



# Hearing the Millennials: Ministry alongside an Unchurched Generation for the Sake of the Gospel

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The release of the Apple iPhone represents a sociological tipping point of considerable importance for the vitality and sustainability of Christian institutions. After the June 2007 announcement about this technological phenomenon, the Western world accelerated toward constant mobile connection. In 2019, 81 percent of American adults owned a smartphone.<sup>1</sup> Additionally, approximately eight in ten adults in the United States go online every day.<sup>2</sup> Those who came of age during the advent of the smartphone would be more likely to remark that they and their community do not “go online”—rather, they “live online.”<sup>3</sup> This experience of constant connection has had profound effects on how millennials and

<sup>1</sup> “Mobile Fact Sheet, Pew Research Center: Internet & Tech, June 12, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/fact-sheet/mobile>.

<sup>2</sup> Andrew Perrin and Madhu Kumar, “About three-in-ten U.S. adults say they are ‘almost constantly’ online,” Pew Research Center, July 25, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/07/25/americans-going-online-almost-constantly>.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Dimock, “Defining Generations: Where Millennials End and Generation Z Begins,” Pew Research Center, January 17, 2019, <https://tinyurl.com/y2vce6c4>.

*How people hear and respond to the gospel and to Christianity is often greatly influenced by the experiences and assumptions of their generational cohort. By looking at these factors among members of the most recent American generations, it is possible to find ways that the gospel can be shared more effectively and appropriately.*

subsequent generations conceive of themselves, reflect on the world around them, and experience the divine.

Religious communities have struggled to keep pace with these accelerating changes in thought and practice. Consequently, millennials and subsequent generations are significantly less involved with the church than their generational predecessors.<sup>4</sup> This essay presents a framework for engaging unchurched, digitally driven millennials in Christian mission. Rather than providing universal prescriptions or detailed ministry models akin to “all churches should be on Snapchat,” “all churches need to start a podcast,” or “all churches should stream sermons on Facebook Live,” we will explore a framework for doing ministry alongside unchurched millennials by exploring what needs to change about Christian practice, what must remain, and how to innovate for the future. The sharp sociological and spiritual differences between millennials and preceding generations demand a fundamental redefinition of Christian practice for an era of digital interconnectedness. The central challenge of this work will be to emphasize individual creativity and social interconnectedness without jettisoning core Christian doctrine.

## MILLENNIALS AND THE CHURCH

Before considering what might be involved in a redefinition of Christian practice, it is necessary to understand why a redefinition is both necessary and inevitable. Put simply, generations born into the digitally mediated world have disconnected from institutional religion at rates not seen in previous age cohorts. Despite this disconnection, millennials and subsequent generations remain spiritually curious, imaginative, and even inventive. It is critical that Christian leaders develop an awareness of these paradigm shifts, which can be accomplished by studying the millennial experience.

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While sociologists define the millennials as those born between 1980 and 1997, little if any data exists on the religious practices of “Generation Z,” those born after 1997. Here, we take for granted that the views and practices of Generation Z will align more closely to millennials than any other generation. Such an

<sup>4</sup> Allison Pond, Gregory Smith, and Scott Clement, “Religion among the Millennials,” Pew Research Center’s Religion & Public Life Project, February 17, 2010, <http://www.pewforum.org/2010/02/17/religion-among-the-millennials/>.

assumption is validated by research by sociologist Vern L. Bengtson, who argues in his book *Faith and Families: How Religion Is Passed Down across Generations* that family is still the most influential social structure in the cross-generational transmission of religion, even in the religiously enigmatic millennial generation.<sup>5</sup> Research from across the Christian denominational spectrum reveals that millennials are averse to Christian community yet remain interested in spiritual practice and pursuits. According to research by evangelical Christian researchers David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, millennials are more likely than previous generations to hold a decidedly negative view of present-day Christianity. Thirty-eight percent of millennials have a “bad to very bad impression of present-day Christianity,” while “fewer than one out of ten young adults mentions faith as their top priority.”<sup>6</sup> Kinnaman and Lyons identify a constellation of causal factors for these generational perceptions, including past traumatic experiences within evangelical Christianity, disagreement with conservative Christian positions on social issues, and a marked increase of “fierce” spiritual individualism.<sup>7</sup> The upshot of these perceptions is that 30 percent of those born after 1982 do not identify with an institutional religion such as Christianity.<sup>8</sup> Religious-studies scholar Elizabeth Drescher identifies this 30 percent as the “Nones,” in reference to their tendency to check the “None” box on surveys of religious affiliation.

It would be easy to assume that these unaffiliated millennial Nones are dismissive of spirituality and disinterested in Christian practice, yet such an assumption would belie the data. According to the Pew Research Center’s 2010 study on “Religion among the Millennials,” people in this younger generation believe in God at a rate nearly identical to that of Generation X (those born between 1965 and 1980), the baby boomers (those born between 1946 and 1964), and both the Silent and Greatest Generations (born between 1928 and 1945, and before 1928, respectively).<sup>9</sup> Their willingness to believe in God carries over to independent participation in traditional Christian beliefs and practices. Millennial Nones and affiliated Christians exhibit similar rates of belief in heaven and hell, and the same rates of engagement with daily prayer. Forty-five percent of the general millennial population of adults, ages 18–29, pray daily. Twenty-seven percent read scripture weekly, and 26 percent meditate weekly—all rates of participation equal to or only slightly lower than those of previous generations.<sup>10</sup> The data from Drescher and the Pew Research Center suggests that the chief difference between those who came of age in the smartphone era and those who came of age beforehand is primarily a difference in institutional affiliation.

<sup>5</sup> Vern L. Bengtson, Norella M. Putney, and Susan Cannon Harris, *Families and Faith: How Religion Is Passed Down across Generations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 50.

<sup>6</sup> David Kinnaman, and Gabe Lyons, *Unchristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks about Christianity—and Why It Matters* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2012), 30.

<sup>7</sup> Kinnaman and Lyons, *Unchristian*, 22.

<sup>8</sup> Elizabeth Drescher, *Choosing Our Religion: The Spiritual Lives of America’s Nones* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 6.

<sup>9</sup> Liu, “Religion among the Millennials.”

<sup>10</sup> Liu, “Religion among the Millennials.”

Elizabeth Drescher adds considerably to our understanding of None/millennial spirituality in her book *Choosing Our Religion*. Defining None spirituality as a predominantly privatized set of often traditional religious practices, Drescher refutes the assumption that younger generations are becoming less spiritual by demonstrating that millennials are in fact prayerful, morally focused, and service-oriented. For Drescher, a key difference between millennials and previous generations is a need for dynamism, the inevitable result of a culture that has become deeply interconnected in digital spaces. Nones are uncomfortable with doctrinal commitments. As would befit a generation that grew up in a digital culture of customized user interfaces and individualized digital design, Nones prefer to define, test, and reshape their own beliefs as they carry out traditional yet independent spiritual practices.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, they appreciate the ability to derive their belief from a plurality of sources and contexts, beyond traditional scripture. Drescher identifies popular media, friends, family, and social gatherings as sources from which individual religious beliefs are imagined and tested.

#### CLEARING THE WAY: BARRIERS TO ENCOUNTERING CHRIST

The synthesis of institutional disaffiliation and spiritual experimentation should rightly trigger critical reflection on the part of the Christian public leader. Such reflection must have a theological and an ecclesiological bent. First, how will millennials encounter the work of God in the world? Then, what can be done to change the institution of the church and, by extension, millennial perceptions of the church?

In pursuing answers to these questions, one can begin by using the process of elimination to rule out what unequivocally should not be part of our framework. Primarily, any missional strategy that emphasizes a specific and narrow Christian moral practice is likely to be met with skepticism and hostility. Kinnaman and Lyons's data shows that 85 percent of millennial outsiders see the church as hypocritical, a judgment supported by their finding that there is virtually no significant statistical difference between how Christians and church outsiders live their lives.<sup>12</sup> Kinnaman and Lyons, themselves self-professed born-again evangelicals, empathize with millennials who see the avoidance of sin as the top priority in Christianity. They similarly express concern with the 50–60 percent of outsiders who see conservative Christian politics as a major barrier to church engagement.<sup>13</sup>

Similarly, Drescher holds that millennial Nones see themselves as quite capable of independently developing robust ethical systems based on the “Golden Rule”—no church membership required.<sup>14</sup> She points out that millennials are often very interested in Jesus's version of the Golden Rule, though they see no

<sup>11</sup> Drescher, *Choosing Our Religion*, 62.

<sup>12</sup> Kinnaman and Lyons, *Unchristian*, 45.

<sup>13</sup> Kinnaman and Lyons, *Unchristian*, 159.

<sup>14</sup> Drescher, *Choosing Our Religion*, 186.

contradiction in applying it in a radically inclusive setting apart from doctrinal constriction.<sup>15</sup> Strict moralism is self-defeating in a generation with constant digital connection on a global scale. In her chapter on “Good Samaritan Nones,” she remarks:

The realities of globalization and digital communication mean that few people, even in the most remote places, are likely to get through life without regular encounters with many different people and practices.<sup>16</sup>

Drescher might, therefore, espouse a more conventional mainline Protestant position in that rigid moralism will only serve as a deterrent for ecclesiological engagement, whereas an ecclesiology that embraces fluidity, globalization, and experience offers hope for church viability.

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## THE ROAD AHEAD: TRADITIONAL MILESTONE MARKERS

In this time of unprecedented transition, the church should rightly be worried about the jettisoning of tradition. A Christian church that loses its foundation in Christ and its emphasis on Scripture is not much of a Christian church, even if it appeals to the masses. All Christian denominations need to engage the challenging questions of what it means to remain faithful to God and respectful of doctrinal commitments while journeying toward a pluralist, constructivist, and extra-institutional future. There is certainly some good news in the sociological research. Unchurched millennials are in many cases deeply attracted to what most denominations would consider orthodox Christian teachings. As Drescher argues in *Choosing Our Religion*, Jesus’s version of the Golden Rule is inspirational and formative to many religious Nones.<sup>17</sup> Both the church and the unchurched are mutually interested in practicing Jesus’s teachings. Perhaps, then, the jettisoning of tradition appears less likely when so much of the tradition is held in high esteem by those on the outside looking in.

Three milestone markers ought to be included in a ministry framework for those who feel unheard by the institutional church. Those milestone markers are

<sup>15</sup> Drescher, *Choosing Our Religion*, 197.

<sup>16</sup> Drescher, *Choosing Our Religion*, 217.

<sup>17</sup> Drescher, *Choosing Our Religion*, 197.

Word and Sacrament, networked community, and prayer. In the *Apology of the Augsburg Confession*, Melancthon suggests that Word and Sacrament are not formed by the church. Rather, the church is formed by Word and Sacrament. Other institutional rites, including rites of membership and affiliation, are of secondary importance. In considering the road ahead, Word and Sacrament must be the starting point.

Without both Scripture and the sacraments, the church would not be the church, for the church would not have access to Christ and would lack the means through which faith is formed. Jesus makes this imperative clear in the Last Supper and the Great Commission. In sharing the Last Supper, Christ commands his followers to participate in the Sacrament of Communion, instructing them to “take, and eat,” and to “drink from it, all of you” (Matt 26:26–27). The Great Commission is explicitly a summons to proclaiming the Word and administering the Sacraments, with the instructions to baptize and “teach them” what Christ had commanded (Matt 28:19–20). Christians cannot participate in Christ’s testament without the Sacrament of Communion, nor can Christian communities make disciples of all nations without the Word and the water of Baptism. However the church moves forward to facilitate an encounter between Christ and the unchurched, the constitutive elements of Word and Sacrament must be front and center.

The second milestone marker for our framework in the road ahead is, by extension and by necessity, the community in which the Word is proclaimed and the Sacraments are administered. No matter how pervasive and engaging our technology becomes, isolated individuals can never constitute the church. Community is deeply desired by many who would consider themselves unchurched, but Christian leaders would do well to understand that spiritual independence is not synonymous with spiritual isolation. Religious Nones view a particular type of community—networked communities—as invaluable to and normative for their spiritual formation. Networked community is not the same as group-based community, which is predicated on membership, loyalty, and physical presence. Group-based community is the historical model of the institutional church, the model rejected by over one-third of millennials. Networked community is a loosely connected set of relationships that are easy to leave and join, yet that inspire participation, presence, and authenticity.<sup>18</sup>

Networked community can take place in physical or digitally mediated spaces, in person or online. Keith Anderson suggests that networked community is the future locus of theological and biblical reflection, where listening, connecting, and engaging replace traditional group activities of recruiting, marketing, and selling.<sup>19</sup> Scholars Heidi A. Campbell and Stephen Garner suggest that networked community resonates with younger generations because it replaces static, controlled, and hierarchical orientations with dynamic, adaptive, and connective

<sup>18</sup> Keith R. Anderson, *The Digital Cathedral: Networked Ministry in a Wireless World* (New York: Morehouse, 2015), 55.

<sup>19</sup> Anderson, *The Digital Cathedral*, 66.

relationships.<sup>20</sup> Networked community is not a new concept to the church, even if the technology of networked communication has transitioned from written letters delivered on Roman roads to digital bytes of data transmitted on the information superhighway.

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The third and final significant milestone for our framework is spiritual practice, specifically the practice of prayer. Prayer transcends denominational commitments and group traditions. Its practice is established as a foundation for faithful living in the Sermon on the Mount. In the sixth chapter of Matthew, Jesus teaches on the necessity of prayer, and how it is to be rightly practiced. In eleven verses of teaching on prayer, which include what we now refer to as the “Lord’s Prayer,” Jesus frequently uses the phrase “when you pray” (Καὶ ὅταν προσεύχησθε), as if to communicate that prayer is not a peripheral practice but a central expression of what it means to live into the Christian faith (Matt 6:5–15).

The Lutheran Reformers thus saw prayer not as something that could be jettisoned based on cultural necessity but as something fundamental to the eternal witness of the Christian church. As we have already noted, synergy exists between the traditional imperative toward prayer and the redefinition of Christian practice among millennials and other younger generations, even if emerging forms of prayer may seem novel or peculiar to Christian traditionalists. Drescher’s research reveals that over 40 percent of Nones participate in what they consider prayer on more than one occasion each month.<sup>21</sup> Interviews with unchurched millennials who participate in prayer suggest that prayer is seen as a necessary antecedent to meaningful altruistic action. Whether that prayer takes the form of dialogue with the divine, meditation, contemplation, or yoga, the unchurched are finding spiritual nourishment and strength for the journey.<sup>22</sup> Drescher points out that theological notions of prayer are nebulous and expansive, and that prayer need not take place in the confines of a membership-based group in order to positively affect the community.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Heidi A. Campbell and Stephen Garner, *Networked Theology: Negotiating Faith in Digital Culture* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016), 7.

<sup>21</sup> Drescher, *Choosing Our Religion*, 159.

<sup>22</sup> Drescher, *Choosing Our Religion*, 169.

<sup>23</sup> Drescher, *Choosing Our Religion*, 172.

## THE ROAD AHEAD: NEW SIGNPOSTS FOR CHRISTIAN PRACTICE

So far, we have established that Word and Sacrament, networked community, and prayer are necessary inclusions to the framework if the church of the future is to remain a Christian church. Having engaged the necessary question of what milestone markers cannot be lost or dismissed in this period of spiritual redefinition, we now turn toward what new signposts might guide Christian practice in the road ahead. These signposts follow a three-step sequence of changing perceptions, establishing new precedents, and committing to experimentation. Put simply, the church needs a framework that changes minds, tries new things, and changes course when inevitable mistakes are made.

Perceptions of Christianity are always in need of fine-tuning, if not a complete overhaul. Kinnaman and Lyons's research provides a thorough explanation of the need to change perceptions. Their finding that 75 percent of Protestant pastors know someone who has had a "traumatic experience with Christianity" reveals that the younger, unchurched generations have in fact been injured by the Christian tradition.<sup>24</sup> Meanwhile, the Barna Group, an evangelical polling firm, found that only 46 percent of millennials see the church as tolerant, only 54 percent see the church as relevant in their lives, and just 49 percent believe they can be themselves at church.<sup>25</sup> Perceptions in need of changing range from the benign and mundane to the catastrophic and existentially challenging, so the work of changing perceptions is, by necessity, contextually driven. Christian public leaders who serve communities recovering from church scandal or clergy abuse face a different challenge than those who serve communities accustomed to church disengagement or Christian apathy. The work of changing perceptions will vary in urban and rural contexts, across political ideological backgrounds, and across class or educational backgrounds. But in an era where over one-third of America's largest generation identifies as religious "Nones," it is safe to assume that a change in perceptions is needed.<sup>26</sup> Waiting for that change in the church are 25.5 million unchurched millennials.

The role of today's Christian leader is to discern the community's perceptions about their spiritual communities, for good or for bad, and then to determine whether those perceptions are based in fact or fabricated on misinformation. Either way, the Christian leader needs to start seeing their work from the neighborhood's perspective, which begins with an intentional commitment to engaging church neighbors. As Rev. Laura Everett remarks in her book *Holy Spokes: The Church for Urban Spirituality on Two Wheels*, "That whole 'love your neighbor' thing is a lot easier when you actually see your neighbor."<sup>27</sup> Expert opinions

<sup>24</sup> Kinnaman and Lyons, *Unchristian*, 30.

<sup>25</sup> Barna Group, "What Millennials Want When They Visit Church," March 4, 2015, <https://tinyurl.com/tchfcwy>.

<sup>26</sup> Richard Fry, "Millennials Expected to Outnumber Boomers in 2019," *Pew Research Center*, March 1, 2018, <https://tinyurl.com/y7m6zf2h>.

<sup>27</sup> Laura Everett, *Holy Spokes: The Search for Urban Spirituality on Two Wheels* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017), 3.

and paid consultants can guide the church toward an understanding of how the neighborhood perceives them. Yet maybe the first step is simpler and more affordable. As Mark Lau Branson and Nicholas Warnes suggest in their book *Starting Missional Churches: Life with God in the Neighborhood*: “God is already moving among their neighbors. A new church needs to connect with the innovations of a local people (who have seldom been told that they are worth listening to).”<sup>28</sup>

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In this way, Christian leaders ought to examine their surrounding communities as mission fields, thinking as if they were a church planter, and understanding their neighbors not as recipients of ministry programs but as equal partners in stewarding God’s mission to the community.<sup>29</sup> This is particularly critical for the engagement of the approximately 25 million unchurched millennials. If they are viewed as objects, there is no hope for their return to the church. If they are viewed as partners, the opportunities for change are limitless.

Once perceptions are identified in partnership with the community, Christian leaders need to work toward the establishment of new precedents via a concrete action plan. The new precedents to be established are again contextually driven, though they should be inclusive of Word and Sacrament, focused on networked community, and oriented toward spiritual practice instead of intellectual formation. New precedents could be as simple as a commitment to writing pen pal letters to neighborhood students, as expansive as launching a pub or coffee shop as a spiritual “third place,” as technologically oriented as launching a podcast or meditation app, or as justice-focused as a commitment to accompanying a local racial-justice group in their struggle for reconciliation.

Changed perceptions and new precedents can take many forms, including the establishment of new ministry programs. But it can also take the form of concrete action on significant social issues, including intentional action to address the church’s ignominious legacy of institutionalized racism. Over the last fifteen years, the Presbyterian and Episcopal Churches have undergone an intensive process of listening and reflecting to understand the dynamics of race in the United States and how the church is called to respond.<sup>30</sup> Their work has included the difficult tasks of considering the damage done by Protestant support of both the slave

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<sup>28</sup> Mark Lau Branson and Nicholas Warnes, *Starting Missional Churches: Life with God in the Neighborhood* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2014), 20.

<sup>29</sup> Branson and Warnes, *Starting Missional Churches*, 30.

<sup>30</sup> Jennifer Harvey, *Dear White Christians: For Those Still Longing for Racial Reconciliation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 198.

trade and the institution of slavery, and a close study of the economic and spiritual challenges created by this legacy.<sup>31</sup> In listening to the voices of Native Americans and African Americans, leaders of these predominantly white denominations discerned a calling to advocate for economic reparations at a policy level, and to educate congregations on the problems of racism at the community level.<sup>32</sup> Over 90 percent of the Episcopal Church in the United States of America is white, yet this work across the denomination has in fact effected meaningful change in the educational curriculum of this mainline denomination.<sup>33</sup> While this work is still in its beginning stages and concrete outcomes are far from certain, it demonstrates a clear commitment toward accompanying the work of racially diverse groups who have traditionally been on the outside of the church's mission.

A posture of experimentation is the third necessity for the road ahead. Error is inevitable with any time of trial, and new precedents never guarantee sustained successes. Branson and Warnes, authors of *Starting Missional Churches*, articulate the way of experimentation as a process that "should encourage risk; failure should actually be frequent as the group continues to walk into the future. Feedback loops will keep participants informed. Sometimes experiments get dropped; sometimes they are altered and reengaged; sometimes they become longer-term commitments."<sup>34</sup>

The church's work to change perceptions and establish new precedents should be continually evaluated, particularly as it pertains to reaching unchurched millennials. The generation is already leaving the church, which mitigates some of the potential harm of experimentation. However, funding for such innovation has become increasingly strained. Donations to religious organizations fell 50 percent between 1990 and 2016, according to *The New York Times*, a trend that is likely to accelerate as millennials replace baby boomers as the most populous American generation.<sup>35</sup> So while there is certainly an imperative to experiment and low consequences of error, the financial realities facing the church necessitate a certain level of efficiency and prioritization.

To that end, Branson and Warnes recommend a simple four-part framework for evaluating missional outreach. The four sections of the framework are the initiative of God, the neighbor as subject, boundary crossing, and plural leadership.<sup>36</sup> Any attempt to change priorities or establish precedents should first be able to answer the question of where God is active in the initiative. In other words, where in this is God working to build up community and reach the unchurched? Next, all ministry programs should see the neighbor as subject as opposed to object.

<sup>31</sup> Harvey, *Dear White Christians*, 200.

<sup>32</sup> Harvey, *Dear White Christians*, 201.

<sup>33</sup> Pew Research Center, "Racial and Ethnic Composition among Members of the Episcopal Church," *Religion & Public Life*, <https://tinyurl.com/ux24l2r>.

<sup>34</sup> Branson and Warnes, *Starting Missional Churches*, 187.

<sup>35</sup> Alina Tugend, "Donations to Religious Institutions Fall as Values Change," *The New York Times*, November 3, 2016, Giving (special section).

<sup>36</sup> Branson and Warnes, *Starting Missional Churches*, 188–90.

Are neighbors seen as the audience or as the co-creators? For millennial audiences, do these younger voices have a say in this work, or are they relegated to the role of consumer? The third question evaluates whether the initiative crosses boundaries: Does the program create bridges and establish social capital for the sake of mission, or does it further isolate the unchurched? Programs that promote moralism and rote information will likely serve to further isolate, while initiatives that invite participants to actively create and contribute will likely enhance social capital and advance the mission of the church. Finally, who is represented at the leadership table? If the church is producing a podcast to reach unchurched millennials or an app for contemplative practice, are unchurched millennials involved in its design and development? Do they have a role in its production and marketing? Diverse leadership teams representing a myriad of experiences and backgrounds will have a chance at creating a missional and relevant ministry. Homogenous leadership teams risk creating something that is irrelevant, patronizing, or even patently offensive.

With one-third of America's largest generation on the outside of the church, perceptions desperately need to be changed and new ideas put into action. Precedents can and must change in ways that are completely consistent with denominational tradition and traditional faith convictions. The success of the journey to come depends on the extent to which the church will allow the Holy Spirit to stir up in us a spirit of restlessness. ☩

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