

The Millennial Generation - The Future of Christianity in America

Introduction

The Millennial generation is a group of young people whose birth years range from 1980 to 2000. This generation is actually just slightly larger than the Baby Boom generation (born from 1946 to 1964). Nearly 78 million Millennials were born between 1980 and 2000.

Millennials are already having an impact on business, the workplace, churches, and other organizations. They certainly are having an impact on politics. The 18- to 29-year-old Millennials voted for Barack Obama in 2008 by a significant margin. Because of their impact in business, politics, and the church, they are simply too large and too influential to ignore.

For this article I will be using much of the data from an excellent book by Thom and Jess Rainer, *The Millennials: Connecting to America's Largest Generation*.^{1} Their survey of 1,200 older Millennials (born between 1980 and 1991) provides a detailed look at this generation.

We should begin by noting that not only are Millennials the largest generation, they are also one of the most diverse. That means that for every trend we identify in this generation, there are also lots of exceptions. But that doesn't mean we can't learn some key facets of the Millennials. Here are just a few characteristics.

First, they are on track to become America's most educated generation. "In 2007, the first year the twenty-five- to twenty-nine-year-old age group was entirely comprised of Millennials, 30 percent had attained a college degree. That is the highest rate ever recorded for that age group."^{2}

Second, Millennials view marriage differently than previous generations. They are marrying later, if at all. The average age for first marriage has increased approximately five years since 1970 for both men and women. "About 65 percent of young adults cohabit at least once prior to marriage, compared to just 10 percent in the 1960s."^{3}

Finally, Millennials are the least religious generation in American history. They may say that they are spiritual, but only a small fraction of them say that is important in their lives. The sad reality is that most Millennials don't think about religion at all.

Perhaps the most amazing response from the survey of Millennials was that they are hopeful. Consider their response to the simple statement: "I believe I can do something great." About 60 percent agreed strongly with this statement, and another 36 percent agreed somewhat. That was almost every respondent, 96 percent in total.^{4}

Marriage and Family

How does the Millennial generation view marriage and family? One way to answer that question is to look at the characteristics of their parents.

Baby Boomers wanted the best for themselves. They had a level of self-centeredness that eventually shifted toward meeting the needs of their children. They wanted everything to be perfect for the Millennial children.

There was a high level of parental involvement. Hence, the parents of Millennials are often called “helicopter parents.” When Millennials were asked about parental involvement, 89 percent responded that they received guidance and advice from their parents.{5} It turns out that the Boomers are helping Millennials make decisions about work and life. Sometimes the parents sit in on job interviews and even try to negotiate salaries. While previous generations might have rejected such advice, 87 percent of Millennials view their parents as a positive source of influence.{6}

This positive view Millennials have of parents extends to the older generation as a whole. While Baby Boomers tended to be antiauthoritarian, Millennials have a very positive attitude towards those who are older. Of the Millennials interviewed, 94 percent said they have great respect for older generations.{7}

When it comes to marriage, Millennials are still optimistic about it even though they grew up in a world where divorce was common. They were asked to respond to the following statement: “It is likely that I will marry more than one time in my life.” For those who responded, 86 percent disagreed that they will marry more than once.{8} Apparently most Millennials plan to marry once or not at all. It is also worth noting that Millennials are marrying much later than any generation that had preceded them.

Millennials also view marriage differently in part because of the political battles concerning same-sex marriage and the definition of marriage. In the survey of Millennials, they were asked to respond to this statement: “I see nothing wrong with two people of the same gender getting married.” Six in ten agree with the statement (40 percent strongly agreed, 21 percent agreed somewhat).{9} Put simply, a significant majority of Millennials see nothing wrong with same-sex marriage.

The impact of technology on marriage and family is significant. The Millennial generation has grown up with the Internet, cell phones, and social media. It is easier than ever to call on a cell phone or send a text to other members of one’s extended family. Posting pictures on Facebook allows family members to immediately see what is happening to their children and grandchildren. Millennials are introducing their families to a variety of ways to stay connected.

Motivating the Millennials

How can we motivate the Millennial generation? The answer to that question is easy: build relationships. Thom and Jess Rainer put it this way. “The best motivators in the workplace for this generation are relationships. The best connectors in religious institutions are relationships. The best way to get a Millennial involved in a service, activity, or ministry is through relationships.”{10}

Relationships are important because of their connection to their family. Millennials also see the world as a much smaller place since they can visit anywhere in the world (either in person or on the Internet). And they are connected to people through the new media in ways that no other generation was able to do.

Education is a high priority for Millennials. This generation is on pace to have significantly more college degrees than the rest of the nation as a whole. About a quarter of the current U.S. population over 25 years old has a college degree, but nearly four in ten of Millennials will probably receive a degree.{11}

Millennials do want to make money, but they are not driven by money. Their motivation for education and career are motivated more by family and friends. One word that often surfaces is the word “flexibility.” They see money as a means to do what they want to do. At the same time, they reject the “keeping up with the Jones’ mentality” that often drives their parents.

Religion is not much of a motivating factor for Millennials. Spiritual matters are not important to them. Only 13 percent of them viewed religion and spirituality as important. And even among those who described themselves as Christian, only 18 percent said their religion was important to them. {12}

Only one group in the study said their faith was important to them. This was the subgroup identified as “Evangelicals” because of their orthodox biblical beliefs. Nearly two thirds (65 percent) said their faith was important to them. {13}

The political orientation of Millennials will no doubt influence elections. Millennials voted for Barack Obama over John McCain in the 2008 election by a two-to-one margin (66 percent to 32 percent). It is also worth noting that only half of the Millennials were eligible to vote that year. A greater percentage of that generation will become eligible to vote in each new election cycle.

Various polls, including exit polls, showed that this generation wanted more centralized power in government. And by more than a two-to-one margin (71 percent to 29 percent) they thought the federal government should guarantee health-care coverage for all Americans. More than six out of ten felt that government should be responsible for providing for their retirement. {14}

Millennials and Media

The Millennial generation has been influenced by media and technology like no other generation. Social commentators made much of the influence of television on the Baby Boomers but the proliferation of Internet, smart phones, and social media has had an even greater impact on Millennials.

When technology first comes on the scene, there are early adopters, then a significant majority, and finally laggards. Millennials fit into the category of early adopters. In the survey they were asked if they agree with the following statement: “I am usually among the first people to acquire products featuring new technology.” About half agreed with the statement, and half disagreed with the statement. {15} And even for those who disagreed, it is safe to say they did not fit into the category of laggards. Millennials are quick to embrace new technology.

There is one technology that Millennials always have in their hands: video games. “Video-game consoles are part of the industry that pulled in more than twenty billion dollars in revenue in 2008.” {16} If there was one form of technology that is easily identifiable with Millennials it is video games.

When asked how they most frequently communicate when not actually with the other person, they rated phone first (39 percent), then texting (37 percent), and then e-mail (16 percent). At the bottom was by letter (1 percent). The survey also noticed a difference between older and younger Millennials. Put simply, the younger you are, the more likely you are to communicate by texting.

Social media is also a significant part of the lifestyle of a Millennial. Not surprisingly, the most popular social media site was Facebook (73 percent), followed by MySpace (49 percent) as a distant second. They also like to read blogs (30 percent) and write blogs (13 percent). But since blogs require more time and energy than other social media, they do not draw in the large numbers like Facebook and MySpace.

Although social media can be accessed in many ways, still the most pervasive is through the computer. Millennials use computers both for work and for personal use. Most Millennials (83

percent) use a computer for work and spend about 17 hours on it each week. One out of five Millennials use their computer for work for 40 or more hours per week.^{17} And Millennials spend time on computers for personal use. The responses ranged from 5 hours per week to 30 hours per week. The average was 17 hours per week.

If you put these numbers together, you find something shocking. The average Millennial spends 17 hours per week on a computer for work, and spends the same amount of time on a computer for personal use. That totals 34 hours per week on a computer. “That means that roughly one-third of Millennials’ waking lives are spent on a computer.”^{18}

Millennials and Religion

The Millennial generation is the least religious generation in American history. The survey found that they are likely to have a syncretistic belief system. In other words, he or she will take portions of belief from various faiths and non-faiths and blend them together in to a unique spiritual system.

Thom and Jess Rainer found that this generation is less likely to care about religion or spiritual matters than previous generations. When they were asked in an open-ended question what was important to them, spiritual matters were sixth on the list. Preceding them in importance were family, friends, education, career, and spouse/partner.

When asked to describe themselves, two-thirds (65 percent) used the term Christian. Interestingly, nearly three in ten (28 percent) picked either atheism, agnosticism, or no preference. In other words, they have moved completely away from certain belief in God.

When asked if they were “born-again Christians”, using a precise definition provided by the interviewers, only 20 percent affirmed this definition of belief and experience. And when presented with seven statements about orthodox Christian belief, the researchers found that only 6 percent of Millennials could affirm them and thus could be properly defined as Evangelical.^{19}

A third (34 percent) of Millennials said that no one can know what will happen when they die. But more than one-fourth (26 percent) said they believe they will go to heaven when they die because they have accepted Christ as their Savior.^{20}

Church attendance has been decreasing with each generation. The Millennial generation illustrates that trend. Nearly two-thirds (65 percent) rarely or never attend religious services.^{21} About one-fourth (24 percent) are active in church (meaning they attend at least once a week). This might suggest that a number of Millennials who attend church do so as seekers. In other words, they are at least spiritually interested enough to visit a church even though they may not be saved.

The Millennial generation presents a significant challenge for us as Christians. The largest and least religious generation in American history is here and making an impact. If the church and Christian organizations are to be vibrant and effective in the twenty-first century, pastors and Christian leaders need to know how to connect to the Millennials. The first step is understanding them and their beliefs. That is why I recommend the book by Thom and Jess Rainer and encourage you to visit our Web site (www.probe.org) for other information on this generation.

Notes

1. Thom Rainer and Jess Rainer, *The Millennials: Connecting to America’s Largest Generation* (Nashville, B&H Publishing Group, 2011).
2. Ibid., 3.

3. Ibid.
4. Ibid., 16.
5. Ibid., 55.
6. Ibid., 56.
7. Ibid., 59.
8. Ibid., 63.
9. Ibid., 66.
10. Ibid., 105.
11. Ibid., 108.
12. Ibid., 111.
13. Ibid., 112.
14. Ibid., 115.
15. Ibid., 188.
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid., 197.
18. Ibid., 198.
19. Ibid., 232.
20. Ibid., 233.
21. Ibid., 236.

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