

A Millennial Talks Back: Practical Theology as a potential strategy for engaging Australian Millennials in churches?

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Introduction

It is a well-reported fact that church attendance in Australia is declining (Powell, 2010). Australian census data demonstrates that between 2001 and 2011, the proportion of the Australian population identifying as Christian decreased from 68% to 52.1% (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2017). Even in denominational expressions that continue to flourish, there remains considerable difficulty—based on both anecdotal and quantitative evidence—in engaging and retaining congregation members aged between 18-30, widely known as the Millennial generation.¹ The Barna Group's *Churchless* (2014) points out that “a younger a person is, the less likely they are to attend church services”, and the National Church Life Survey (NCLS)'s research indicates much the same issue in Australia. Many in this generation have grown up with no conception of the church as community; many others have experienced church but have grown disillusioned of it.

¹ For a more extensive discussion on the definition of Millennials, see Daniel Horan's (2010) “Striving toward Authenticity”.

For Western millennials,² who generally prioritise active participation in a community alongside a genuine desire to enact social justice, the church should be a place where faith intersects with praxis—that is, where practical theology should be at the forefront of innovative church practice. Instead, the church is often seen as hypocritical, interested only in self-preservation, where orthodoxy and orthopraxis, and particularly protecting their own structures, are elevated above everyday concerns (Hughes, 2015).

Much has been written about the Millennial generation and its characteristics, but one key issue from a Millennial perspective is that much of this writing is performed by those outside the generation—mainly those a generation or two older than the Millennials. This has led to a series of generalisations about a generation that many in the generation do not necessarily agree with. There are very few peer reviewed studies that are conducted by Millennials (for reasons that will be discussed later), and this lack of self-identification is a distinct issue in studies regarding Millennials.

As a Millennial pastor (born in 1989) ministering to other Millennials, I often see these issues coming to a head within the church. What’s more, it seems that these issues are critical ones for many churches which struggle to retain Millennial congregation members. Some pastors have tried to reach out to younger Christians by adopting newer music, staging, and lighting. This should not be the solution to the problem. Nor should the answer be to radically transform the church’s preaching style or youth group, casting aside tradition in the interest of hopefully retaining a few young people. The answer, one hopes, should be more holistic.

Millennials can often be misunderstood by many from other generations, and the strategies and methods used to engage them in church life are often outdated or contextually irrelevant, and this has resulted in low rates of attendance, engagement, and retention of Millennials throughout the church body. Millennials can also be subjected to stereotypes and poor rationalizations (for example, the 2017 comments that Millennials could not afford to buy houses because of their proclivities towards spending money at “hipster cafés.”)³ This study aims to provide a Millennial’s perspective on how the church might utilize practical theology in engaging with Millennials and raising their involvement with the church.

The Millennial Generation

Like all generations before them, the Millennial generation (also known as Generation Y, the Net Generation, or the Mosaic Generation by the Barna Group) has its own distinctive traits and peculiarities. Many of these distinctives are agreed upon by writers in both academic and popular press, and are widespread in popular media: Millennials are “entitled”, “materialistic”, “lazy”, “individualistic”, “self-absorbed”, “narcissistic”, “developmentally stunted” and so on (Kelley, 2009; Raymo and Raymo, 2014; Stein, 2013). In one particularly extreme case, Millennials were titled “a generation of narcissists” (Twenge et al., 2008; Twenge and Campbell, 2009). It must be noted, however, that often these generalizations are labels placed upon the generation by those belonging to an older generation. Unlike the lists that define other generations written by

² The nature of this discussion is such that we are only able to focus on “Western” millennials—that is, those Millennials in the “Western” countries of Australia, the United Kingdom, Europe, and the United States. Even then, most of the studies accessed in this discussion are from the United States or Australia, and so we will limit our discussion to these two countries in particular.

³ These comments were made by self-professed Baby Boomer Bernard Salt in *The Australian*. (Bernard Salt, 2016)

sociologists of those generations, Millennials have had relatively little input into how their own generation is defined. A self-identification of distinctive traits is lacking in many constructions of Millennial identity.

Before we turn to self-identification, however, we need to note that there are a number of common variables that characterise the Millennial generation. By most measures, the generation begins with those born in the early 1980s (those who completed high school in 2000) and ends with those born in 2001. Consequently, most Millennials are currently between 16 and 35 years old. Millennials mostly grew up alongside the exponential rise of personal technology, and many find the use of such technology to be an innate skill rather than a taught one (Palfrey and Gasser, 2008; Tapscott, 2009). This leads to one of the defining features of the Millennial generation: a high level of exposure to a vast amount of information and to global cultures. This exposure to a variety of sources for information means that Millennials are often suspicious of trusting any single authority, and are willing to consider a variety of opinions on a subject.⁴

Historically, this generation has not faced the challenges of the previous generations, and as such is likely to take a different view to them. The fall of the Berlin Wall, widely acknowledged to mark the end of the Cold War and the spread of post-WWII Communism, occurred when the oldest Millennials were just 12—and therefore the “threat” of Communism perceived by Gen Xers or Boomers is simply not an issue for many Millennials. Unlike previous generations, until the September 11 attacks in 2001, Millennials grew up in a world without large-scale global conflict. There was no WWII, no Korean War, no Vietnam War and no Cold War – these were learned in history classes rather than lived through.

Economically, many Millennials—particularly Australian Millennials—experienced relative prosperity, or at any rate, a lack of scarcity or hardship. The coming of the new millennium (2000) heralded a particular brand of optimism among many who witnessed it, and given that most millennials grew up amidst this, it is hardly surprising that what many call “entitlement” is simply a sense of expectation derived from growing up in an atmosphere of optimism. As with any generation, a sense of context (historical and otherwise) is vitally important in understanding the generation and its characteristics.

Earlier, we touched on the issue of labelling by older generations, and the lack of recognized self-identification by Millennials. Although many Millennials are uneasy with many of the traits that other generations identify in them, few Millennials have had the opportunity to rectify them. This is, of course, hardly surprising given the median age of the Millennial generation is currently 27; few are inclined towards sociological research, and of those who are, few are at a point in their careers to be able to direct, influence or even publish peer reviewed research into this area. There are, however, a few Millennial writers who have written explorations of the Millennial psyche and the generation’s strengths and weaknesses; they paint a slightly different picture to most other analyses .

Two such writers are: Elisabeth A. Nesbit Sbanotto, who co-authored *Effective Generational Ministry* with Craig L. Blomberg (2016), and Jess W. Rainer, who co-authored *The Millennials* with his father, Thom S. Rainer (2011). Both Nesbit Sbanotto

⁴ Another, important issue is that of the Millennial identity as defined by the Internet – the “digital self”. There is insufficient space here to discuss this issue, but see Horan’s (2010) “Striving Toward Authenticity” for an excellent discussion of the issue.

and Rainer were born in the 80s – Nesbit Sbanotto in 1981, and Rainer in 1985. They have written extensively about the Millennial generation, and here I have condensed their findings into a few key phrases and explanations, combined with some of my own explanatory commentary. Although both authors write to an American context, their findings are generally applicable to Australian Millennials.

- **Diversity:** Millennials are used to, and embrace, diversity. As Nesbit Sbanotto puts it, this is a generation that “has not had to *learn* multiculturalism but instead has embraced it as a core value and norm”.
- **Inclusiveness:** Similarly to the situation with diversity, Millennials have grown up in a world where accepting others was highly valued, and as such their inclusivity extends beyond ethnic or racial boundaries into gender (and gender fluidity), religious, and socio-economic aspects.
- **Individualism:** Rather than being a reactionary protest or suspicion against collectivism, the individualism of the Millennial generation is a celebration of diversity and difference, a result of being treated as unique and special throughout childhood.
- **Overexposure:** As mentioned, Millennials grew up alongside the advent of the Internet and personal technology, and as a generation are inundated with a huge amount of information. This often leads to a sense of apathy or rather helplessness, as Millennials identify a problem, feel a responsibility towards solving it, but are stymied by its sheer size.
- **Adapters:** Nesbit Sbanotto argues that “Millennials did not grow up with the same type of [learning] scaffolding” where there existed a “schema for how to analyse and process new information in order to determine what was trustworthy and what was not.” The rapid advancement of technology, coupled with the relatively slow development of new teaching methods, means that many Millennials have not been taught critical thinking and discernment in a manner that works within their context, and can therefore come across as naïve or uninformed. At the same time, because of this abundance of information, Millennials are adaptable and flexible, and can often learn quickly.
- **Expectancy:** Millennials are not “entitled”, but rather have developed a sense of expectancy given their upbringing as children who were constantly encouraged and validated. They are a reflection of the focuses of the training and parenting they have received, and so are expectant without necessarily having been taught how to achieve these expectations.
- **Respect:** Millennials, unlike other generations, were shown to be respectful of other generations’ achievements, and were able to work alongside others in an egalitarian way (as opposed to Boomers and Gen Xers, who spoke of having to fight against preconceived expectations). They were mindful of their elders’ positive and negative traits, and considered the lack of open-mindedness and tolerance of other generations as a major flaw to avoid.
- **Thinkers:** Unlike previous generations, where obedience was expected before understanding, Millennials were raised to understand before complying; as such, Millennials question everything—not to be contrarian, but rather to understand the motivations and reasoning behind particular actions. This can cause

Millennials to come across as stubborn or recalcitrant, and sometimes Millennials will be reluctant to act without a defined purpose for their actions.

- Collaborators: It is important for Millennials for everyone to have a say, or at least for everyone to have an opportunity to have a say. Feedback in both directions is also important, and communication is vital. Also included in this is a strong sense of egalitarianism, where all opinions, regardless of social construct, were considered equal, and experience was held to be most valuable. This can be a negative trait; often this inclusivity can lead to indecisiveness or slowness in decision making.
- Tribalism: Millennials identify with others through groups who share similar interests or passions, a task made both easier and more complex by the Internet. The Internet has made it easier for individuals to identify their interest groups and to locate similarly minded people; it also exposes individuals to a huge variety of different interests, overwhelming them with choice. Given the breakdown of many racial and cultural barriers in the Millennial generation, these “tribes” allow Millennials to feel like they have participated in a larger cause, and identify with others. Millennials may shift and alter their tribal affiliations over time, and when participating in conflicting tribes, tend to follow the will of the tribe that they most strongly identify with.
- Purpose: Millennials have grown up being told that they have a purpose, and that they can change the world. Because of this, many Millennials will rally around causes that align with their values. Many are interested in meaningful work and making a difference, and are likely to join in tribes that help them to feel a sense of purpose.

These distinctive characteristics paint a more holistic picture of a generation yet to reach full adulthood, who have not been tested in the same way as generations before, and whose context is very different. Many of these characteristics are agreed upon by other generational researchers, albeit using different terminology (Howe and Strauss, 2000; Underwood, 2007). Of course, as with all other generational research, these traits are generalized across an entire population, and many exceptions do occur.

What about how Millennials relate to church? Millennials are often characterized as “spiritual but not religious”, and are generally open to church experiences in search of an authentic faith (Smith and Denton, 2005; Hayes, 2007; Horan and Cicade, 2011). Even before looking at the evidence from the social sciences, we are able to predict from this list of traits and characteristics that Millennials outside of the church (who have not experienced it) are likely to be suspicious of it, due to its highly subjective nature, its demand for absolute faith, its exclusivity and its perceived hierarchical structure. Of those Millennials in the church, it is expected that many might identify more strongly with churches with an inclusive, large Millennial congregation, and at the same time many might feel frustrated due to the lack of collaboration and the lack of direct purpose in churches with more hierarchical structures.

This sense of “purpose” is important for churches who are seeking to retain Millennial congregation members: aside from the sense of existential purpose that is a natural endowment of faith, an earthy, practical sense of daily purpose is important in motivating Millennials in their faith. In other words, a church’s theology must be practical.

Engaging Millennials with Theology

Perhaps the largest issue with theology is the sheer amount of language and terminology that it is often encased in. The average congregation member, regardless of educational status, would find it a chore to wade through the often obtuse language used to describe the task of theology. Articulating and defining theology in plain, simple language is incredibly important for helping make it accessible for all congregation members.

As we have discussed, Millennials are interested in understanding the reasons and motivations behind a task, rather than simply accomplishing it. This means that theology must be practical, understandable, and relate to everyday life—in other words, it must have a purpose. Here, the basic principles and tenets of practical theology are very helpful in providing a framework for churches to engage with Millennials. A Millennial might ask: “What is practical theology, and why does it matter?” Or better yet, “How does theology make my faith practical?” This means that theologians must avoid overcomplicating Christian theology; theology should be written in a simple, easy-to-understand fashion that requires little additional explanation. The language of academia can be retained for those in academia.

Perhaps the most straightforward articulation of practical theology is Browning’s (1976: p.14) definition of practical theology as

The reflective process which the church pursues in its efforts to articulate the theological grounds of practical living in a variety of areas such as work, sexuality, marriage, youth, ageing and death.

To put it even more simply, practical theology is the church bringing together the theological with the everyday, working out how best for people to live a meaningful theological life within their own context. In other words, practical theology provides meaning to everyday life from a theological perspective. As Anderson (2001: p.24) puts it,

The task of practical theology... is to examine theological understandings in the light of contemporary experience in order that their meaning within God’s redemptive movement in the present can be developed and assessed.

To elaborate further on the praxis of practical theology,⁵ it is best to turn to Osmer’s (2008) *Practical Theology: An Introduction*, where Osmer argues that the tasks of practical theology fall into four questions:

1. “What is going on?”—the descriptive-empirical task, which seeks to ascertain patterns, information, and context when faced with particular challenges or situations.
2. “Why is this happening?”—the interpretive task, which tries to provide meaning using a variety of academic theories (though, of course, not strictly limited to these theories).
3. “What ought to be going on?”—the normative task, using theological concepts to interpret situations, creating correct praxis through theological concepts and through observation of best practice.

⁵ An excellent discussion on this subject can be found in Ganzevoort and Roeland (2014) “Lived religion: the praxis of Practical Theology”.

4. “How might we respond?”—the pragmatic task, which aims to provide a desirable solution, but also engages with reflective feedback.

Osmer’s four questions form a helpful framework that can inform church praxis, especially in building church services or activities that relate well to Millennials. There is a clear correlation between the interpretive question, “why is this happening?” and the Millennial desire to understand the reasoning and motivation behind tasks. The pragmatic task is also one that can be well tailored to Millennials—it provides an opportunity for purpose and also for collaboration. It also provides an opportunity for inter-generational dialogue, where those who have faced similar questions in the past can teach valuable theological lessons and provide some ideas on how to best create solutions. If these four questions were utilized correctly in the creation of church praxis, practical theology could well be the catalyst for reinvigorating Millennial involvement in churches. I will demonstrate this in a case study towards the end of this discussion.

Making Theology Practical

Applying these four tasks to the praxis of church should be a somewhat natural process for all worshippers. The issue, however, lies not with the tasks themselves but rather who is involved, and what they relate to. For Millennials, theology cannot remain within the church, but must expand to encompass the questions of everyday life – questions that the church is often not addressing (like the current bipartisan agreement on asylum seeker policy), or not answering in a satisfactory way (like the question of how the church interacts with the LGBTQI community), or questions the church is rereading (such as women in leadership). It is important for the church to remember some of the traits and tenets that Millennials take for granted (such as diversity), not in order to reframe its theology in light of these questions, but rather to recognize that these questions are the questions that contemporary society is facing, and to respond accordingly.

Other internal issues are also important – issues that point to the divide between generations. These questions are covered well in Sider and Lowe’s (2016) *The Future of our Faith*, a conversation between two evangelical leaders with a forty-year age difference. Questions raised address both generations of church leaders, and include topics such as evangelism, marriage, the church and postmodernism, political witness, creation care, and living like Jesus. These questions are more than theological puzzles; they are daily realities grappled with by congregation members who are seeking to make sense of their faith in a world increasingly dominated by a Millennial worldview.

As churches begin to respond to these societal issues, it is important for this to be a task that Millennials are involved in. Given their interests in collaboration and their expectant attitudes, as well as their acceptance of diversity, individuality and inclusiveness, Millennials would expect to be involved in any such discussion, and would also expect that any such discussion would involve good representation from a variety of stakeholders within the church. Millennials have grown up being told that their opinion matters and is important – and they will leave any church or organization that does not value their input.

Here, the church runs into a few obvious issues: data from the 1996 NCLS survey, for example, shows that at the time, a very small percentage of church leaders were aged 20-29 (ranging between 0% for some denominations to a maximum of 8% for the Salvation Army) (Kaldor, Dixon, and Powell: 1999). The NCLS’s more recent surveys

show a very similar rate – although 29% of Protestant church staffing was aged between 15 and 39 years, just 16% of senior clergy (defined as the principal leaders of churches) were within this age bracket (Hancock, Pepper and Powell: 2015). Although this is not necessarily representative of most churches' leadership teams, it is important to note that it is most likely that Millennials were spread between a variety of less "senior" staff jobs such as "youth worker" or "worship co-ordinator" (comprising 49% of the staff) rather than "senior minister", "pastor", or "business manager" (51% of staff). This simply means that there is, unsurprisingly, a lack of representation of the Millennial age group at higher levels of church leadership.

On a practical level, this means that as the world is shaped to suit the younger Millennial generation, many churches will find it increasingly difficult to adapt, given the advanced age of their leadership, until it is too late (a problem identified by almost all of the contemporary research into the future of the church). As a result, many churches will continue to be seen as out-of-touch and subsequently abandoned by Millennials.

One solution would be the outworking of practical theology in a church setting, with strong Millennial involvement. We have already discussed the distinct characteristics of the Millennial generation—they are in a sense uniquely equipped to consider the challenges faced by the church in contemporary society. By coming to any particular question as a church, collaborating on creating a response, hearing everyone's voices, and agreeing on the solution together, the congregation will feel as though they have been part of the process—and as we have seen, this is vital for creating a sense of belonging to the group for Millennials. As Millennials grow more and more involved in both the decision-making process and in enacting the solutions in groups, they will grow to identify more and more with the church, and will eventually consider it their "tribe". This trend is often seen in youth groups where the youth pastor and youth leaders are of similar ages – all of the leaders feel as though they have a modicum of influence over the group (or at least feel that their opinion will be heard and considered), and so consider it part of their "tribe". Although individual expressions within the tribe are expected and celebrated, it is important that collaboration occurs, and that the tribe works towards a common goal.

Putting it into practice: A case study

One particularly helpful case study is drawn from my own experience attending a large Melbourne congregation. A few years ago, the youth and young adult pastor realised that our church was not addressing the question of mission—specifically international mission—in a way that was practical and communicable for Millennials. In order to rectify this, he began a new initiative called PROJECTS. A challenge was issued: to raise a set amount of money to fund development in a village in Cambodia. Over a three-year period, the youth and young adults theologically wrestled with their involvement in global mission in the context of this challenge. Although it was never explicitly articulated, the discussion could be framed and articulated using Osmer's four tasks of practical theology:

1. "What is going on?" – There was a village in need in Cambodia.
2. "Why is this happening?" – Because of structural poverty, and a lack of aid and development focus in the area.
3. "What should be going on?" – The people of the village needed access to basic human rights like clean drinking water, education, and healthcare.

4. “How might we respond?” – The church community could raise money to help the village, the church community could raise awareness, and the members of the church could visit them and report back.

Each week’s preaching was aimed at engaging everyone in the youth and young adult congregations with the theological discussion around the four questions. The question of aid and development was always present amidst the youth / young adults’ teaching agenda. Some preachers from within the community grappled with the question of structural inequality, “why is this happening?”, seeking to provide a theological answer to the question of suffering. Individuals and groups were challenged to contribute their own creative ideas towards fundraising, building a tribal community and therefore providing an answer to the question of “how might we respond?”. Every person was invited to participate in some way in contributing to the solution—although this was a preordained solution, the outcomes of which had already been created for the group by the pastor, it was still an answer that every individual had some sort of stake in and voiced.

Over the course of the three years, as the initiative ran its course, the Millennial community of the church was united in the pursuit of a common goal. Importantly, this was a goal that every person felt empowered to contribute toward. It became a source for identity for the wider tribe of the youth / young adult groups, and acted as a rallying point for every young person. Within it, individuality and diversity could be expressed and encouraged, and every congregation member was learning about how they could respond to poverty. Most importantly, everyone was engaged with the question of outworking practical theology, demonstrating that the church was actively contributing towards helping others and making faith “practical”.

Of course, this was an exercise that involved only Millennials; however, this could be extended to include an entire church community. Millennials want the church to respond to the big issues that they regularly confront: homosexuality, homelessness, refugees, domestic violence, and so on. Any church that begins to respond to these questions from a practical perspective, involving Millennials at every point in the discussion, giving them opportunities to contribute ideas and opinions, allowing them to learn from those who came before whilst retaining their distinctives, will begin to help the Millennials in its congregation to feel as though they are a valued and important part of their “tribe”, that they belong to the church.

Conclusion

Data from the most recent Australian census shows a decline in self-identified Christians, especially among Millennials (ABS, 2017). Churches nevertheless continue to play a “huge role” in Australia (Hughes, 2007), and so must begin considering how to engage and retain Millennials in their congregations. One helpful way to do so is through an ethic of theology that delivers a practical response to the questions faced by the world today. In order to best engage Millennials, such theology must not come “from above”, but must be both representative and consultative in nature, involving all generations that are active attenders in the church. It cannot take for granted the church’s position in the world, but must adapt to the rapidly changing context of both the church and its congregation. Although there is no guaranteed solution, a practical theology that engages with everyday life will achieve a number of helpful goals, key among which is the identification of Millennials with other churchgoers as their “tribe”.

To put it simply, those of us from the Millennial generation want two things from the church: representation that is taken seriously, and practical action that is in line with the faith that we hear preached from pulpits. To Millennials, faith is defined by its praxis, and though it may seem naïve, a great many of us do believe that a genuine outworking of our faith can change the world. Any church that carefully engages with practical theology and thinks through Osmer's four questions will be taking its first steps towards building a community where Millennials feel welcome and empowered to contribute towards the church's wider goal.

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