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Millennials: How Churches Can Attract Them

There is a generation of individuals that is becoming popular to study. Books, magazines, blogs, articles, online videos, and so on, have been based on how to effectively reach and relate to the generation classified as “The Millennials.” Society faces the challenge of relating with this generation. Connecting with Millennials is of interest to college and universities, companies, advertisers, and specifically, churches.

The modern-day church especially finds reaching Millennials to be particularly challenging. Churches struggle to interest them to attend regularly, and to accept volunteer and leadership positions that are vacated by an aging congregation. It is imperative that the churches educate themselves on the Millennials. By doing so, they will discover there are core values held by Millennials the church can work with and appreciate. Churches can attract more Millennials by appealing to core values they find important. The following are the core values Millennials desire from both leadership and laity: authenticity, anonymity, analytics, and action.

The term Millennial is used to describe those born between the years spanning from 1980 to year 2000. (Rainer, 2) Per this range, would make Millennials between the ages of approximately 17-37 years of age, at the time of this writing. The birth years from 1980 to 2000 are a generally accepted birth range; however, some experts differ slightly. For example, the Pew Research Center states birth years of 1981 to 1997. (Fry).

Interestingly, this age group has recently become the largest living generation, “Millennials have surpassed the Baby Boomers as the nation’s largest living generation according to population estimates released [April 2016]...by the U.S. Census Bureau (Fry) Although Millennials have grown larger in population, and taken on roles of influence and leadership in society, the church world still struggles to attract this generation. It is imperative that churches educate themselves on the Millennials, to gain a better understanding of them. The goal should not be for the church to cater to this generation, but to become knowledgeable enough to see things from their perspective.

Millennials are seeking for authenticity of church leadership and laity. Millennials are attracted to leaders who are genuine, authentic, and transparent people. They have quite the distaste for hypocrisy and phoniness. They relate with speakers who talk about their personal struggles, failures, and faults. In years past, it has been taboo to discuss such things, as it was understood as portraying weakness. However, Millennials find stories of success and overcoming failure as extremely inspirational. They simply are attracted to individuals who are real. In an article in Christianity Today, entitled “How to Effectively Reach and Retain Millennials” says, “They preferred preaching from weakness and sharing of struggles of life and faith, approaches that pastors were taught not to do in generations past.” (Stetzer) To relate with Millennials, church leaders will need to become more comfortable with sharing struggles, faults, and failures. This is not to say church leaders need to share everything to attract Millennials, rather being more open to reveal the obstacles in their life, and talk about how they overcame them.

Millennials are seeking for a measure of anonymity. This means that Millennials greatly value their privacy and family time. One of the mistakes churches make when it comes to

dealing with Millennials is too be to overbearing or inquisitive about the details of their lives upon initially meeting them. Millennials prefer to gain a level of trust before totally divulging personal information. In short, Millennials lack trust. This is understandable based on what they were taught growing up. They were taught to not to speak to strangers, and to be wary of people. Millennials grew up in an era when stories of child abductions and pedophiles were increasingly broadcast. “Abductions by strangers have always been rare, but highly publicized cases, such as the kidnapping and killing of 6-year-old Etan Patz in New York City in 1979, reset the template for protective parenting.” (Greenblatt)

Rightfully so, parents of Millennials became more protective of their children, resulting in Millennials having a lack of trust. It will take time to gain their trust. This trust can be achieved, but in their time. Pew Research Center reports the following concerning trust among Millennials:

“Asked a long-standing social science survey question, ‘Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted or that you can’t be too careful in dealing with people,’ just 19% of Millennials say most people can be trusted, compared with 31% of Gen Xers, 37% of Silents and 40% of Boomers.’” (Drake)

In addition to anonymity among Millennials, they also greatly value spending time with their family. Understanding this concept will be to the benefit of churches. This is a quality the church should appreciate. If churches are not careful they will plan the church calendar with too many events, not leaving time to compensate for family time. Some think that the answer to drawing more Millennials to the churches is by having more events, when in fact, the answer is providing less events with greater quality. Of course, good youth programs and events are

appealing to them for their children. But remember that Millennials live busy lives between work, school, athletics, raising children, family time, etc. Whether considered right or wrong, the simple fact is: Millennials are busy.

Millennials are analytically minded. The reason for Millennials being this analytical is the increase of education in their generation. They have been taught to think broadly, and “to think for themselves.” Consequently, this has made Millennials question things. In fact, churches should be places that are open to asking and answering questions. Creating this type of environment can be achieved by classroom settings that are designed to discuss matters and ask questions. Next, pastors and church leaders should be approachable when it comes to discussing matters or questions, without coming off as defensive or offended by asking them. Millennials are looking for people to take their questions seriously, and to help them think their questions through to answers. This requires mentors and family members to know why they believe as they do, and be willing to explain their reasons clearly and logically. (Smith and Stonestreet) Creating an environment inviting of questions can be intimidating and uncomfortable at first. This is because most Sunday schools, Bible classes, or life groups are purely lecture based. It would be ideal to have classes for Millennials that are interactive. These classrooms should consist of open discussion and question time, that way the millennial students can logically think about the presented lesson.

Interestingly, Millennials desire sermons and lessons that are rich in Biblical content, given it is back up with substantial, verifiable facts. They want to learn more about the Bible, but in such a way that it is not pushed on them, or feel that they are being “sold” something. Millennials are not much interested in the opinions of teacher and preachers on what they think the Bible says, as they are in what the Bible actually teaches. The challenge in this case is to be

knowledgeable in the difference between fact and opinion, God's traditions and man's traditions, and God's teaching and man's teachings. It would do one well that teaches or preaches to answer every question with Biblical evidence through verse, illustration, or passage.

Millennials desire action. Surprisingly, they want to serve, volunteer, and give back to the community. They see true Christianity as getting out and practically serving others. Their idea of church is to feed the hungry, help the less fortunate, and make a difference in the world. They crave to find significance, and one of the ways this is accomplished is through volunteerism. The complicated part of this is showing Millennials how the church can provide such opportunities. They are very much interested in serving in an area that will provide them with this much-needed sense of worth. They want to feel as though they are making a difference in the world. Millennials are attracted to ministries who not only provide these ministries, but will allow them to serve in some capacity.

“One of the attributes of the generation is that they are very much active locally,” says Morley Winograd, a senior fellow at the University of Southern California Annenberg Center on Communication Leadership & Policy, who has co-authored several studies on Millennials. “When they think of global challenges and problems, they take action at the local level.” (Greenblatt)

Churches need to examine to see if they provide these types of opportunities of community outreach and volunteerism. Implementing some sort of outreach in the community will convey to this generation, that the church is interested in what they consider true Christianity. Millennials for the most part are looking for these types of features. To them it is the true display of love, compassion, and care.

Millennials view mission trips as a means of contributing to society. These mission trips allow them to travel to other places in the U.S or abroad. Such experiences help them to gain perspective of the rest of the world, and a greater appreciation of their own situations. Thus, mission trips are a means for Millennials to gain this sense of significance. It is one way of providing this yearning for action. Millennials consider short-term mission trips as a sure way of displaying love, devotion, and service.

In conclusion, it will be of great benefit to the church leadership and laity to study and understand Millennials better. In doing so, it will reveal key core value qualities that the church can work with and appreciate. Millennials like any other people group, desire to simply be understood, and for people to see things from their point of view. There are several common denominators that reoccur when studying, reading, and talking to Millennials. By empathizing with the Millennials generation, it will allow the church to reach, relate, and retain them. Churches can attract more Millennials by appealing to core values they find important. These core values that Millennials desire from both church leadership and laity are: authenticity, anonymity, analytics, and action.

Millennials connect with those who are authentic. They simply are attracted to people who are real, transparent, and authentic. Sharing stories of struggles, success, failure, and faith will prove to be very inspirational to the Millennial. They too face obstacles in their lives, and wonder how they might overcome. By church providing a comfortable atmosphere can prove to be effective in connecting to Millennials.

Millennials desire a measure of anonymity. They greatly value their privacy and family time. Churches should use wisdom in dealing with Millennials, as not to be appear to be to

overbearing, intrusive or nosey. Doing so will prove to be a major repellent. Respect their privacy and family. When a level of trust is achieved, the Millennial will feel more comfortable sharing. Be sure to compensate for family time when planning the church calendar.

Millennials are analytically minded. They question everything, only satisfied once something is explained fully and logically. Providing healthy atmospheres welcoming of questions and discussions will allow Millennials to fulfill this core value they find important.

Millennials desire action. They view true Christianity as getting busy serving the community or world. Churches need to be designed to supply such opportunities of service, and invite Millennials to serve through the local church outreach, as a mean of volunteering. In closing, by churches exhibiting these qualities will greatly increase their likelihood of attracting more Millennials.

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