



ENGAGING MILLENNIALS IN THE CHURCH: INSIGHTS ON EFFECTIVE MINISTRY MODELS

INTRODUCTION

In 2015, Siebert Lutheran Foundation co-commissioned a research project with Kern Family Foundation, in partnership with Oversight Network, to achieve these objectives:

- To lift up successful Christian ministry models that effectively engage Millennials;
- To make learnings available to and encourage Lutheran and other Christian ministry leaders;
- To provide practical ideas and applications of Millennials ministry best practices; and,
- To provide a framework to inform Foundation funding priorities and to attract other faith-based funders to support effective Millennials ministry practices.

Siebert Lutheran Foundation extended this project in 2017 by commissioning another research study that engaged a national sample of Millennials, asking them to share their spiritual beliefs and practices, as well as those of their peers and family members. There were 2,223 survey respondents: 1,500 from a national panel and 723 from Lutheran organizations. The survey screened out Millennials who have no interest in spiritual ideas and anyone who follows a non-Christian tradition. Therefore, the respondents are Millennials who have some degree of spiritual interest and are Christian or have a Christian background. Special thanks to the Lutheran Foundation of St. Louis for funding support for this work.

The following report explores the practices and worship traditions that are most effective at reaching and engaging Millennials with the Gospel and developing Millennials as future church leaders, according to the research findings.

To access the packet of materials developed from the
Millennials Ministry research project visit:
www.siebertfoundation.org/engagingmillennials



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WHO ARE MILLENNIALS?

Millennials now represent the biggest generation in the United States workforce, surpassing Baby Boomers.

This is the first generation to grow up in a fully integrated digital world. 83% of Millennials report sleeping with their cellphones; and on average more than half of their day is spent with a screen, and usually multiple screens (computer, phone, tablet).



Millennials are accustomed to on-demand information on every topic, and being accessible at all times - via text or social media - is an expectation they have of themselves and others.

This is the most diverse generation ever in the U.S. - 44% are non-white - and have grown up expecting and comfortable with diversity in their network. Traditional biases and racial stereotypes are not as strong with this generation, which provides hope for systemic change as this group advances into leadership roles. They are also more accepting of alternative lifestyles, values, and beliefs different than their own, than were previous generations.

Millennials are naturally skeptical about institutions and people: authentic relationships and transparency are very important. Ministry leaders have to “walk the talk” to be viewed as credible and leaders need to be open to Millennials’ questioning and doubts.

OVERVIEW

- In 2016, ages 19 – 35 (Born 1981-1997)
- 83 million (1/4 of total population, surpassing Baby Boomers)
- Most diverse generation yet (44% non-white)
- 73% live in mid to large sized cities
- Very open-minded: “live and let live”
- Digital Natives: grew up with the Internet and smart devices
- Delaying marriage or remaining unmarried; average age for first-time marriage in the U.S. is 29 for men and 27 for women
- Institutional mistrust
- Value being accepted, loved and welcomed
- Struggle with identity
- Interested and curious about religious beliefs and practices that are different than what they know
- Traditional membership models are meaningless
- Seek a sense of belonging before exploring beliefs
- Philanthropic, but in different ways than their elders
- Can spot a fake a mile away

WHAT FORCES FORMED MILLENNIAL ATTITUDES?

Millennials are a product of the socialization and formative experiences during childhood, just as the generations before them were. Some of those forces include:

Great Recession

Millennials entering the workforce between 2008 and 2014 were hit with a hard reality of few jobs and high college debt. This financial crunch caused a delay in reaching traditional adult milestones, such as living on their own or buying a house, getting married, or having children.

Where's Dad?

The high divorce rate of Millennial parents contributed to this generation having the fewest fathers in the household of any generation ever. This, coupled with an increased number of dual working households, created a new idea of "family." And the introduction of new parenting philosophies have left Millennials with a different understanding of and expectations about independence, accountability, and perseverance.

Technology

Technology has been an immense influencer, where unrealistic expectations are set up in a virtual world that does not mirror real-life circumstances and conditions. The ability to constantly compare and judge oneself against others has taken an emotional toll on Millennials, which is fueled by the addiction phenomenon associated with technology use. Measuring self-worth by "likes" on social media can take the place of self-confidence and interpersonal relationships.

Institutional Misconduct

A mistrust of institutions is rampant among Millennials because of high-profile issues such as the Catholic priest sexual abuse scandal, corporate America lay-offs and financial scandals, the National Security Administration's secret surveillance program, and the like. A non-stop stream of headlines and news updates is available via every device and social media platform. The latest from the Gallup Poll shows that only 32% of Americans trust the print and TV media to tell the truth.

These experiences have shaped Millennials into a unique generation that varies greatly from Baby Boomers and Traditionalists, currently the most influential generations in congregations.

INFLUENCERS



- 9/11, War on Terror, geopolitical uncertainty
- Great Recession, the economy and education debt; delayed typical life milestones
- Frenetically busy and stressed parents while they were growing up
- Never married, split and blended families
- Institutions have not earned their respect
- Marriage viewed as an institution
- Distrust of church, corporate America, government, and media
- Technology changing EVERYTHING



WHY FOCUS ON MILLENNIALS?

Millennials will change the church, as they will impact other institutions of society. However, based on our research, **there is much to be encouraged by for the future of the church.**

As Millennials grow older and advance through life stages, it will be important for ministry leaders to continue to adapt

- Millennial generation is larger than any previous generation
- Emerging leaders and influencers
- Significantly different than previous generations, **require a shift**
 - Highly educated, 61% attended college
 - Spiritual but not religious – 32% of adults under 30 have no spiritual affiliation
 - “Ambient Awareness” - being able to keep in touch with people with a level of regularity and intimacy that you would not usually have access to, because time and space conspire to make it impossible (think social network notifications)*. 90% of 18-29 year-olds say they sleep with their cell phones and 18-36 year-olds spend an average of 17.8 hours a day in front of multiple screens.
- 77% believe in God** / 62% talk to God ***
- Some researchers believe this is a 500-year cultural shift

MILLENNIALS ARE THE FUTURE OF THE CHURCH

- Just as spiritual as previous generations, despite attending church at lower rates
- 27% attend religious services on a weekly basis
- 4 in 10 say religion is very important in their lives
 - But, many distrustful of organized religion
- 59% who grew up in the church have dropped out at some point
- Regular church attendance in U.S. is at a 30-year low (35%) and Millennials aren't the only ones missing in the pews

A 2017 Barna Trends Study found that also missing increasingly from the pews are women. From the study: “We are hemorrhaging a generation of women who have often been made to feel they have a limited role to play in the Church. The landscape has changed dramatically for many women in the western world when it comes to their inclusion in and contribution to all sectors and decision making - but there has not necessarily been a corresponding shift in church.”

SO, NOW
WHAT
??

PROFOUNDLY SHIFTING MODEL OF CHURCH



Millennials want to be a part of a community, not part of an institution. These young adults bring a different understanding of what it means to be engaged in a worship community and the traditional models of belonging and involvement may not apply. Engagement for Millennials is an active participation in service, meaningful contributions to the life of the community, and a voice in leadership.

FROM CONSUMERS TO CREATORS

Church is something we build together.

“Is our church set up like Target or like a home?”

FROM CHECKBOOKS TO ACTION

The “checkbook model” is a transaction vs. the “action model” that is participatory, which includes giving of time and talents in addition to money.

FROM CHURCH NATIVES TO CHURCH IMMIGRANTS

Many Millennials did not grow up going to church: they never left the church because they weren’t engaged there to begin with.

Even for those who did, they may have been out of a relationship with a church for 5-10 years.



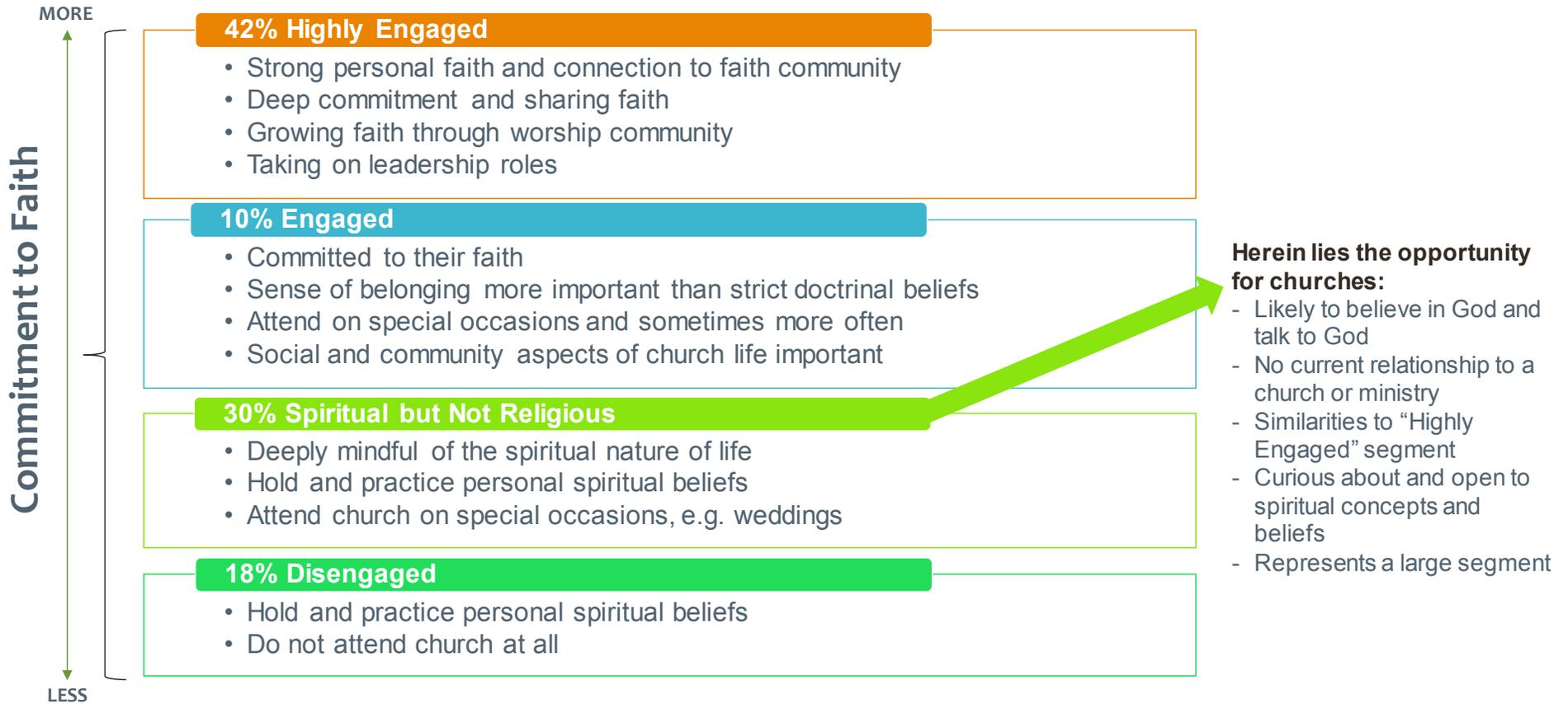
*“We long for our churches to be **safe places** to doubt, to ask questions, and to tell the truth, even when it’s uncomfortable.*

*We want to talk about the **tough stuff**...but without predetermined conclusions or simplistic answers.*

*We want to **bring our whole selves** through the church doors, without leaving our hearts and minds behind, without wearing a mask.”*

- Searching for Sunday by Rachel Held Evans

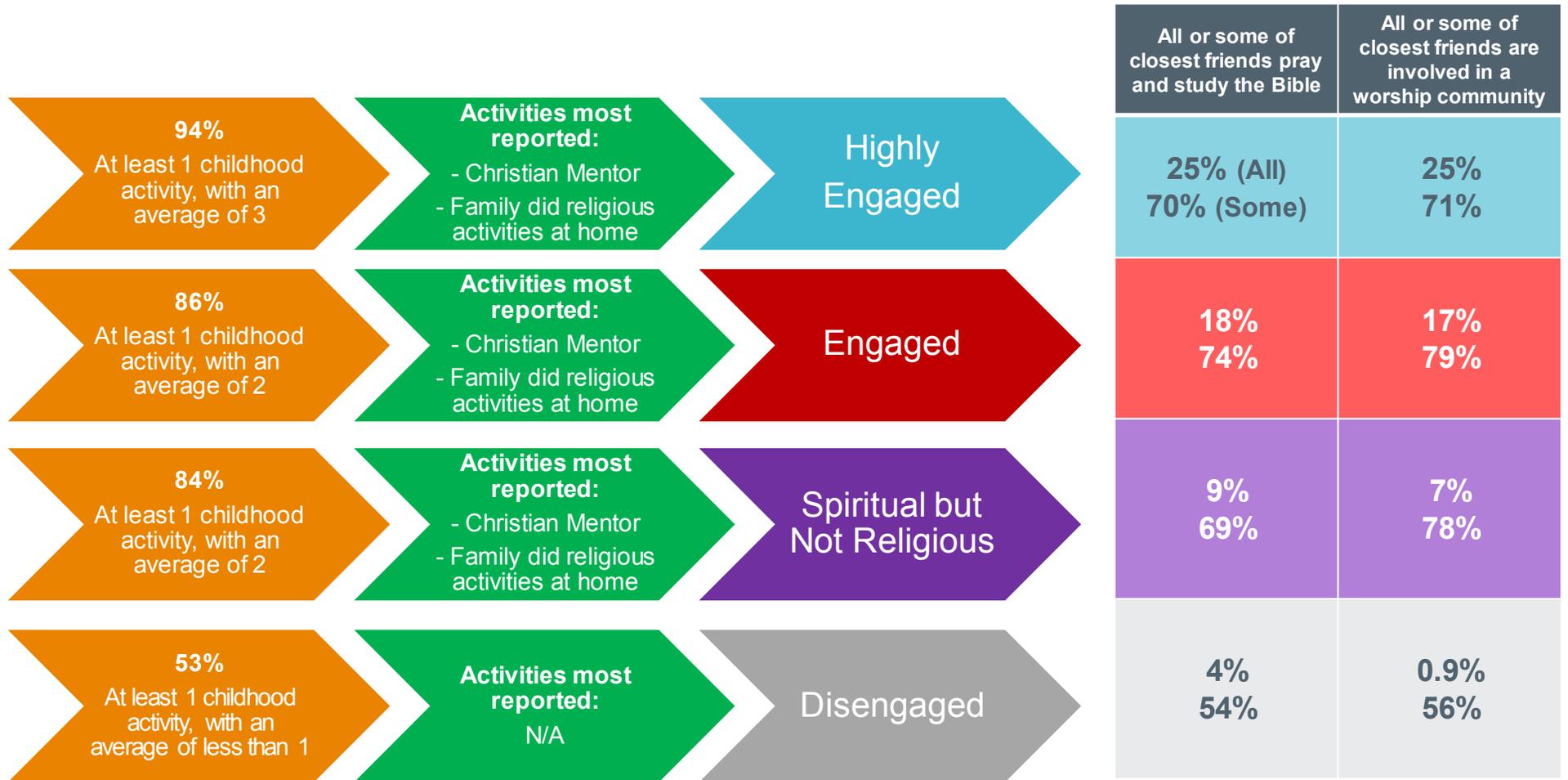
LEVELS OF SPIRITUAL ENGAGEMENT OF THE 2,223 SURVEY RESPONDENTS*



*Because atheists, agnostics and those “not interested in spiritual ideas” were filtered out of the research sample, the percentages shown for each segment cannot be accurately applied to the general population.

INFLUENCES ON ENGAGEMENT

We wanted to understand to what extent childhood experiences loom large in the spiritual lives of Millennials. The primary difference among these four groups is the total number of Christian activities they were exposed to as a child. Then, we compared that to the influence of the beliefs of their family and friends.



IDEAL WORSHIP COMMUNITIES

THE TOP 5 SELECTED WORDS FOR EACH GROUP

Based on qualitative research findings (phase one), Millennials are turning away from traditional models of church, specifically models where leaders tell congregants what to think and believe. They also are not being attracted simply by the trappings of the entertainment culture they can find anywhere, such as fancy coffee or mult-media presentations.

The top five attributes selected by the largest number of respondents across all four engagement-type groups are:

LOVING • WELCOMING WORSHIP COMMUNITY • ACCEPTING • TRUTHFUL • PRAYERFUL

Highly Engaged	Engaged	Spiritual but Not Religious	Disengaged
1. Loving	1. Loving	1. Accepting	1. Welcoming Worship Community
2. Welcoming Worship Community	2. Safe	2. Welcoming Worship Community	2. Accepting
3. Truthful	3. Accepting	3. Truthful	3. Loving
4. Prayerful	4. Truthful	4. Prayerful	4. Truthful
5. Teaching	5. Welcoming Worship Community	5. Teaching	5. Safe

WHY MILLENNIALS ENGAGE IN A WORSHIP COMMUNITY

THE TOP 5 SELECTED REASONS FOR EACH GROUP

We provided respondents a list of phrases that describe attributes of church and 57% checked at least one attribute, indicating that there is at least one thing that they could find attractive in a church, which would increase their likelihood of participating in a worship community.

The top five reasons to engage in a worship community selected by all respondents are:

- FEELING WELCOMED BY LEADERS
- A SAFE PLACE TO ASK QUESTIONS ABOUT GOD
- SUPPORTIVE FRIENDSHIPS WITH OTHERS
IN A WORSHIP COMMUNITY
- RELEVANT ANSWERS TO LIFE'S CHALLENGES
- TEACHING BASED ON THE BIBLE

Highly Engaged	Engaged	Spiritual but Not Religious	Disengaged
1. Teaching based on the Bible	1. Feeling welcomed by leaders	1. Feeling welcomed by leaders	1. Feeling welcomed by leaders
2. Supportive friendships	2. Teaching based on the Bible	2. Relevant answers to life's challenges	2. Relevant answers to life's challenges
3. Feeling welcomed by leaders	3. Contemporary worship music	3. Supportive friendships	3. A safe place to ask questions about God
4. A safe place to ask questions about God	4. Authentic leadership	4. A safe place to ask questions about God	4. Learning more about how the Bible relates to modern life
5. Authentic leadership	5. Opportunities to express my creativity	5. Opportunities to make a difference in surrounding community	5. Supportive friendships

APPLICATIONS AND LEARNINGS FOR THE LUTHERAN CHURCH

Based on feedback during research interviews, we see the following intersections between the expressed needs and interests of Millennials and strengths of the Lutheran tradition that can meet those needs.

Millennial Needs / Interest	Lutheran Strengths*
Community	Being Lutheran is about community; God's unconditional welcome and grace; supportive faith communities
Authenticity	Rich history of substantive worship; historical connection to reform, countering perceptions of churches being about power and money
Mentoring	Leadership capabilities; multiple generations of congregants; retired lay leaders from professional fields
Social Activism	Rich tradition of social service and mission work
Meaningful Traditions	Practicing "high church"; deep conviction in belief and practice; sacramental presence
Leadership & Vocation	Sense of vocation in all work; everyone is called by God and celebrated for who they are
Leadership Development	Lutherans understand ambiguity - don't wait to "get holy" to get involved
Openness, Tolerance, and Diversity	Ability to embrace paradox and pockets of progressive Gospel
Contextualizing the Gospel	We don't always have all the same answers; an understanding of grace that says "here no question is too big to ask;" openness to questioning the Gospel
Wide range of programming, events and study options	Creative programming for faith formation, e.g. Lutheran youth camps, retreats, service trips, campus ministry, etc.
Youth Development	Strengths in youth programming

*As identified in research qualitative interviews.

BEST PRACTICES

1. AUTHENTIC RELATIONSHIPS

“They don’t need to go to church to find good coffee.”

There is a continually emerging trend of authenticity and Millennials are quite savvy when it comes to seeing right to the core of any institution, organization, or agency, past the sales pitch and shiny veneer. Though they may be critical (even more so than their Boomer parents), they seek out the real thing. “They can spot a fake a mile away,” say ministry leaders who work with Millennials.

2. GENUINE WELCOME

“They are dying to be part of a story and family.”

Millennials want to feel like they are part of a group and they want to be accepted for who they are - Millennials are turned off by what they perceive as the judgmental stance of the church. Millennials are most deeply engaged when they feel that the church leaders don’t have all the answers and are open to questioning or doubts.

3. MEANINGFUL COMMUNITY SERVICE

“Millennials want to be part of something bigger than themselves.”

Millennials want to make a difference in the world and they are drawn to causes that allow them to have what they perceive of as meaningful impact. They are not content to write checks to support causes they believe in, as their parents and grandparents might be. They want opportunities to get involved directly in community service and they want to have a voice in how those efforts are created and implemented.

4. RELEVANT CONTRIBUTION

“The bar is so low. Millennials are uninspired.” “They don’t want to be parking cars or serving as ushers.”

Just as Millennials want to serve, they want to know that their contributions are valued by the worship community. They want to use their gifts and talents and be appreciated for them. In practice this means that Millennials also want opportunities to lead and they want their input and ideas to be taken seriously. They are not satisfied to sit back and be told what to think.

5. SYMBOLIC FAITH PRACTICES

“People want a rite of passage.”

Millennials are drawn to more traditional and ancient forms of worship, which symbolizes a connection to something bigger than themselves. Others emphasize the importance of rites of passage to symbolize a connection to faith or becoming a part of the community. For ministries in the evangelical tradition, the altar call often fills this role, but many interviewees described other rituals and faith practices that are tangible means of symbolizing belief. They also spoke of the importance of explaining and talking about the meaning of faith practices, particularly for Millennials who have not grown up in a faith tradition.

PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS

"Millennials aren't looking for a hipper Christianity.

We're looking for a truer Christianity, a more authentic Christianity.

Like every generation before ours and every generation after, we're looking for Jesus – the same Jesus who can be found in the strange places he's always been found: in bread, in wine, in baptism, in the Word, in suffering, in community, and among the least of these.

No coffee shops or fog machines required." - Rachel Held Evans, *Searching for Sunday*



- Emphasize church as a place to find the things that matter most to Millennials
- Provide a welcoming and accepting environment for all, without compromising truth
- Encourage Millennials in their faith and provide tools and safe places to practice faith conversations
- Provide multiple ways for Millennials to engage with the community
- Identify those capable of being “Disciplers” in the midst of the worship community and offer leadership and mentoring opportunities
- Welcome and encourage those who are looking for social involvement without too much pressure on doctrine
- Focus resources (money and time) on relational experiences for Millennials, while meeting a baseline expectation regarding technology
- Emphasize faith activities for all ages, including intergenerational mentoring and programs
- Offer programming to address real life challenges for Millennials, e.g. financial literacy, parenting, etc.

WHERE DO YOU GO FROM HERE?

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY RESEARCH REPORTS CASE STUDIES

The Siebert Lutheran Foundation is working to develop even more practical tools and resources to support and help grow your ministry with Millennials. Visit our website to join the email list and download all of the available materials. Is your ministry engaging young adults in an effective and meaningful way? We would love to hear your story:

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