

Where Are We Going? : A Critical Analysis of Millennials and the Traditional Church

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Augustana College

Where Are We Going?

A Critical Analysis of Millennials and the Traditional Church

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Walk into any given Protestant church on any given Sunday morning, outside of Christmas and Easter; what you will most likely see is the pastor at the front of the congregation running through the week's prayers, a piano/organ playing, a cross somewhere at the front, but what you will not see is a great multitude of young adults between the ages of 18-29 (Kinnaman). There is a problem with millennial church membership and it is deeply impacting our congregations and how faith is being understood today. Pastors, church leaders, and congregations have been trying to find ways to solve the issues of youth leaving the church by adapting to the most current context of culture within the United States. Churches over the past forty years have begun to get rid of older worship styles and begun to start adapting "secular culture" (that which we understand to be outside of the confines of church teaching) into the church changing how the church is now understood. Nondenominational churches and emerging churches¹ have begun to take over the realm of church membership when it comes to young adults and young families. The formation of different types of church has been one attempt to fix the problem of millennial church membership. Many religious leaders and scholars alike (including myself) believe there are other means to bring young adults back into the traditional church. What I propose to bring back those that the church has lost is not to drastically change the church to the needs of each individual, but rather educating individuals on what it means to be a Christian.

When referencing traditional worship I speak of the church that is focused on word and sacrament through liturgy both spoken and sung which typically includes robes, candles, pews,

¹ Emerging churches, also known as plant churches, arose in the later parts of the 1990's as a way of rethinking and reshaping how traditional worship is done. These churches started changing the physical space of worship and started thinking of new ways to incorporate the old church with the new.

and pianos or organs. I am looking at the mainline Protestant denominations and how the millennial generation has interacted with them. I am a millennial and I am invested in the traditional church. I am writing this paper regarding those who are in church leadership, but also to those who have lost the church at large². The “we” language I use in this paper is meant to include myself and those who find themselves in church leadership. This paper has a focus on the Lutheran church in the United States, but I use this tradition as an example of a much larger problem within the mainline Protestant denominations.

Why Millennial Church Membership Matters

Millennial church membership is a larger problem than many may think it is. Over the course of the history of the church there has always been a problem with keeping young adults in the pews; what we (as members of a church body) have seen is, historically the people that leave the church at the early adulthood stages of life, for the most part, find their way back to the church. The problem that we are seeing with the millennial generation is that unlike the generations before it, young adults are not returning to the church. If you adhere to a specific Christian tradition and are part of a traditional church, millennial church membership should be a concerning topic for you. The young adults that leave the church are those who should be filling the pews every Sunday, bringing their children to Sunday school, and keeping alive the community of believers.

Anyone applying to seminary in any of the major Protestant denominations is well aware of the shortage of clergy in the United States. In particular, the Lutheran seminaries have started

² In speaking about those the church has lost I recognize that excludes a great number of people that follow faiths such as Islam, Buddhism, Judaism, Daoism, etc. It is not my goal to sway the opinions of those outside of this particular religious tradition, rather to make note of a very real problem.

to reach out to their congregations to tell about the problem that the United States is facing in terms of its clergy. Trinity Lutheran Seminary in Columbus, Ohio releases a midweek blast every Wednesday offering an update on the seminary while often offering commentary on the events occurring in the world around us. Trinity released a Midweek Blast on January 18th, 2017, where its president Dr. Rick Barger commented on the falling number of clergy in the United States, specifically that in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). Dr. Barger stated that by the year 2020 there would be a shortage of clergy in the United States by over 1,000 ELCA rostered clergy, meaning that over 1,000 congregations would not have access to a full-time pastor. Without access to a full-time pastor, congregations are forced to rely on retired pastors – whose numbers are also decreasing rapidly – to fill in when and where they can. Without access to a full-time pastor and a lack of retired pastors to fill in, congregations will most likely be forced to close their doors and all of their ministries in their communities. The millennial generation is full of the people that would fit the role of full-time pastors and lay leaders, but they are leaving the church and not coming back. Church membership whether or not you are a member of a traditional church will have a profound impact on the United States in the near future.

I am a member of the ELCA and I intend to go into ministry one day; it is because I am a Lutheran that the problem of millennial church membership matters to me. Because I am a millennial I am in constant communication with my peers about the church and why they just do not seem to get it anymore. I am concerned about the future of the church because I believe the church at large is good. There are always going to be times and places where the church may fall short, but that is our nature as human beings. There is something more to church than a simple space of worship. Church is the place where you get to come in all your brokenness and find the

gospel that teaches love, hope, and forgiveness; the church is the place where faithful relationships are built, developed, and continued. It is also a place where people who hold very different beliefs can come together and attempt to live out the teachings of Christ. Church is important because the world is in need.

What Are Young Adults Saying?

A simple google search of “why are young adults leaving the church” will lead you to multiple different articles stating the “real” reason why Millennials are leaving the church. The millennials that have been polled by a variety of groups say that they have been hurt, the church is not accepting anymore, and that worship simply is not cool. By looking through various articles, opinion columns, poems, and surveys I have concluded that millennials are not losing their faith, they are losing the church. Millennials adhere more to what spoken word poet/writer, Jefferson Bethke, titles in his poem “Why I Hate Religion, But Love Jesus” this idea of a hate for religion, but a love for Jesus. Young adults at large are finding themselves labeling their faith as spiritual but not religious. Millennials are still faithful to their God and their faith but they want nothing to do with the church. Throughout the articles, there are four main themes that thread through. First, the church is unwilling and unprepared to change. Young adults in the United States today have been pushed to question their understanding of the world around them through their teachings in school and pop culture. The culture we live in has become more accepting of asking questions about the institutions we have and whether or not they matter. Second, there is lack of a compelling vision. Young adults are having issues seeing where the church is going and if that vision is an acceptable one. There is comfort and security in knowing that the church at

large has a vision that matches up with your own, the problem is that the millennial generation cannot find that.

Third, millennials are not finding mentors in the church. It is hard to argue that congregations do not provide support to their members, but what millennials are seeking is individuals to step up and go beyond their ordinary congregational duties. “Children learn primarily from their elders as role models for personhood and community” (Hamman 163). A large part of child development comes from a child’s access to an older mentor. What young adults who leave the church are saying is that the church is not giving them a proper spiritual mentor. Lastly,³ the church is not talking about controversial issues. There is a theme between the last point and the rest, and that is young adults are saying the church is not properly preparing them to answer the questions they are asking. We live in a very politically, socially, and spiritually divided nation, and young adults need a foundation which they can find answers or comforts to the questions that they desire to ask.

The Numbers

The church and many sociologists have come up with terms to understand the issue of millennial church membership at large. Sociologist, author, and founder of the Barna Group David Kinnaman has taken on the task of attempting to understand fully why young adults are leaving the church. Through his research conducted in the Barna Group Kinnaman has come up

³ These four points stem from a variety of sources found on a google engine search. The sources all represent what millennials are saying about why they leave the church. Through reading these sources I pulled out four points that were a thread amongst them all. The sources are as follows: ED Stetzer “The Real Reasons Young Adults Drop out of Church” Huffington Post “Seven Reasons Why Young Adults Quit Church” Recklessly Alive “12 Reasons Millennials are OVER Church” Exponential “5 Things Millennials Wish the Church Would Be” CBN News “The Real Reason Why Millennials Aren’t Going to Church, and It’s Not Because They Hate Jesus” Outreach “10 Reasons Churches Don’t Reach Millennials” Fox News “Ten Reasons Millennials Are Backing Away From God and Christianity” and Jefferson Bethke “Why I Hate Religion, But Love Jesus.”

with three main groupings of why youth are leaving. The first group that Kinnaman addresses is the “nomads” which he describes as, “*Nomads* walk away from church engagement but still consider themselves Christians” (25). Nomads often refer to themselves as spiritual but not religious. The second brought up is the “prodigals” which are described as, “*Prodigals* lose their faith, describing themselves as ‘no longer Christian’” (25). Prodigals completely abandon their faith and are less likely to return to the church. The last group that Kinnaman addresses is the “exiles” which he describes as, “*Exiles* are still invested in their Christian faith but feel stuck (or lost) between culture and the church” (25). Exiles often feel as though the church has not prepared them well enough to live in society⁴. Kinnaman offers a constructive approach to understanding the issue of millennial church membership and based on his studies other groups have started thinking of how and why young adults are leaving.

Along with the Barna Group, Pew Research has spent time conducting surveys across the United States asking young adults about the church and faith. Richard Waters from the University of San Francisco and Denise Bortree from Penn State University came together to write a sociological review of the data collected by Pew Research and their own research. Waters and Bortree reviewed the data through the lens of several questions but the data that stood out was focused on their third research question which stated, “How do relationship improvement strategies and relationship quality indicators affect one another in religious organization—Millennial relationship?” (205). The image below⁵ depicts the connection between different

⁴ The previous information has been drawn from a paper I wrote in RELG 328 Theological investigations in February 2017 called “You Haven’t Lost Me Yet” with approval from the instructor Dr. Jason Mahn.

⁵ Image displays comes from “The Relationship Between Church and Millennials” I use the image to show how complicated the decision for an individual to the church can be. Waters and Bortree’s reflection on the data is immensely helpful in understanding the data we are given.

aspects of the RQ3 question that was asked by Waters and Bortree. These specific connections display the complexity of millennials and their motives for leaving the church.

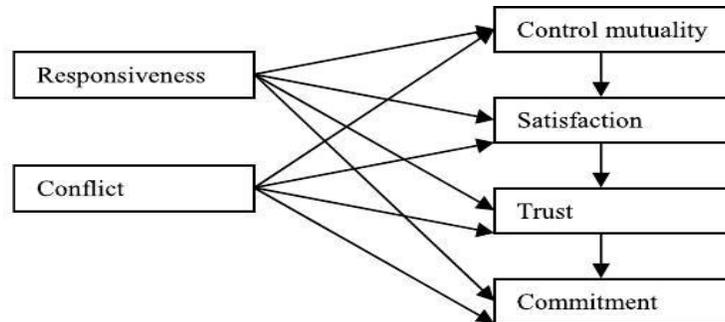


FIGURE 1 Initial model tested for the impact of responsiveness and conflict on the evaluation of the religious institution–Millennial relationship.

Waters and Bortree came to the conclusion from their studies that “Of the 401 participants in the project, 29.2% did not have any affiliation with organized religion; this number is similar to the proportion found by the 2010 Pew Research Center study” (210). Waters and Bortree’s research along with the research that was done by the Barna Group who concluded that 32% did not have any affiliation. Jacob Hamman at Vanderbilt University reflected on the study done by Pew Research saying, “As the Pew Research Center reported in May 2015, Christianity declined by almost 8% (from 78.4% to 70.6%) between 2007 and 2014, while those who are “unaffiliated” to any faith increased by almost 7% (from 16.1% to 22.8%)” (162). Research is proving that there is actually a problem of millennials leaving the church, the question to ask then is what is the church to do about it? Figure 2⁶ below depicts the research done by the Barna Group of where millennials fall when it comes to church membership and attendance.

⁶ This particular image comes directly from the Barna Group website based on a study they conducted in 2011. The Barna group has conducted a multitude of surveys over the past seven years asking about faith and life. The group focuses heavily on how faith impacts every walk of life.

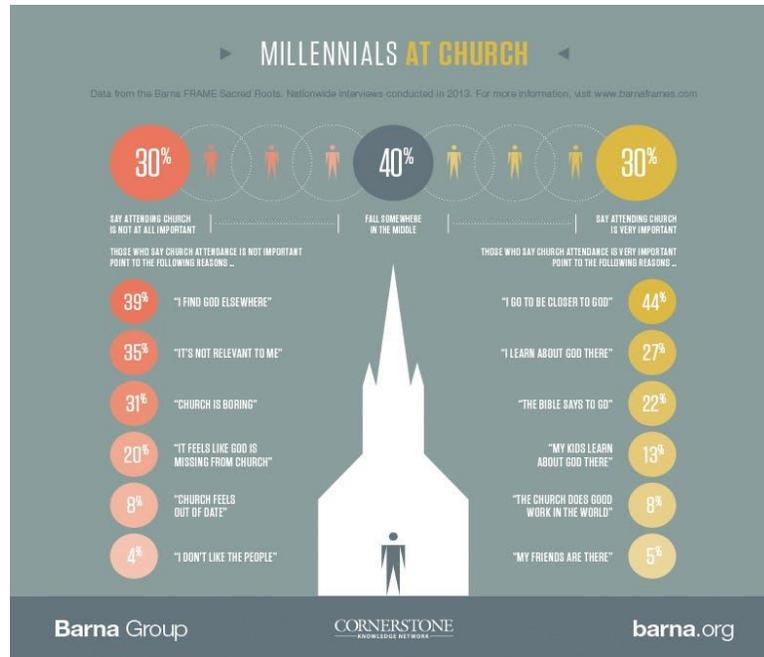


FIGURE - 2 Millennials at Church, Barna Group. Responsiveness of millennials and why they left.

What Are We Saying?

The church is at a crossroads and its actions in the upcoming years will define whether or not it will prosper or fail. As stated before, the problem of young adults leaving the church is not something new, what is new is that the church is not pulling back the people it lost. Church leaders should get away from labeling the millennial generation as things such as “Lost in transition”, “Trophy kids”, “App generation”, and “Generation Me” (Hamman 162). If the church truly wishes to bring back those they have lost, not only is it on the church to put in the work, but the effort must be put in by the young adults to rejoin something they wanted to get away from. Each one of the authors that I will address agrees that for any change to come there must be an effort put in by both the church and the millennial generation. There are many ways

in which people have tried to understand the issue of millennials leaving the church, the following represents three main themes of scholarship around the issue.

“It’s Them Not Us”

Unlike many of his counterparts and colleagues in religious studies, Jonathan P. Hill, assistant professor of sociology at Calvin College,⁷ believes that the problem with millennial church membership may not be a Protestant one but rather a Catholic one. Hill writes in *Emerging Adulthood and Faith*, “Millennials, they say, are a new breed of religious dropouts, with different priorities, attitudes, and aspirations than the generations that came before. And, when it comes to faith, they possess a deep skepticism of anything that smacks of inauthenticity and exclusion” (3). Hill has a keen sense of commitment to the millennial generation, which may have to do with his constant engagement with them in a college setting. Hill starts his writing by addressing certain statements that he labels as true, the first of which is: “Protestant church attendance has remained nearly unchanged for forty years (and likely longer), while Catholic Mass attendance has seen steady decline⁸ over the same period” (3). Hill advocates that the problem is not that of the Protestants because they have not seen a drastic drop in church attendance when it comes to millennials compared to Catholics. Hill backs up his claim that young adults are not leaving the Protestant church at the same rate as the Catholic Church through the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1997, 2000-2010. The study is conclusive that the Catholic Church is seeing less of a return of young adults around the age of 30 than the

⁷ Calvin College is a liberal arts college in Grand Rapids, Michigan that is known for its evangelical beliefs and conservative outlook. When Hill refers to the Protestant church he is referencing the mainline denominations that are not Catholicism.

⁸ An interesting point of contention may be that the Catholic Church is not declining in terms of members but rather its members have changed from white-Anglo Saxon origin to Hispanic origin due to the large influx of immigrants from South America.

Protestant church is seeing at the age of 25. Hill concludes the problem of millennial church drop out is not a Protestant one and that we should continue to support our young adults talking to them about the hard questions they have to ask.

Hill's writings are convincing to those who find themselves in the Protestant church because it tells us that there is not a problem at hand. Despite what Hill says, there is a problem with church membership and millennials which is proven through the studies done by Pew Research Center, National Study of Youth and Religion, and the Barna Group. It is easy to walk into a megachurch in any given suburb and feel like there is nothing wrong with young adult membership. For the majority of nondenominational churches is true, but where the largest concern comes in is the traditional churches that are predominantly dominated by elder generations⁹. There is a large difference between a church like Willow Creek Community Church in Chicago¹⁰ and First Evangelical Lutheran Church in Cincinnati¹¹. We have seen since the life of Jesus that Christians disagree on theology (the study of God) of every aspect of life. Likewise, we see today that every major church is different and practices their faith according to their own theologies. Hill is stating that Catholics are facing a millennial drop out, which is similar to the rates in which the Protestant church is facing them. Hill's approach has its basis, but I believe it is not the correct approach, as it is not recognizing the problem that mainline Protestants and Evangelicals are facing. There is plenty of evidence that the church is losing millennials no matter if its mainline Protestants, Catholics, or Evangelicals. Hill touches on a

⁹ The purpose of this research is not to prove that young adults have lost their faith, rather prove that the millennial generation is leaving the traditional church and it is not returning.

¹⁰ Nondenominational church in the greater Chicago area that worships roughly 26,000 on any given Sunday and has 9 different locations.

¹¹ ELCA church in downtown Cincinnati that worships roughly 50 a week with only one service and one location.

subject that leads to how other scholars have been trying to address to problem of millennials and the church.

What About the Kids?

Jeremy Myers associate professor of theology and youth studies at Augsburg University, writes about how he believes the future of the church is in the hands of the youth. Myers came up with what he calls “Ten Theses on Youth and the Church” amongst his ten theses, Myers describes different ways in which the church needs to adapt to the needs of the youth. His eighth point is most captivating when trying to address the issue of young adult church membership. In Luke 4:18-19¹² Myers states, “If we continue to talk about youth as though they have not yet arrived, or adolescence as a ‘holding pattern,’ then we cannot proclaim a gospel of freedom or a call to discipleship that will make sense to them” (111). For Myers, the way to shape the future of the church is through effectively teaching our youth what it means to be a disciple. The term disciple gets thrown around a fair amount and its base meaning is to be a follower of Jesus Christ. I wish to push further than the basic understanding of a disciple to include those Christians pursuing a community with one another creating a greater congregation.

Myers’ solution to the larger problem of young adults dropping out of traditional church can be very effective; the problem I find with it is that if we simply pass by the millennials we are still going to lose a generation that will inevitably still have immense impacts on the church’s future. I agree with Myers in that we must start with the youth to help the future generations, but we should not negate the fact that millennials are the ones who will be affecting the church very

¹² “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” (NRSV).

soon. Myers' sixth point leans in on why the church needs to step up with children. "The current economic and political climate in our country is making things worse for our youth" (111). The country has and is continuing to cut its support to children through different programs and that is why it is so crucial for the church at large to step up when it comes to teaching children. The church needs to create enthusiastic and passionate disciples of Christ if it wishes to have growth in the future. Myers' teachings of the youth match up perfectly with what Martin Luther says about children.

Five-hundred years ago, Martin Luther, an Augustinian monk nailed 95 theses about the church hierarchy to the door of a chapel in Wittenberg, Germany. Martin Luther's 95 theses inevitably led to the Protestant Reformation and the formation of the Lutheran church. Luther's writings consisted of everything from consoling women whose pregnancies failed to the justification of faith. Luther wrote in 1530 "A Sermon on Keeping Children in School" which lays a foundation in which Myers writings agree:

He has not given you your children and the means to support them simply so that you may do with them as you please, or train them just to get ahead in the world. You have been earnestly commanded to raise them for God's service, or be completely rooted out—you, your children and everything else, in which case everything you have done for them is condemned, as the first commandment says [Exod. 20:5]¹³. But how will you raise them for God's service if the office of preaching and the spiritual estate have fallen into oblivion? (Pelikan)

¹³ "You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me" (NRSV).

There is a certain demeanor that is carried and expressed when Christians speak about children. The narrative of Jesus' birth and as an infant child play a large role in how Christians understand their faith. How believers interpret the Bible impacts how they treat their youth. It is natural for a parent to have desires to take care and protect their children but what comes second nature is the providing and protecting other people's children. Jesus teaches¹⁴ that we are to love one another and that extends to the duty of taking care of each other's children. Over the ages, church leaders and lay people alike have understood that the children are the future of the church and that if the church is to survive they must teach their children to be disciples. It takes dedicated teachers, parents, and mentors to educate children. The church must step up in its congregation and focus on its children for the future. Myers' approach is hopeful, but his proposal is not the correct way to solve the problem of millennial church membership.

The major flaw in Myers' approach is that the millennial generation is going to be the ones that take on the role of mentoring the generations below it. If there is a focus on the development of children, especially in a religious context, there has to be a group of people that are willing to step up and take on the torch of guiding the newest generation through life. Without the millennials, there might not be a strong group of mentors to aid in the development of the children.

I Don't Need the Church to Be a Christian

Robert Putnam and David Campbell co-authors of *American Grace* write how the United States has been deeply rooted economically, spiritually, and politically in Christian values.

¹⁴ Matthew 22:37-40 "He said to them, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets'" (NRSV).

Putnam and Campbell comment on how the changing political polarization and influx of change has started to change how Christianity is being viewed in the United States. Putnam and Campbell use a graph of the Faith Matters Survey conducted in 2006¹⁵ and the results were quite shocking. They are as follows: “Percent of U.S. population: Evangelical Protestant 29%, Catholic 24%, None 17%, Mainline Protestant 14%, Black Protestant 8%, Other Faiths 3.5%, Jewish 2.5%, Mormon 2%” (17). It is evident that Christianity has had a large impact in the United States, making up roughly 77 percent of the religious traditions in the United States. Putnam and Campbell label those who identify as still having a faith but do not belong to any religious tradition as “nones.” Putnam and Campbell nail in that the number of religious nones has surpassed the number of people who identify as mainline Protestant. “There are more nones (17 percent) than mainline Protestants (14 percent), a striking fact given that the mainline wing of Protestantism once represented the heart and soul of American religion and society” (17). Up until recently, the traditional church has been able to keep its followers in the congregation even to the point of being the heart of American religion. Now, that we are seeing a rapid growth in young adults identify with the group of nones, the traditional church is not being able to return its followers.

Putnam and Campbell address how the political realm is changing Christianity, as well as how our individualistic culture is creating a new approach to faith. In the United States, we live in a society that is focused on the individual, we focus our lives around a certain school, jobs, and a family (all of which are competitive). We put ourselves up against each other to prove who is better but we forget what it means to be a neighbor. Technology has enveloped our lives and

¹⁵ The percentages over the past decade may very well have changed, but the data represented in this study is still relevant to the issue of millennial church membership.

caused a great multitude of mental health issues. Through our self-centered individualism, we have created a new form of Christianity called moralistic therapeutic deism. Americans developed the therapeutic God because we are so focused on ourselves we are afraid of community, let alone prepared to be a part of it. God is no longer there 24/7; he is only there when we need Him. We watch those on the far left (liberal) and the far right (conservative) argue about what the “right” form of Christianity is and we are pressured to make decisions that are not necessarily our own. We idolize those who preach to us in mainstream media who, in all reality, are not the mentors that we need. Millennials need the traditional church just as much as it needs them. The church needs to fill the voids that young adults are missing.

The church at its best is a collective community that reaches outside of the physical space that people gather to worship. The millennial generation is composed of individuals that are extremely passionate about volunteering. The church can provide the perfect source for the millennials to fulfill their desires of helping others. Part of what is seen is that churches, no matter the denomination, across the United States provide a variety of social services. For example, an inner-city church might provide community meals, hat and coat drives, and children’s choir for at-risk youth whereas a small congregation in a farming town might provide drug counseling and job placement help. Churches provide an immense amount of support to their communities, but the reality is that you do not have to go to a church to volunteer.

There are many organizations across the United States that offer opportunities for people of all ages to help their communities and communities not their own across the world. What I believe non-church affiliated organizations are missing is the community of believers that are founded on a gospel that is heavily grounded on service to others. The church in its messiness

provides relationships that go beyond baseline friendships and have potential, if an effort is put in, to create a greater church family. Church at its core is meant to create a community of believers that can lean on each other and which is invested in the communities where they located. To a new family in a new town, it can be where they go to create meaningful relationships. To a recently widowed mother, it can be a place to find solitude and comfort. Church is what it is because it is based on helping others and what other place to take a group of young adults who are passionate about volunteering than the church. Some scholars believe the way to return those who have left is to completely rethink the way we do church.

Let's Change

The following section engages with scholars that I believe align the closest to my proposed approach to addressing the issue of millennial church membership. I will use the following theorists for the backing of my practical solution. David Kinnaman offered a particularly good insight into the sociological aspect of the problem of young adults, and his commentary on how he sees the church changing in the future to bring millennials back is quite moving. Kinnaman believes there are three main steps which must be taken to foster again a relationship between millennials and the church.

I have learned from studying the next generation: (1) the church needs to reconsider how we make disciples; (2) we need to rediscover Christian calling and vocation; and (3) we need to reprioritize wisdom over information as we seek to know God. As I have argued throughout this book, *the Christian community needs a new mind—a new way of thinking, a new way of relating, a new vision of our role in the world—to pass on the faith to this and future generations.* (201-202)

Essentially, we (as Christians) in the eyes of Kinnaman, are to completely reshape how we are training people to be disciples of Christ by changing how we teach the gospel. We need to find our passion for Christianity and we need to put that to work by wholly changing the church to fit the needs of the newest generation because they are the future of the church. Kinnaman takes the approach of many religious leaders, in that the church needs to drastically change before it can bring those it has lost back. Kinnaman touches on a larger topic when he addresses what is known as moralistic therapeutic deism¹⁶ when he talks about millennials leaving the church.

The research that was done by groups such as Pew Research, the National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR), and Barna Group has given church leaders the tools they need to move forward in answering some of the questions that millennials are asking. David Kinnaman in *You Lost Me*, Dan Kimball in *They Like Jesus But Not The Church*, and Chad Lakies in “Candy Machine God, or, Going to Church Without Going to Church” address the term moralistic therapeutic deism in identifying how young adults understand their faith. Moralistic therapeutic deism is the idea that if I am generally a good person and I do good deeds, then I have a spot in heaven. It also encompasses the idea that God is all good and He is there only when I need things from Him. The final aspect of moralistic therapeutic deism is that I can pick and choose what I want from God and His message and disregard the rest.

Chad Lakies in “Candy Machine God” responded to *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* a comprehensive study that was done by the National Study of Youth and Religion. Lakies touches on how millennials understand their deistic therapeutic God: “This new faith saw God as distant but benevolent. Ultimately, God was

¹⁶ The term “moralistic therapeutic deism” came about after the Pew Research study across the United States asking young adults about faith and church.

interested in helping humanity but he was not busy interfering with things. God was understood to be there when we needed Him, ready to help whenever we called upon Him” (Candy Machine God). Millennials based on the studies conducted believe God is there when we need Him and when we do not He is irrelevant. Through the idea of moralistic therapeutic deism, Kinnaman, Kimball, and Lakies are all connected; the three authors are all advocating that there must be a drastic change in the church before millennials start returning.

Kimball and Lakies address the issue of millennial church membership by stating that Christians are no longer the dominant group and that we will have to be patient and loving when it comes to bringing young adults back in. Kimball writes, “Being a Christian is no longer considered normal in our culture, so we need to think like missionaries—that is, we must listen first because we are on their turf” (29-30). Christianity has undoubtedly woven its way into our culture and government, but the hard truth for many believers is that it is no longer normal or the majority to be a Christian. Kimball states correctly that Christians if they want to return millennials, must learn to be missionaries once again. There is a deep sense of call when referring to missionaries, as many Christians have not found themselves needing to think in the mindset of outward mission; through moralistic therapeutic deism, we have found that faith has turned into more of what is God doing for me instead of what can I do for others. The history of the church stems from the missionary work that the disciples did following Jesus’ resurrection. There is a deep rootedness in the catholic¹⁷ church when it comes to missionary work which means there are many great examples of how to look at those who do not yet believe. Considering a popular culture which does not accept the church at large, there is a call for

¹⁷ Using the word “catholic” I refer to the universal church body at large, which many mainline Christian denominations use to refer to the community of believers at large.

believers to “take on their cross” and bring people back into the church. A drastic change in the passion and desire of believers is one major way of understanding how the church can return its followers.

Kinnaman, Kimball, and Lakies each offer a constructive view as to how we are to address and solve the problem of millennial church membership. However, there are other more actionable methods to solve the problem that can be more fruitful. The problem with changing the church to meet the needs of each millennial is that it is an insurmountable task. The church has the ability to change over time, but to ask those who are deeply connected to it to change overnight will not work. If we are to drastically change how the church works as it is we must grapple with the fact that there will be a great multitude of people that are upset with how the church will look. Many churches are offering different services where they label their services as either “contemporary” (geared more at younger audiences) and “traditional” (for the most part brings in older audiences). The problem with splitting the church is there is already a split in the congregations. The focus of the church should be the community which is built in the congregation. There is a generational split in the church which needs to be fixed, but it cannot be done by further separating the generations through drastic changes. Kinnaman, Kimball, and Lakies are criticizing the church in a constructive manner and based on their observations we can begin to better what they have proposed on how we can return millennials to the church.

A 2,000-Year-Old Conversation

Over the past couple millennia,¹⁸ Christians have argued and questioned different ways to keep people in the church. We are part of this timeline as church members and it is our turn to return the “lost generation.” Turning back to the conversations over the course of Christianity is a perfect place to look for guidance in returning those which the church has lost. The traditional church is the representation of the church that has been developed over the past 500 years;¹⁹ that its history is full of conversation and dialogue about church membership. I wholeheartedly agree with how Lilian Daniel understands church in her novel *When “Spiritual but Not Religious” Is Not Enough*:

Anyone can find God alone in the sunset. It takes a certain maturity to find God in the person sitting next to you who not only voted for the wrong political party but has a baby who is crying while you’re trying to listen to the sermon. Community is where the religious rubber meets the road. People challenge us, ask hard questions, disagree, need things from us, require our forgiveness. It’s where we get to practice all the things we preach. (5)

Church is tough, and Christians realize that a large reason why people leave the church is that they are unwilling to deal with the messiness of church. Things such as politics and pop culture challenge us to the point where many young adults straight up leave the church. One thing we must realize is when the church was initially founded with Jesus’ disciples, they were living in a different society than we are today; there was more of a focus on the community than on the individual. Because Christianity is deeply rooted in a community, it does not fit fully into our

¹⁸ I chose the title of this section to represent the thousands of years that Christians have been working to form the church. Over the time that the church has been formed many questions have been asked and answered, this is to state that the answer may be in the history of the church.

¹⁹ I use 500 years here to refer to Martin Luther’s 95 theses and the Protestant Reformation.

society and that is why it is not “normal” to be Christian anymore. Lilian leads the discussion into a light that authors like Armand Boehme are picking up on.

The church itself is not perfect it has many flaws that have been worked on for over 2,000 years. Authors such as Armand Boehme, International Interim Senior Pastor at Trinity Lutheran Church in Faribault, Minnesota, are working to bring millennials back to the traditional church by turning back to the teachings and doctrines of mainline Protestant²⁰ churches. Armand Boehme is the author of the article “The Church and the Culture of the Millennials” which concludes like many other scholars of religion, that there is a problem of millennials leaving the church. However, Boehme takes a different approach to answering how we might return them to the traditional church. Boehme, along with looking at mainline Protestant church dropout rates and what youth are saying, looks at what Lutherans understand about their own faith. The results that Boehme found are that we, as Lutherans, have a problem with our foundational beliefs and that problem is that we do not know what they are.

Boehme, through his research considered the Pew Research Study but more importantly for his studies was the ELCA survey completed in 2008 labeled “Lutherans Say...No. 6—The Religious Beliefs and Practices of Lutheran Lay Leaders in the ELCA” which gave insight into what Lutherans said they believed. Martin Luther writes in his Augsburg Confession what he deems to be the core of what later becomes Lutheran teaching. The belief is that we, all of mankind, are justified by God’s grace through our own faith alone, not by good works or good deeds. In the ELCA survey Boehme reports, “In response to another religious question, 62%

²⁰ Boehme is rooted fully in the Lutheran tradition, particularly the ELCA. He currently serves as an ELCA pastor and has done work with the Lutheran church at large. I use his writing with a focus on the ELCA not only because it is my own tradition, but because it offers a constructive view of how millennials can be brought back through returning to teachings and doctrine.

agreed with the statement that ‘Salvation is given freely by God but only to those who have made a decision to accept Jesus as their personal savior’ (105). The surprising fact of the result is that only 62 percent agreed with the statement, meaning that 38 percent did not agree. 38 percent of the people polled in this survey who identified as a Lutheran did not know what the core of Lutheranism is. Furthermore, Boehme writes “In another poll, 73% of the Lutherans surveyed agreed ‘that if a person is generally good, or does enough good things for others, he or she will earn a place in Heaven’” (105). They are missing the point completely of what it means to be a Lutheran. Lutherans across the United States have either not been taught what it means to be Lutheran or they have forgotten and it may not be their fault.

What Does It Mean to Be Lutheran?

There are many forms of Lutheranism across the country let alone across the world. Despite the differences between the different sects of Lutheranism, I believe there is a main teaching of Luther’s that all Lutherans believe. Martin Luther was and is known for his work in justification, which stems from Paul’s teaching in the book Romans. Luther writes in his *Augsburg Confession*,

Furthermore, it is taught that we cannot obtain forgiveness of sin and righteous before God through our merit, work, or satisfaction, but that we receive forgiveness of sin and become righteous before God out of grace for Christ’s sake through faith when we believe that Christ has suffered for us and that for his sake our sin is forgiven and righteousness and eternal life are given to us. For God will

regard and reckon this faith as righteousness in his sight, as St. Paul says in Romans 3[:21-26] and 4[:5]²¹ (Kolb & Wengert 38-40).

It is undeniable that Luther's works influenced the Lutheran church of today and it is clear in the church of today that the doctrine of justification is still at large in traditional church doctrine. Luther was not a perfect man, there was political, moral, and ethical problems with parts of his writing in the middle of his life and towards the end of it. Despite the fact some of his writing was distasteful, there is a lot that the mainline Protestant church has picked up from him. Namely, the Lutheran church has adapted the doctrine of justification through the *Augsburg Confessions* which Luther labels the doctrine in which the church stands or falls.²² The surveys conducted by various groups have proved that Lutherans are not grasping what it means to be Lutheran. Luther has many other teachings that can be extremely beneficial when it comes to talking about young adults leaving the church.

So, What? I'm Not Lutheran.

Armand Boehme started a conversation by bringing into question what Lutherans believe about their faith compared to doctrine. Many denominations are starting to focus on what their members believe in comparison to doctrine and I believe the solution to the millennial church membership is found in the teachings of religious figures like Martin Luther and St. Augustine. We have identified that there is a problem of millennials leaving the church and not returning. We have looked at different authors such as Kinnaman, Lakies, and Hill on how they see the church returning the followers it has lost. But authors such as Boehme are addressing the

²¹ "But to one who without works trusts him who justifies the ungodly, such faith is reckoned as righteousness.

²² Paraphrased from the Preface to "The Book of Concord" translating *The Augsburg Confessions*.

problem from a completely new lens that can positively change the future of the church (no matter what denomination it is). The church must start teaching its young adults what it means to be Christian, more specific what it means to be Lutheran, Presbyterian, Methodist, Catholic, or etc.

Studies by Barna, Pew Research, and National Study of Youth and Religion have proven that millennials are confused about their faith and dissatisfied with the traditional church as it is. If we look back at what young adults are saying about why they are leaving, the traditional church approach²³ could work. As stated earlier, the four main themes I discovered through researching what young adults have to say about why they are leaving the church are First, the church is unwilling to change. Second, there is lack of a vision. Third, young adults are not receiving proper mentors. Lastly, the church is unwilling to talk about controversial issues. The traditional church at large has the ability to meet the needs of the millennial generation, but it all begins with the work of individual congregations. Social science tells us that foundation in something positive and supportive is crucial in child development. There can be hope found in that the church can be that foundation.

Young adults say the church is unwilling to change and unable to change, but what they do not realize is that the church changes every day. If we look at the larger traditional church over the course of its existence from the time of Paul to now there is undoubtedly a great degree of change. The church today is willing to change just like it has over the course of history, it is just not in the ways that the millennials are expecting. Based on earlier studies, millennials are

²³ My own terminology developed from the stance of Boehme and personal belief that the millennial church membership can be returned through teaching young adults what it means to be Christian, ultimately giving them a foundation.

expecting the church to change to each little thing they desire, authors such as Kinnaman, Kimball, and Lakies even agree that the church must make a drastic change to these desires. The solution is not throwing out what we already have, but molding it to some particular needs of the younger generation. The church is meant to mold and meet the needs of its most current congregation, which not only should include the young adults but the generation that has become tied to traditional liturgy. Martin Luther was all for change in the church, but to truly learn from him, we must identify what needs to be molded to fit the needs of the millennials.

Young adults say there is a lack of a clear vision in the church. By returning to the teachings of the traditional church we can find a commitment to community and faith. The catholic church from its beginnings has been a place for believers to come together and build community while preaching the word of God. Teachings such as The Great Commission [Matt. 28:16-20]²⁴ have been the forefront of the church for centuries when it comes to missionary aspects of the faith. The traditional church has taught its members that they are to proclaim the Gospel (transliterated to mean Good News). Somewhere along the line, the millennial generation lost this teaching and now it is up to the churches to teach them once again. Once young adults have a grasp of where the church is going based on its foundations, they can start to adapt the church to passions in which they have. The church can be firm on its foundations but also passionate about immigration, women's rights, racial equality, etc. But it must first be firmly rooted in its foundational beliefs.

²⁴ "Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age'" (NRSV).

Young adults say they are not receiving the proper mentors. The congregation is meant to serve its youth, it is there to build community but a major part of that community is taking on the younger generations to help foster relationships in Christ. Many people would argue that the church already does this through the implementation of Godparents at the baptism of a child, but the harsh reality is that many young adults lose connection with their given Godparents. The congregation should fill the void in the young adult's lives by offering themselves up as mentors and becoming dedicated to the development of the individual's faith through the foundational teachings of the church. It ultimately comes back to the church leaders, namely the pastor/priest to make sure the congregation is properly educated in church doctrine and beliefs. Putnam and Campbell earlier stated that the mainline Protestant church used to be the heart and soul of American society but that was succeeded only through integrating fundamental beliefs and faith into all aspects of life. The church today may not seem like it can return to its former cultural acceptance, but it very well can if it starts to provide properly educated mentors to the young adults today.

Young adults say the church is unwilling to talk about controversial issues. It is undeniable that the United States in its most current context is politically, socially, racially, and economically divided. We live in a world of contention and people are becoming locked in their beliefs and are unable to listen to each other. The church is supposed to be a space where people, no matter their political belief, can come together to worship a God that loves them. The millennial generation has expressed that the church was unable to answer the questions they had when it comes to controversial subjects. Not only is it the job of religious leaders to help answer or point people in the direction of answers, but it is the laypeople and congregational members that have to put aside their personal beliefs for the growth of young adults. The only way to fully

address and answer the tough questions that millennials are bringing is to have a firm understanding of what the common taught beliefs are. If you do not fully understand what you believe you do not have the tools to answer the questions that are being asked. Therefore, the church is meant to prepare its members to go out into the world to answer tough questions based on the knowledge they have been given about their own faith. The church not only prepares its members to answer questions but it is supposed to create a space where people can come together with a common faith and question each other about the tough realities of life.

It is quite possible to forget the millennial generation in the solution that Boehme has offered and along with that which I have touched upon. Like Hill's solution, I believe simply giving up on the millennial generation is not a viable option to returning those the church has lost. An approach that involves the dedication of church members towards the development of young adults in their faith and church dedication requires that all generations are deeply involved with each other. Millennials are needed in the church to be the leaders that teach the youth what it means to be a Christian. The idea I propose will take a lot of work, time, patience, and compassion, but what all church members will be able to say is "we are not giving up on the future of the church."

Young adults need to be in the church before a substantial change can be made in how the church teaches its youth. My proposal is that when millennials come asking questions (which they will) do not turn them away, but rather invite them in and offer them the chance to find the answers they seek. By inviting those who have lost the church back in to be taught the fundamental teachings of the church and to be supported by church members as mentors, young adults may find their way back into the pews. Do not get me wrong, in practice, my proposal will

be very difficult to carry out, people will make fun of church leadership, will tell the church off, and will simply laugh at the institutions that are held near and dear to many. There is so much that can be done in an intellectual conversation in a coffee shop, but what it really takes to understand a tradition, religion, or belief is to have an investment or a stake. The millennial generation has proven that they are able and willing to be open and understanding when it comes to controversial topics. What I am proposing is that millennials approach church with an open heart and an open mind. Part of keeping an open heart and open mind about church involves putting aside any prior bad experiences. The beautiful aspect of church is that it is so diverse, from its worship styles to community outreach focuses. What I am asking is that millennials do not judge the church based on one bad experience they have had, but rather give a second chance as they would with many other groups.

If and when the church and the millennial generation come together, the education aspect of my proposal will not be enough to solve the problem of millennial church membership. Once the education piece has taken place, it is up to the church to create an environment where conversations can be had with the younger generations where they have to feel like they are actually being heard. It is not enough to educate and not have any conversation or dialect come from the millennial investment. The church's actions need to be focused on creating the space that welcomes and is ready to talk about difficult subjects with young adults.

Where Does That Leave Us?

The traditional church has the ability to help the millennial generation in a multitude of ways, but the millennial generation has the potential to rekindle a fire of faith and dedication to the church. This will require a whole lot of work and faith from everyone. Despite my opinions,

there are many ways in which the church can start to bring back those in which it has lost, but it is crucial that it does. We must not forget that not only is the millennial generation the future of the church, it is the future of this country and whether you like it or not the church will have an impact on it. The church is at a major dividing point, it can either grow immensely from the leadership and advice of young adults or it can take a significant loss from the drop out of the majority of the millennial generation.

Nondenominational churches, emerging churches, drastic change, Protestantism, and traditional church are all approaches the church can take in the near future to bring back those in which it has lost. Inevitably there is a problem that must be addressed and there will be impacts if the church does not act. No matter what route the church decides to take in the future it is going to take patience. Lakies writes, “Third, do not—and I cannot say this strongly enough within our culture of fast food drive-throughs and instant gratification—DO NOT expect to see much fruit from your labor anytime soon” (27). We have accepted a culture that demands immediate response and recognition, waiting for results has no longer become part of our cultural norm. We have developed at large anxieties when we do not see immediate results and it tears us apart because we wish to see our efforts bear fruit. If the church is to pull back its millennial members, those who are putting in the work must realize that they may never see the results of their hard work, but that does not negate the significance of it. We live in a changing world and the question we must ask the church is: “what are you going to do next”?²⁵

²⁵ I have written and completed my research while realizing my own biases when it comes to an ELCA Christian in the Midwest, but I have attempted my best to represent a larger national problem of millennial church membership. The church has immense potential to do very well in the future, but it takes the proper dedication of its leaders and laypeople to help it continue.

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