



Editorial



Chine McDonald

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Sometimes it is hard to be a Millennial. My generation has been characterised as the snowflake generation. Author Fay Weldon, in a *Guardian* interview in September 2018, described as ‘jobless, homeless and childless, unlikely to reach Millennials full potential’; ‘the most despairing generation ever conceived’, who are raised by ‘stupid, careless, smug parents’ who fuel narcissism so that their ‘see themselves as centre of the universe’.

I beg to differ. This generation is full of entrepreneurial spirit. Having grown up with technology and social media, the world is smaller and more connected to us than it was to our parents. We aspire to change the world, to stand up for tolerance and against injustice. Maybe this is true of the Millennials you know. But the problem of characterising a generation is that we resort to generalisations. Is it really true to say that those born within a certain bracket of years all display the same behaviours? Clearly not, but it is evident that socio-cultural contexts help to shape human actions and thought. Chris Auckland writes about the economic and political environment that has led to the positive aspects of Millennial behaviours on page 26: ‘We are in crisis; the system is letting us down, and no one is listening. That is why we are the John the Baptist generation, because we are shouting in the wilderness to warn you of what is to come, because it is going to be so much worse. We are not the outliers, we are the warm-up act.’ It is a stark warning to which those who lead churches must pay attention. Because despite the problems of generalisation, one of the things that

seems true of this generation is that they do not think about faith in the same way as their parents or their grandparents. Many just do not think about faith at all. And that is a problem for us as the Church.

I first read David Kinnaman’s *You Lost Me: Why young Christians are leaving Church ... and rethinking faith*¹ a few years ago, while working for the Evangelical Alliance. We were concerned with the seeming exodus of people in their 20s and 30s from UK churches. While children’s and youthwork in many churches were thriving, many found numbers dwindling in early adulthood. Many of the young people who had grown up in their churches left faith once they got to university. Statistically speaking, you were more likely to have survived the Titanic than to have seen your childhood faith survive into adulthood. We felt that we could not just sit back and let a generation go missing from church. We wanted to find out why they were missing and how we could get them back. Kinnaman’s *You Lost Me* provided some of those answers. Although based on observations of US Millennials, it pointed towards an overarching narrative of socio-cultural factors which were similar to those in the UK. Christianity to Millennials was often seen to be hypocritical, judgemental, boring and irrelevant.

While these views present challenges to mission among Millennials, in this edition of Bible in Transmission, Kinnaman points to something I find even more concerning: ‘The most common millennial response to religion in general and

Christianity in particular, is neutral or none at all,' he writes. This is according to a study sponsored by Bible Society and CODEC, which found that just 41 per cent of UK Millennials have a net positive view of Christianity and the Bible. At least any evangelist might know where they stand with the one in seven who have a negative view of the Christian faith. Apathy is much more difficult to tackle.

The exploration of the unique challenges of black majority churches' engagement with Millennials on pages 16–18 once again reiterates that while there are overarching themes when it comes to reaching 20s and 30s, there are also particular cultural challenges. In his fascinating article, Jason Shields explains: 'One of the biggest shifts the BME Church is encountering is the increase in black consciousness of Millennials. The history of Christianity and its involvement in slavery has been a particular sticking point as many black Christians attempt to reconcile their Christian faith and the history of the Church.' As a Nigerian-born British Millennial Christian, this is something I have had to tackle in recent years – extricating my faith from the notion of whiteness and Englishness. This article gives real insight into the different ways that churches are reaching Millennials and how those black and minority ethnic Millennials are in turn reimaging their faith.

When thinking about mission and Millennials, it can be easy to become despondent – to focus on the challenges of reaching this generation and the socio-cultural context which might make this more difficult. I hope you will be struck by the gutsy defence of his generation in Chris Auckland's article because I too believe there is so much to admire in this generation.

This is also a generation that cares greatly about the world around them. In Matthew van Duyvenbode's article, which explores 'Millennial Catholics in England and Wales', we see how this age group emphasises the expectation of helping others. In the 2017 survey, 21% ranked 'helping others' as their top aspiration, more important than lifestyle options such as 'having close friends', 'being happy' and 'living in a safe environment'. Overall, it ranked as the fifth most likely aspiration. This is according to a study called *Complex Catholicism* launched in June 2018. But this was not just a mark of being in the 20s and 30s age group. It marked a shift in the emphases from those Millennials surveyed in 2009, for whom the expectation of helping others ranked as their ninth most likely expectation. Whether in fact this altruism is merely aspirational rather than something mirrored in their behaviours is another matter.

One of the key ways in which we are to help shape Millennial behaviour, perceptions and attitudes to the world around them, as well as their theology, is to help them better engage with the Bible. When I sat on the Bible Society board, this was

one of the questions that I found most pressing. Does reading the Bible only in bite-sized chunks, on our phones detract from the overarching narrative of the biblical story? Does it lead to a picking and choosing of Bible verses that match up with how we want to live our lives and mean that we are more easily able to steer clear of those passages that make us uncomfortable? In his article, David Ford asks how the Church in Britain can help digitally savvy Millennials engage more meaningfully with the Bible. His piece draws on the aforementioned research commissioned by the Bible Society and undertaken by the CODEC research centre in 2017.

One of the key themes that emerges from these pages is authenticity. In her discussion of the place of social media and other digital technologies in the life of the Church, Hannah Stevens reminds us of the importance of the physical presence of open and accessible *authentic* communities that provide opportunities for spiritual growth.

Pete Wynter, in his article on the Church and its mission, makes the same point: 'if the church cannot learn to speak with authenticity it will not communicate in an intelligible language to Millennials.' He argues that the culture of the Church needs to change, that leaders need to learn to become more vulnerable if they are to communicate with authenticity.

We hope that in the following pages, you will be encouraged, equipped and inspired in your mission to Millennial Christians. This edition has been designed in the hopes that it inspires food for thought and helps you look at things in a new way. It is packed with insight, as well as research. In reading through, you will notice that there is not a set definition of what counts as a Millennial. Sociologists and cultural commentators fail to agree on when the Millennial generation begins and ends. Some argue that the Millennial generation started as early as 1975, while others claim it ended as late as 2002. For the purposes of these articles it is best to think of this generation as those in their mid-20s to mid-30s – those who came of age around the millennium.

In reading through the articles, I hope that rather than feeling like all is lost and that the challenges of reaching this generation are too great, you will be inspired to do even more to welcome them home. As David Kinnaman writes: 'Even now there are seeds of hope germinating in the cracks, breaking through in places such as the UK, Ireland, Australia and the USA. What we find confirms what Christianity's long history records: the roots of faithfulness often sink deeper in anxious, unsettled times. Faith can grow even – and sometimes especially – in the darkest of places.'