

# HOW TO ENGAGE MILLENNIALS

Bridging the gap to the  
fastest growing segment  
of your church



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# ABOUT THIS EBOOK

You know it's important for your church to engage millennials, but you're not sure where to start. We put together this resource to help you understand what's special about the millennial generation and start thinking about how you can make them important members of your community.

It's not about making surface-level changes in your church in order to appeal to millennials. It's about learning to see the world through the eyes of this new generation and preparing your church to do the same with the generations to come.

We'll show you how!

## About echurch

Pushpay and echurch were created in response to well-documented declines in both tithing and church attendance. By simply making giving available on your congregation's smartphones (connected in real time to the church's website and database), we help pastors address the disconnect between the church and younger, tech-savvy generations.

This is the echurch and Pushpay model, and it's being used by thousands of churches across the world to help drive sustainable increases in all giving, especially first-time, young, and recurring givers.

Read more about the heart behind our model at: [echurchgiving.com/resources](http://echurchgiving.com/resources).

## About Jayson D. Bradley

Jayson D. Bradley is a well-known writer and pastor in Bellingham, WA. He's a regular contributor to the [echurch.blog](http://echurch.blog) and *Relevant Magazine*. His own blog, JaysonDBradley.com, has been voted one of the 25 Christian blogs you should be reading.

All the first-person pronouns in this book are his.

# WHAT IS IT WITH THESE MILLENNIALS?

Unless you've been entirely isolated with no web access for the last five years, you've seen thousands of articles about millennials and their relationship to the church. While some of the conversation has been extremely helpful and thought provoking, a lot of it has been absurd.

This generation has been called entitled, over-sensitive, self-absorbed, shallow, and undisciplined, but the truth is they were just unlucky enough to be the generation that coincided with the rise of the internet. Can you imagine the blogs, articles, and Facebook posts that would have been written during the sixties as the "Greatest Generation" reacted to young, hippy boomers? It wouldn't have been pretty.

# SAME DISCUSSION, DIFFERENT GENERATION

The real reason churches need to wrestle with how to engage millennials isn't because this generation is so different from the generations that came before. It's because the church bears a responsibility to stay flexible and fluid in the way that it responds to every generation. This ebook isn't about just millennials—it's about the how a local church can extend its life cycle.

Today's discussions about millennials in the church mirror the discussions going on in the church during the late sixties and throughout the seventies. Back then, it seemed that the fights were over acceptable church instruments, music, hairstyles, and dress. But the real question then was the same as it is today: Is the church willing to rethink authenticity for a new generation of believers?

We want to look at engaging millennials not as an end in itself, but as a lesson in how to engage culture in a way that enlarges rather than diminishes the church's influence.

# CONSIDERING A CHURCH'S LIFE CYCLE

Like any biological organism, a local church has a life cycle. When churches are aware that this exists and know where they are in the cycle, they can take some control. The truth is that a church can fend off decay or, by exerting enough focused energy, even turn back the clock in the cycle.

# THE FIVE STEPS IN A CHURCH'S LIFE CYCLE

## Birth

Like any organism, a church is birthed into the world. Maybe it's created by a team of church planters, or maybe it's birthed through mitosis. This can happen fairly quickly, but it generally won't be in the birth stage more than a year or two.

In many ways, the general character of the church at this point can best be described as a *tabula rasa*—a clean start. And during this season, the pastor and planting leadership team play an integral role in setting the church's direction for years to come.

## Adolescence

Here, a church is moving away from being an infant and starting to grow into the vision and mission that was set for it. This is the era where the church has the most vitality and opportunity for the greatest organic impact. Like any teenager, it's gangly and struggling to come into its own, but its incredible energy and enthusiasm tend to make up for its flaws.

The adolescence stage can last anywhere from a year or two to an entire generation. This exciting time in the life of a church is entirely dependent upon the vision and drive of the leadership that birthed the church and those who have taken the reigns since.

## Adulthood

This is where the church begins to settle into a groove. Its identity is becoming fixed, and its particular traditions, practices, and liturgy are well established—new ideas aren't being introduced as often as they used to be.

The church is not really growing like it used to, but it isn't shrinking, either. Financially, it has a steady income and is able to fund a lot more programs and ministries. When new people are added, they tend to resemble the lifestyle, age, and background of the current congregation. People outside of that demographic often struggle to find their place.

It's possible that a church can simultaneously maintain a spirit of its former adolescence during adulthood, but it's very difficult. At this stage, the

congregation is generally so far removed from the pastor and the movement that birthed the church and created its initial momentum that it begins to settle for comfort over mobilization.

Recreating some sense of adolescence requires leaders that are willing to shake things up, ask difficult questions, and promote uncomfortable changes. However, the conflict introduced by shaking up settlers is often avoided, and the church slips into the final stages.

## Decline

Here, we see a church starting to reach the end of its life cycle. You can see the deterioration starting to set in as everything begins to decline: membership, participation, budget, and local influence.

Sometimes, the evolution from adulthood into decline happens so quickly that no one notices the transition from one to the other. Most often, visitors can recognize decline long before anyone in the church notices it's happening.

## Death

With the help of generous members and denominational oversight, churches in decline can be on life support for years. But without an infusion of energy and vision, they will eventually succumb to death. It's been estimated that the number of churches closing may be as high 8,000–10,000 a year!

## Prolonging the cycle by challenging perceptions

To prolong the life cycle of any church, there needs to be an understanding that the church doesn't exist to meet the needs of any one generation. A healthy congregation should be constantly readdressing the concerns and perspectives of a continually evolving society with timeless truth.

The picture of a vibrant church isn't one of a staid and placid lake. It isn't fixed in time and place and kept fresh by a constant cycle of members. It's a river that's kept alive by constant movement and energy. It's always fresh, always moving, always adapting to changes in its surroundings, while leaving a marked effect on its environment.

With millennials, as with any generation, this means that the church strives to understand the myriad of influences that have formed their attitudes and perceptions. The church accepts that many of those perspectives are in response to the deficiencies and sins of previous generations. It invites them to get swept into the river of Christ's love and purpose, while ensuring that Christian community is a safe place for them to struggle with their questions, frustrations, preferences, and ideas.

# WHO ARE MILLENNIALS REALLY?

Authors Neil Howe and William Strauss coined the term “millennial generation” to describe the people who would reach adulthood around the turn of the 21st century. While there is some disagreement with their delineation, it’s generally accepted that millennials include those born between 1982 and 2004.

By and large, millennials have grown up in a quickly changing, technology-filled world. Computers have always been part of their consciousness, and they’ve watched the incredibly rapid changes associated with the technological revolution. These advancements tend to make them optimistic about humanity’s ability to deal with any world crisis.

This optimism manifests itself in a sincere belief in the power of individuals to have a significant impact in their world. Where the flower children of the sixties embraced a countercultural “turn on, tune in, and drop out” movement, the millennial generation feels called to wake up, show up, and get worked up. It’s a generation of loyal activists who believe that their involvement matters.

Despite their hopefulness, they’ve also become a generation extremely cynical and wary of most institutions. A recent [Harvard poll](#) revealed the low percentage of trust millennials in the US show for various institutions:

- ▶ The media: 12 percent
- ▶ Wall Street: 14 percent
- ▶ Congress: 17 percent
- ▶ Federal government: 25 percent
- ▶ President of the United States: 37 percent
- ▶ The United Nations: 37 percent
- ▶ The Supreme Court: 42 percent
- ▶ The United States military: 53 percent

This distrust of institutions includes the church. In a [2015 article from CNN](#), readers were met with the startling fact that faith isn’t being handed down to millennials. According to the article, only 11 percent of millennials identify as mainline Protestants and 16 percent as Catholics.

# WHY ARE MILLENNIALS LEAVING THE CHURCH?

## Growing distrust and uncertainty

It wasn't long ago when multiple generations lived and died without experiencing many changes that directly challenged their existence, traditions, or worldview. Even landmark innovations like the printing press, manned flight, and the assembly line left areas of everyday life virtually untouched. The world was as large as the local community, and people trusted the individual and institutional authority figures in their lives.

It was during the upheaval surrounding the Vietnam War and Watergate when cracks began to appear in the veneer of institutional dependability. But as I stated earlier, young adults' response to the unrest and uncertainty of the sixties was to withdraw and create their own subculture totally separated from, and independent of, society's institutions and expectations.

Because it was a countercultural rather than deconstructive movement, society was patiently waiting for the children of the sixties to rejoin them when their cause proved directionless and unsustainable. And even though that generation eventually abandoned a great deal of their idealism, their distrust of the establishment took root.

## Enter the millennial generation

In the early eighties, the first millennials started being born, but unlike their boomer predecessors, they weren't born into a world of relative stability. Their whole existence has played out against a background of constant, world-changing advancements. This state of technological evolution has created a generation that's not only comfortable with change, but looks forward to it. While boomers coined the idea of "thinking outside the box," millennials are part of a world where progress demands it.

The internet has made the world smaller and information more pervasive. News doesn't need to be routed through corporately owned media channels, and writers no longer have to rely on publishing companies to get their work in front of others. Social media has enabled people to communicate directly with corporations and celebrities, and it has also helped them build community with others who share their views.

Technology has empowered millennials. Like no other generation before them, they have a unique perspective and a voice. They're no longer dependent upon societal structures requiring them to "pay their dues" in order to earn their place or significance in the world. The proliferation of young entrepreneurs and inventors is a sign that this generation has found a way around that social construct.

Unlike young adults in the sixties, millennials feel equipped to challenge and resist institutions that they no longer trust. They feel no need to withdraw into a countercultural movement if they have the ability to subvert the current one.

## Millennials and the church

This is one of the biggest areas of conflict that the church has with this generation. Over hundreds of years in the West, Christianity has enjoyed a position of influence and authority in public life. Millennials are no longer willing to buy into that authority on principle. Like any institution, the church needs to prove that it has the best interests of others at heart.

It's getting harder for the church to derive its authority from tradition and the Bible. Millennials have inherited a world where progress is hindered by unuseful perspectives and values. It's not that millennials are contrary for sake of being difficult; they're just convinced there is no intrinsic value in thinking "this is the way we've always done it." Every institution is essentially on the hook to reestablish its importance and significance.

This isn't a bad thing. If you think about it, it's actually quite good. For hundreds of years, the church has been handed a sizable amount of clout and influence. People respected and cherished it because it was important to their families and local culture. This has been helpful for getting people to attend church and adopt Christian values, but it hasn't always been ideal for getting them to make a life-changing commitment to Christ as Lord.

In many ways, millennials are pushing the reset button and putting the American church in a position similar to what the church has been experiencing in Europe for some time. It feels like a crisis, but I assure you, it's not. It's an incredible opportunity for churches to re-establish their priorities and communicate the significance of the gospel in a brand-new way.

## Dumping the clichés

If you want to begin to truly appeal to millennials, you have to begin by dumping the negative stereotypes about millennials. Too often, when discussing this generation, words like "spoiled" and "shallow" are bandied about—but just about every generation since the Great Depression has been dismissed as entitled. Perpetuating stereotypes negatively impacts your perspective and undermines your true goals.

In these discussions, we tend to forget that you can't paint an entire generation with one broad brush stroke. Millennials in rural Virginia aren't the same as their peers in Long Island. And while a conversation like this one almost requires some generalization, there are many distinct perspectives and values present in this generational group.

It's probably also important to remember that every generation has a context and is formed from a shared background of similar influences and attitudes. The lumber that millennials are using to construct this epoch has been milled and passed down by previous generations. It's more than fair to say that the strengths and weaknesses of any era are built upon the best and worst characteristics of those who have come before.

# HOW DO WE ENGAGE MILLENNIALS?

In the early nineties, a family moved from Texas to Bellingham, Washington, with a plan to open a restaurant serving authentic Texas barbecue. They secured a location that was rather long and narrow, and in an effort to make the most of the space, they ran two long, picnic-style tables down the length of the establishment.

The restaurant opened and people loved the food. But it wasn't too long before the owners noticed that most people took their food to go. They never had more than three or four families who would actually sit in their restaurant to eat. It became obvious pretty quickly that people in my town weren't open to the idea of sitting down with strangers at a shared table.

This came from a culture that had made privacy a sign of success. You drove into your garage and entered your house through an internal door. You never had to see any of your neighbors if you didn't want to. In fact, if you were really successful, you lived in a gated community that isolated you from the rest of the world.

Now, in 2016, the busiest restaurants in my town feature large, open courtyards full of regular-sized tables where millennials sit and share meals with friends and people they've never met. Even this generation's most introverted seem comfortable getting lost in a crowd. This hunger for authentic community seems to be a huge distinction of the millennial generation.

## Creating authentic community

The church has given a lot of lip service to community, but it's had a tough time delivering on its promise. In keeping with the "seclusion as affluence" emphasis in the eighties and nineties, people got used to going to church on Sundays and maybe a couple times during the week, but it was largely programmatic. If people from church gathered, it was usually around an agenda. Many churchgoers seldom if ever opened their homes up with relationship-building as the ultimate goal.

To recapture the attention of millennials, the church will have to rethink some important elements of community.

### 1. Authority must be given

When I was growing up, ministers were respected members of the community, even if you never went to church. According to a 2013 Pew Research Center poll, only 37 percent of Americans now think ministers make a big contribution to society's well-being—with 18 percent saying that they contribute nothing.

I became a youth pastor in 1992, and I shared that job title with people every chance that I could. Part of that was immaturity, but part of it was the social significance that came with the title of “pastor.” But by the time I was an ordained pastor planting my own church in 2003, I avoided telling people what I did for a living as much as I possibly could. The “pastor” title had started to feel like a disability.

It's important for clergy to recognize that authority is given to us by individuals and earned incrementally by our investment in trustworthy relationship. You might have 5,000 people in your church and only be pastoring half of them (or less). There comes a point when people give you authority in their lives. When I say authority, I don't mean the ability to tell them what to do. I mean the permission to speak truth to them.

This is true for the Bible as well. You can't presume that millennials pay special attention to or are influenced by the Scriptures. In the same way that you build a personal relationship with them in order to earn significance, you will have to create a framework with which they can develop a trust in the Scriptures as well.

## Cultivating authentic leadership

My dad was a significant figure in my life. Whenever he answered a question, I assumed his answer was completely accurate and never needed to be questioned. It wasn't until I was an adult that I realized that he—probably like a lot of parents—made stuff up when he didn't know the answer to questions.

Segue to when my kids were in junior high. They'd ask me a question and then have the audacity to Google the accuracy of my answer. I was deflated (and mildly irritated), not so much because they didn't trust me, but because I got caught winging it way too often. It wasn't too long before I realized that my best bet was to say, “I'm not sure; let's figure it out together.”

This is a style of leadership that the church needs to start excelling at. The Christian leader's job isn't to have all the definitive answers; it's to help create a hunger in people to chase their questions into the arms of Christ.

Technology has challenged civilization's need for the wise, old sage. The Information Age has diminished the demarcation between the availability of collected facts and the wisdom that comes from experience. With instant access to all the world's information and their skepticism about previous generations, millennials don't necessarily defer to the wisdom of others based on age. Instead, as with authority, they tend to offer respect to those who have earned it through relationship.

Clergy don't need to provide definitive answers for every metaphysical question. The millennial generation has little use for or interest in clichés. This is good news! Feeling responsible for having all the right answers is exhausting. If you are interested in displaying authentic leadership, “I don't know; let's figure it out together” is a good place to start.

## 2. Community is an end in itself

As I alluded to earlier, the church has developed a habit of using community as a means to an end. When we get people together, it's for them to learn, minister, or serve. That's great, but it's not enough.

We need to make community an end in itself. This is more than scheduling potlucks without an agenda; it's about coming up with a strategy for fostering and strengthening life-giving, transparent, and trustworthy community. The first-century church understood this:

*And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved. (Acts 2:42–47)*

The amazing experiences they shared were birthed out of community. Community was a sign of God's involvement. It's not enough to simply get people together; we need to teach them to be comfortable being spontaneously spiritual together.

### Social media is a community-building tool

Social media is wonderful for church marketing, but don't stop there. If you're truly interested in building relationships with millennials, you'll learn to see social media as a tool for creating and strengthening relationship.

Too many boomer members of the clergy view platforms like Facebook and Twitter as necessary but time-wasting evils. What they don't realize is that millennials aren't creating counterfeit community online. The community being forged online is sincere—it's just that the boundaries and definition of community are expanding. If you want to forge a connection with this generation, you'll take advantage of the opportunities that social media provides. Not only can you use it to forge personal relationships, but you can also learn quite a bit about millennial hopes, fears, and beliefs.

# USE TECHNOLOGY TO MEET MILLENNIALS WHERE THEY ARE

The way millennials view technology is different than past generations. They're exponentially more interested in its usefulness than its novelty. Because of their constant tech exposure, millennials have moved beyond being drawn in by gimmicks. If it doesn't serve a useful purpose, it doesn't generate interest.

As odd as it sounds, millennials have a significant desire to embrace old-world simplicities and traditions while taking advantage of modern conveniences to do things more efficiently. They're not interested in glitz and glamour. This is why there's a significant movement by evangelicals in this generation toward liturgy and a worship experience that draws more from [high church traditions](#).

It's important for churches to use technology in a way that doesn't distract from worship and community. When a church considers a new software or media solution, it really needs to wrestle with the ways that it's contributing to genuine spiritual engagement. Smoke machines need not apply.

## The importance of mobile apps for millennials

One of the most important modern advancements has been the rise of mobile computing. [Research confirms](#) that millennials spend, on average, 90 hours a month using smartphone apps. Of all the digital media consumed, 40 out of every 60 minutes are spent on a mobile device—most of those minutes involving apps.

This is an important shift as millennials' phones intersect with every area of their lives. Think about it like this:

The alarm on David's phone wakes him up at 9 a.m. on Saturday morning because he has to get his sister a birthday present. So he opens up his banking app, transfers \$50 over to his checking account, and arranges for an Uber ride.

Knowing that he doesn't want to wander around the mall on his own, he opens the Facebook Messenger app and messages three of his friends to meet him in the food court in an hour.

On the way to the mall, David listens to Spotify and checks the price of the shoes his sister wants on three different store apps to see who has the best deal. While he's checking prices, he gets a text from his youth leader reminding him for the

third time that he's running out of time to get his money in for next weekend's ski trip. He grimaces and thinks, "I need to go to the ATM, but I don't want to pay that stupid \$3 service fee."

He meets his friends, and while they talk about the stores they're going to visit, David pays for his Americano by swiping his Starbucks app. The gang heads to Target to get David's sister's shoes, and on the way there, they buy tickets for an afternoon movie from the Fandango app.

This is seriously the average day in the life of a millennial. The only hangup in this story was that David couldn't manage his church relationship when he needed to. Can you imagine if he could have just opened his [church app](#) and made his ski trip payment? Instead, he's required to bring cash or a check—and like most millennials, he never carries very much cash.

According to a [J. Walter Thompson Intelligence study](#), millennials are changing the face of finance. Forty-four percent would prefer to use their phone instead of cash to make the smallest of purchases. Sixty-two percent are perfectly comfortable connecting their payment information to retailer apps in order to speed up payments.

If the church is going to teach fiscal responsibility and generosity, it's going to need to meet millennials where they are. Requiring them to adapt to the way we've been doing things for the last 90 years is a losing scenario for everyone involved. Besides, we're only now experiencing the older edge of the millennial generation. Within five to seven years, churches' solvency will require them to move toward mobile giving.

## Engaging millennials with church apps

Millennials are hungry to experience authentic community and feel no dissonance with the idea that community can be partly facilitated through digital media. A [church app](#) makes perfect sense to them.

With the rise of streaming media and bingeable content on Netflix, Hulu, and Amazon, it only makes sense to this podcasting generation that content should be available at all times. They expect to open up a [church app](#) when it's convenient and watch, share, read, or listen to sermons and other content from the church.

It would be a genuine surprise to them if they couldn't quickly access an app that would update them on church events and prayer concerns or enable them to make a donation.

This isn't about catering to an indulgent or entitled generation. This is the world they live in, and if we want to communicate the relevance of the gospel, we're going to need to meet them where they are.

# DEVELOP A WORLD-CHANGING VISION

The internet has made the world so much smaller than it seemed 50 years ago. Millennials don't have to look to books, films, television, or even missionaries to learn what the world is like. In fact, social media platforms have made it possible for the millennial generation to have a complex and nuanced understanding of breaking world events before media outlets do.

The average Twitter user develops international relationships with people from all sorts of philosophical and religious backgrounds. As Americans in California discuss literature with Iranian students in Tehran, a growing international homogenization has created a greater sense that people have more in common than what divides them.

All of this contributes to a feeling of optimistic responsibility. Millennials want to be involved on a grand scale and genuinely feel that they can make a difference. When they see the world, they see an ecosystem where the decisions they make have a worldwide ripple effect. For instance, they can see the direct connection between the clothes they buy and the labor conditions in third-world countries.

Churches that want to reach out to millennials will also share their desire to make a big impact.

## Focusing the church outward

Almost in tandem with the rise of big-box stores in the nineties, the church started focusing on making itself a one-stop destination. When churches thought of ways to invest their income in growth, they dreamed about buying huge stage sets and coffee shops. This investment was about creating a place that would draw people in.

This mindset holds little interest for world-minded (not to be confused with “worldly”) millennials. They see an inwardly focused church as a living contradiction. They want to make a difference in their communities and in the world.

The challenge to churches is to not simply see community involvement as a method to generate kingdom or church growth. This generation sees through using service as a tool for evangelistic outreach. Don't get me wrong; I'm completely sold on the fact that more people would be coming to Christ if the church was more focused on serving our communities. But millennials are looking for churches that have advocacy, charity, and service in their DNA.

## Building bridges and not walls

I was one of a handful of local Christian leaders invited to a dinner in the home of a celebrity chef who also happens to be a Muslim. During this amazing meal, we sat around a large table while she and her husband answered questions about the beliefs, practices, and experiences of Muslims in America.

This dinner was birthed out this couple's desire to create some reasonable discourse with Christians whose understanding of Muslims might be more informed by news stories about ISIS and international terrorism than by any relationships with actual Muslims. Throughout the evening, no question was off limits, and their hospitality was so sweet and sincere. The night was a huge success, and true friendships were formed that day.

In retrospect, I see this dinner as being a perfect embodiment of generational values. Our millennial-Muslim host wasn't trying to convert us; she was attempting to build a bridge between two disparate communities. Since that evening, I have had wonderful and deep discussions with this couple.

Because the world is getting smaller, and people are more exposed to a variety of people groups and ideas, millennials have a real wariness of any religious identity that appears to be built upon an "us vs. them" worldview or that adopts a condescending and scoffing demeanor towards others' beliefs.

This doesn't mean that the church needs to soft-pedal what makes Christianity unique. It means that a Christ-like posture is imperative in any discussion about why the Christian faith is extraordinary. Ultimately, we should be able to communicate what's special about Jesus in a way that makes people thankful we're part of their community—even if they never make the choice to follow him.

# SERVING JESUS BY SERVING MILLENNIALS

The fact that God sent his Son to save humanity is a timeless truth. But the way this truth is shared, communicated, and experienced needs to develop with changing culture. We don't know what future generations will look like, but we do know that they will need us to express the message of Christ in a way that resonates with the world they inhabit.

If you're interested in seeing how accessible a church app is for your church and discovering how it can help revolutionize your ministry, contact echurch today for a free demo of the total engagement package!

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