



Millennials, authenticity, the Church and its mission



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We live at a mission critical time. There are seismic changes happening in culture and the Church must rise to the challenge of speaking a language that can be understood by the emerging generations. Paul's famous quote of becoming 'all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some' (1 Corinthians 9.22b, NIV) carries fresh impetus for much of the UK church, as we face the reality of missing generations attending and being involved in church.

One of the principal desires of the Millennial generation and therefore a primary language is that of 'authenticity'. Charles Taylor coined the phrase and descriptor of the cultural moment we find ourselves in as 'a secular age' and that the chief need is 'authenticity'. In a recent *Financial Times* article, the CEO of France's largest food group said Millennials no longer desire bigger and more well-known brands but rather, 'They want committed brands with authentic products. Natural, simpler, more local and if possible small, as small as you can.'¹ Against this background, how can we as church leaders also encourage and challenge Millennials in our communities to thrive and be all that God has made them to be?

It may seem simplistic to define it, but authenticity is more than being 'rootsy'. When a group of 25–30 year olds were interviewed about what they valued about their churches they replied, 'Things like integrity, transparency, honesty, grace and truth.' Every ounce of my church leader being wants to reply, 'Well sure, all church leaders preach that stuff!' However, in the same piece of research the

journalist found that, 'Millennials are asking church leaders who they are ... far more than they're asking what they'll do.'² So the challenge begins not with how are we going to expertly contextualise the gospel for a generation dependent on wifi and good coffee, but rather how prepared are we to be vulnerable, authentic and honest leaders for people desperate for relationship?

Some of the values of the Millennial generation

Character trumps competency

Millennials are more concerned with who a person is over what they can achieve. A small example of this is found in reality-TV singing shows, where success is dependent not necessarily on the technical ability of the contestant but on their story. Another small example is the influx of coffee shops, tea rooms and real ale serving pubs that tell the story of how the company started, why it started and the narrative of the production chain. It may be a small thing, but it is a glimpse into the desire for the real person behind the product. For church leaders, this may mean allowing people to preach and make mistakes, lead services and slip up, lead worship and break a string and not be punished or sidelined because character is what matters most. Millennials want to see the reality behind the closed doors before they trust the competency on display.

Budgets matter less

Whilst money is important, for the Millennial generation, it is disheartening and disempowering

for plans, dreams and visions to be quashed because of insufficient funds. A grassroots program, a social action project or an event is far more life giving if it has been the accumulative work of many people rather than a polished event with maximum finances behind it. This is partly to do with the 'can do' attitude of Millennials, but also to do with a 'make it happen' approach. How much do you involve the Millennials in your plans and dreams? Although it may mean thinking outside the financial box, using their passion and ideas, may bring about a brand new way of thinking about local mission and evangelism. If they can engage in the process they will engage in the desired outcomes. Too many Millennials are put off by slow institutional approaches where they hit a stifling mass of red tape. We need to find ways of involving them in things that make tangible differences.

Relationships matter more

This may seem obvious to pastors but never underestimate the time you spend with people. We can too often think that our congregations will know us well enough, be persuaded by our leadership ability and love Jesus more due to what we say from the pulpit. Unfortunately, this is not the case! You may have Millennials in your congregation because other people brought them but they will stay if they have a relationship with you. I would recommend under-promising and over-delivering on this front. How about putting in your diary a few lunches every three months and also keeping the list of those people and occasionally sending a text for a quick coffee? Those moments, both planned and spontaneous, will preach more sermons and teach more courses than years of ministry. However, we cannot possibly have 1-2-1 meetings and build meaningful relationships with every person in our congregation. Accessibility in lieu of availability is essential. How rushed and busy, distant or aloof are you? Or do you make time for incidental conversation, preach with a smile, lead as if leading family rather than a business meeting? Relationship has become the primary currency for committed involvement. Gone are the days when people committed to church because they wanted knowledge or societal structure. If they connect then they will stay. If they get behind the masks they will commit.

Change is good

To someone in the mid-twenties to mid-thirties age bracket, change is not a bad word. If the denomination you are in enjoys tradition, be prepared to understand the 'why' behind it but also try and find areas that can be changed. One instance of this is the rise in popularity for the 'groups' model of midweek discipleship opportunities. In the 'groups' model, one may commit for just a term and the group may involve something around a hobby, a subject matter, or a mission initiative. The appeal is that the

commitment is low but more importantly, change is an option. Consider how you approach change in your ministry and where possible, invite the Millennials in your congregations to be the change agents needed for a new project.

What this means for the ministry of the church?

Now we have given a broad brush-stroke approach it is worth honing in on four areas of church-life that will be affected by the Millennial generation.

Preaching

An emphasis on story in your preaching requires greater engagement and reflection on culture and society. Are you studying, spending time with and reading about the emerging generations? Relevant story does not mean a departure from biblical exegesis. Jesus was the quintessential story teller. On occasions he gave direct teaching (like the sermon on the mount), but when faced with a crowd more often than not he told culturally relevant stories to lead people into relationship with God, Luke 15 being a great example of this approach. The stories Jesus told challenged and provoked worldviews, and our stories should be no different. Millennials are looking for challenge as part of their ability to embrace change. Focus on crafting the questions you ask more than the answers you give. Clarity and teaching are certainly needed, but a good question will help to lead someone into discovering truth, and if they discover it they will own it more than if they are told what to believe from the front. Once again, Jesus modelled the art of great questions that forced engagement from his audience: 'Who do you say I am?'; 'Whose image is on this coin?'; 'Was the baptism of John from heaven or from man?'

In recent months I have noticed greater response and feedback from sermons that contain a powerful story. The danger being that you can tell a great story with very little biblical context and people listen more than when you focus on simply expounding the words of Scripture. We must not avoid story in favour of being more purist in our exegesis, but we must learn the art of story that communicates deep truths from the Bible. The most powerful stories paint vivid pictures (craft your adjectives), are from your experience (increasing authenticity), contain emotional connection (use 'feeling' words) and ultimately bring hope, inspiring minds to be set on things above (Colossians 3.2).

Story is not only helpful in a wider church sense, it is also fundamental to preaching to a Millennial generation. Where the likes of Steve Jobs dominated the business world with his masterful narratives for selling technology for many years of a Millennial's working life, storytelling rather than lesson giving is key when preaching. When preaching, do you place the passage in its context, using story to paint a vivid picture? How do you

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1. www.ft.com/content/09271178-6f29-11e8-92d3-6c13e5c92914
2. <https://careynieuwhof.com/5-things-Millennials-are-looking-for-in-a-church/>
3. S Chrostek, *The Kaleidoscope Effect: What Emerging Generations Seek in Leaders* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2017).
4. <https://aleteia.org/2017/10/18/hey-pastors-want-to-bring-us-Millennials-back-to-church/>
5. Brené Brown became a *New York Times* best seller and most watched TED talk presenter because she tapped into the generational desire for vulnerability. See her *Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead* (London: Penguin, 2015).

cast vision, using objectives or telling a narrative of 'what could be'?

Authenticity

Where in previous decades, the church leader has needed to adopt a guru-teacher like role whereby the congregation learn from being told right doctrine and orthodoxy, now, because of the availability of university standard information at your fingertips, the Millennial generation is not seeking a how-to guide to Christian life. Rather,

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twenty to thirty year olds seek someone who will walk the journey with them, fully aware of the potential pitfalls and failings, honest in the struggles and heartbreak (keeping in mind the importance to preach from our scars and not our wounds). Apart from that, what is required of you, as the leader, is not to be a carbon copy of your favourite leader but authenticity. 'The best way to engage Millennials is to be as unique as they are,' says Scott Chrostek.³

Serving

Millennials, more than many other generations, want to make their mark on the planet. They have been brought up with an empowered worldview, and genuine possibilities to make a real difference to those around them and the world in which they live. This poses a challenge to the local church. How are our churches places where people can make a real difference? If your church is simply a 'turn up and turn out' event, then the capacity to make a real change is limited. This may result in a turn in your priorities. We serve so that people will encounter the love of Jesus. A wonderful by-product is that people feel more connected to a community if they serve within it. In an interview about why she left church, a woman in her late twenties responded, 'We want more. We want more than the caramel macchiato that we can get anywhere. We don't need the Church to give us access to what is "cool." We have more access to that than we can consume. We want what is true. We want what is beautiful. We want access to it in consistent terms which we may not understand, but can learn through practice. We want access to meaning that goes beyond what is cool, or what's trending.'⁴ Giving Millennials a compelling vision will provide a language that released them to serve.

Discipleship

The principle challenge to any church leader working with Millennials is the area of discipleship.

This is not because Millennials are more difficult to disciple, it is simply because we have to unlearn some old habits: (a) course-led discipleship, in the main, is a poor substitute for 1-2-1 or very small group discipleship, walking through Scripture and life issues together; (b) the student-master relationship often used in discipleship needs to be replaced with a student-student relationship – we are all still learning, but taking someone on the journey you're on, that is discipleship. Millennials want peer to peer relationships with people who they also know have greater wisdom and experience; (c) discipleship is an end in itself. Pastors have often used discipleship to mentor those they identify as having potential. However, to meet this generation's demand for authenticity, if pastors truly believe discipleship is intrinsically valuable, then mentoring must be offered to all, with no guarantee of return. It is important to note that Millennials desire relationship with grandparent/parent figures and a dissolved structure where the pastor is not the centre of discipleship but responsible for a network of mentoring relationships.

Lastly, when it comes to discipleship, challenge is desired. Whether it is memorising Scripture, fasting, serving radically, or giving sacrificially, for a Millennial generation, challenge is a driver and may be your greatest ally when discipling people. Consider who you disciple, how you do it and why you do it? Are these authentic choices? Is there any un-learning you need to do?

The final challenge

If the church cannot learn to speak with authenticity it will not communicate in an intelligible language to Millennials. Perhaps this has been the key reason for their absence. If this is true then the implications for those in leadership of the church are challenging. A new breed of authentic leaders are needed, because the culture of a church is so often determined by its key leaders. Authenticity requires vulnerability – something that does not always come easily, and many of those in older generations can find this more difficult. Vulnerability is not just a personality trait, but a learnable skill, so before resigning yourself to an inability to be vulnerable ask the question, 'Am I willing to embrace this journey of growth?' Cultivating that vulnerability will significantly increase your ability to communicate with authenticity, and if you can achieve that then Millennials will begin to re-engage.⁵

Do not get too comfortable though. Close on the heels of the Millennials are the first generation to have gone through adolescence with a smart phone in their hands. One device, yet the implications have huge cultural and missional consequences for the church. We cannot afford to delay, it is time to engage.