and lead worship?**

Millennials as Leaders

Millennials commonly seek meaning and purpose. Millennials want to contribute their own gifts and talents to the inner-working of their churches at not only an organizational level but also a social service level. Opportunities to lead are central to both engagement and sustained involvement in the churches we spoke with.

As relationships with Millennials grow, many church leaders have found a better understanding of what young followers have to offer and what they are interested in. Often this involves lifting up and encouraging young leaders. Listening and acting on those interests by linking young people to leadership and relevant service opportunities that tap into their gifts. All these factors are the keys to engagement.

Camps Change Lives

Though we heard some success stories from individual churches, we also heard repeated accounts of the primacy of youth camps in fully engaging Millennials.

We heard several amazing stories about the power of camp in developing young leaders. As one denominational leader indicated, “There’s a difference between church and camp. The way of living together in intentional community. A level of transparency and authenticity you won’t find in a congregation.” Another interviewee whose church includes a camp model said the secret to its success is identifying and cultivating young leaders early and continuously:

“Camp delivers a process with leadership development built into it. We are always identifying leaders. In a regular camp they are called camp counselors. We call them junior nation builders. We recognize them. They get to wear a different shirt. At camp, we are always lifting them up as leaders. They go through a year of apprenticeship. Counselors take a vow to stay connected to the children who are part of their tribe. They meet up once a month. Once you become a mentor, then you can become a senior mentor. There are opportunities for constant growth. That’s the big draw for those who play a role in the camp.”

The camp experience has been nearly universally heralded as one that changes lives - builds leaders, sustains engagement, and creates mentors. The experience of camp is a life force of its own that can live on in one’s life, far beyond one’s youth.

Best Practices

In the research, we asked interviewees to think beyond just the initial attraction and talk more about true engagement. We were looking for practices and offerings that effectively engage Millennials. Though Millennials place less emphasis on formal membership in institutions, we asked interviewees to tell us what motivates Millennials to make an enduring connection to their worship communities.

These five themes emerged consistently from all of the various ministry models represented by those we interviewed.

1. **Symbolic faith practices.** Millennials are drawn to more traditional and ancient forms of worship, which

symbolize a connection to something bigger than themselves. Others emphasize the importance of rites of passage to symbolize a connection to faith or becoming a part of the community. For ministries in the evangelical tradition, the altar call often fills this role, but many interviewees described other rituals and faith practices that are tangible means of symbolizing belief. They also spoke of the importance of explaining and talking about the meaning of faith practices, particularly for Millennials who have not grown up in a faith tradition.

2. Genuine welcome. Millennials want to feel like they are part of a group, and they want to be accepted for who they are. Those we interviewed confirmed what we learned from studies of religiosity and Millennials—Millennials are turned off by what they perceive as the judgmental stance of the church. Millennials are most deeply engaged when they feel that the church leaders don't have all the answers in life and in scripture.

3. Meaningful community service. Millennials want to make a difference in the world and they are drawn to causes that allow them to have what they perceive of as meaningful impact. They are not content to just write checks to support causes they believe in, as their parents and grandparents may be. They want opportunities to get involved directly in community service and they want to have a voice in how those efforts are created and implemented.

4. Relevant contribution. Just as Millennials want to serve, they want to

know that their contributions are valued by the worship community. They want to use their gifts and talents and be appreciated for them. In practice this means that Millennials also want opportunities to lead and they want their input and ideas to be taken seriously. They are not satisfied to sit back and be told what to think.

5. Authentic relationships. We heard many times about the continually emerging trend of authenticity. Millennials seem to be quite savvy when it comes to seeing right to the core of any institution, organization, or agency, past the sales pitch and shiny veneer. Though they may be critical (even more so than their Boomer parents), they seek out the real thing. In the words of one interviewee, "They can spot a fake a mile away."

How do Ministries Measure Success?

As we interviewed ministry leaders, we asked them to identify how they measure success. We approached the question of success this way because we did not want to pre-define success based on traditional models of ministry. Rather, the research team hoped that new models of measurement might emerge from the ministries themselves.

In general, ministry leaders recognize that just as Millennials are changing the way they do ministry, they are also changing the way they measure success. Traditional measurements like membership numbers, the size of one's worship facility and total giving, according to interviewees, do not

adequately capture the effectiveness of outreach to Millennials. Instead, ministry leaders we spoke to tend to measure in multiple ways and focus on the different stages of spiritual engagement, as we outlined earlier.

Measurements tend to fall into four primary areas:

1. Participation
2. Invitation
3. Leadership
4. Growth

We heard multiple examples of measurement in each of these areas, depending on the ministry and the areas in which it focuses its efforts.

Participation measurement can include:

- Attendance at worship
- Participation in service projects
- Participation in community events
- Participation in “rites of passage”
- Engagement over time, i.e. longevity of relationship

Invitation measurement can include:

- Inviting others to events
- Inviting others to worship
- Inviting others to service projects
- Discipling others

Leadership measurement can include:

- Taking on informal leadership roles
- Taking on formal leadership roles
- Being part of a core leadership group in the church
- Leading small group activities
- Worship leadership

Growth measurement can include:

- Progressing from one “stage” to a more engaged one
- Participating in a discipling relationship
- Taking on additional leadership responsibilities

As we can see from these categories, the possibilities for measuring success are more complex, but possibly more meaningful, than what we typically think of as traditional measures of success.

Applications and Learnings for the Lutheran Church

Central to the objectives of the research is the identification of ways in which the unique tradition of Lutheranism can relate to Millennials and provide what they are looking for in their spiritual lives. Based on feedback that we heard from interviewees, we see the following connections between the expressed needs and interests of Millennials and what interviewees have identified as intersecting strengths of the Lutheran tradition that can meet those needs.

Millennial Needs / Interest	Lutheran Strengths *
Community	Being Lutheran is about community; Lutheran's emphasis on God's unconditional welcome and grace; Pockets of supportive faith communities
Authenticity	Rich history of substantive worship; Historical connection to reform, countering perceptions of churches being after power and money
Mentoring	Leadership capabilities; Multiple generations of congregants; Retired lay leaders from professional fields
Social Activism	Tradition of social service and mission work
Meaningful Traditions	Practicing "high church"; Deep conviction in belief and practice; Sacramental presence
Leadership Roles	Sense of vocation; Everyone is called by God and celebrated for who they are
Leadership Development	Lutherans can address hypocrisy - don't wait to "get holy" to get involved
Openness, Tolerance, and Diversity	Ability to embrace paradox and pockets of progressive Gospel
Contextualizing the Gospel	Being able to say we don't always understand or have all the same answers; An understanding of grace that says here no question is too big to ask; Openness to questioning the Gospel
Wide range of programming, events and study options	Creative programming and particularly well-known youth camps
Youth Development	Strengths in youth programming

*Identified in interviews

PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS FOR ALL MINISTRY LEADERS

From the research we heard many practical applications for any ministry that wants to reach Millennials as well as the growing number of others of all ages who are disillusioned with the Church as they have known it.

For Samplers:

- Make it easy to sample your worship community. Consider your worship service from the perspective of someone who has never been in a church. Explain faith practices, and share why those practices have meaning.
- Give Millennials a chance to experience your community outside the walls of your church building. Get involved in community activities. Be visible at local events, and think about how to serve community members, even if they never show up at your worship service.
- Take particular care to make holiday services – Christmas and Easter— accessible to those who may not have a faith tradition or who have a different faith tradition.
- Create events that Millennial worshipers can get excited about inviting their friends to. Engage Millennials in the design of events and ask their opinions about how to make the events more inviting to their peers. Give them tools to make the invitation process easy.

For Servers:

- Engage Millennials around social causes and service projects that allow them to serve the community. Engage them without expecting or requiring them to be members or to also show up for Sunday morning worship. Assume that attendance on Sunday morning is something they will do if they want to; make the invitation, but don't use it as a barrier to participating in service.
- Encourage Millennials to create their own service projects and empower them to carry them out without creating committees, excess oversight, or bureaucracy.
- Invite Millennials to engage their own social networks in service projects, again without expectation or requirement of membership, worship attendance or adoption of church doctrines.
- Make service projects short-term commitments. Rather than setting up long-term committees to carry out specific ministries, put a specific time period on ministries and let participants know that at the end of the time period they can decide whether or not to continue the ministry.

For Tribers:

- Provide multiple opportunities for all worship community members to build relationships within the community. This could include a small group ministry, group outings, or any activities where the emphasis is on getting to know each other and

hear each other's stories. This time should be interactive and relational, not study, lecture or preaching.

- Encourage intergenerational relationship building. Don't segment gatherings or adult Sunday School by age. Instead, provide venues where all ages can interact and get to know each other.
- In particular, use food and social gatherings to build relationships across generations. Ask Millennials to help create and implement these gatherings, challenging them to make them appealing and engaging for all ages. Solicit their input and follow through on their ideas. Food can be a vehicle for sharing wisdom and stories across generations, i.e. potlucks of traditional family recipes or shared cooking activities can encourage members of all ages to learn from each other.

For Leaders:

- Allow Millennials to use their gifts and talents in the life of the worship community in relevant and meaningful ways. Rather than fitting their gifts into the traditional practices of the church, ask them how they want to contribute. For example, don't assume that a Millennial writer will be spiritually fulfilled by editing the church newsletter.
- Give Millennials a voice in the leadership of the church. Include them in leadership bodies and solicit their opinions about important matters of the church. It's important

to Millennials that their opinions are genuinely considered.

- Share leadership opportunities with Millennials who want to take on leadership roles. Some worship communities designate a monthly worship service as Millennial-led, while others incorporate Millennial leaders in parts of every service. It's important for Millennials to see their peers in leadership positions.

For Believers:

- Provide opportunities for open, accepting discussion about faith and how it relates to everyday life. Millennials want to engage in deep discussions about life's questions, and they are adept at considering multiple perspectives on issues. Rather than being told what to believe, they want space to question and work out their beliefs.
- Incorporate meaningful spiritual practices and rites of passage in the worship experience. Use these to reinforce belief among Millennials who resonate with these tangible symbols of belonging and belief. Instead of using them to signify membership in an institution, use them to signify membership in the community.
- Build one-on-one relationships with Millennials and use time together to encourage them to grow deeper in their faith. Don't expect lectures and adult study classes to have the same kind of impact as one-on-one mentoring can. It is a serious commitment of time, but is an

important investment in the lives of young believers.

For Disciplers:

- Encourage young disciplers to live out the same authentic leadership style that they demand of their own leaders, and continue to mentor them as they mentor and lead others.
- Provide increasing levels of responsibility within the context of the worship community, and encourage disciplers to take on a discipleship role outside of the worship community, if that's where they are called, understanding that Millennial disciplers often have access to places and groups that older leaders can't reach.
- Support the ministries of Millennial disciplers financially, recognizing that the traditional financial models of ministry don't always work for those who are reaching Millennials. Financial support builds relationship with these disciplers and their worship communities, and gives them the ability to create new ministry models that add to the body of Christ, in the same way that New Testament churches supported the ministry of those churches who had fewer resources.

Conclusion

While the research indicates an overall decline in Millennial participation in worship communities, we have found much to be encouraged by throughout this research. Consider these key points:

- Millennials express a high level of spirituality and a strong interest in having a life with meaning and purpose.
- Although they may not be attracted to the traditional model of church, many outreach ministries and worship communities have successfully reached out to Millennials and engaged them in the life of the church.
- Millennials want to be part of a community, not part of an institution.
- Millennials bring a different understanding of what it means to be engaged in a worship community, and the traditional models of belonging and involvement may not apply.

Engagement for Millennials is an active participation in service, meaningful contributions to the life of the community and a voice in leadership.

- Engagement does not, however, necessarily mean a high-tech worship service. Authenticity means more than form, and many Millennials are attracted to more traditional forms of worship as important symbols of belonging to a community.
- Many ministries are experiencing growth and impact among Millennials.

Millennials will change the Church, as they will impact other institutions of society, and based on our research, there is much to be encouraged by for the future of the Church.

As this generation grows older and advances through life stages, it will be important for church and ministry leaders to continue to adapt and grow with them.

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