

Reaching Millennials: No Young Man Left Behind

Much has been written about this group of men and women born between 1985 and 2000, often called millennials or Mosaics. They grew up in a fundamentally different world than previous generations, never knowing a world without cellphones or the Internet.

Their disinterest in organized religion is well-documented. In one study, the Pew Center asked people their religious affiliation and found that a large number of people no longer affiliate themselves with any specific religion. This is sometimes called “the rise of the ‘Nones.’”

The Nones

The study revealed a troubling trend. In the oldest generation—those over 65—only 9 percent of the population have no religious affiliation. But as you go into successively younger generations, you see a larger and larger number until you get to the millennials, where 32 percent express no religious affiliation.

Another study by The Barna Group found that 59 percent of 18-29 year-olds with a Christian background have stopped attending church after attending regularly growing up.

The news is not, however, all bad. The number of Nones from The Pew Center study who call themselves atheists is still very low; many express that they pray regularly, believe in heaven and hell and even look to the Bible as a source of truth.

Likewise, a separate study from Barna for InterVarsity and the American Bible Society found that millennials who *are* in church still hold a very high view of the Bible. For instance,

96 percent say it is the Word of God and that it contains everything a person needs to know about living a meaningful life. Millennials outside the church, however, are at best ambivalent, often holding negative views about the Bible. I suspect they see it as a heavy book they have been beaten over the head with.

So, what *are* millennials doing? If we're going to reach them, we need to know how and where to find them.

A Window Into the Generation

There were more than 33 *million* people engaged in fantasy football teams last year. Some of these are middle-aged guys in office pools, but I know from my son's experience that there are thousands of young men spending time, energy and passion on their teams.

I was eating lunch with a 20-year-old college guy in Jacksonville last season, and the Cowboys-Jaguars game was on. I thought it was weird when he gave a little whoop as the Cowboys scored. "Oh, you're a Cowboys fan?" I asked. "No," he replied. "I'm rooting for the Jags to win, but I've got Tony Romo on my fantasy team." Inwardly, I rolled my eyes. Rooting for individual players over your favorite team is hard for me to accept.

Likewise, many of us rant about "kids these days" living in their parents' basement **playing video games** all day. We write condescending blog posts and cluck our tongues like old ladies.

Take the *Call of Duty* game franchise. Since the release of *Call of Duty Finest Hour* in 2004—which sold a "measly" 4.5 million copies—sales have risen dramatically. 2012's *Call of Duty Modern Warfare 3* sold 26.5 million copies. This chart shows a combined sales record of million. That's not dollars; that's units. Several newer versions of the game have come out since.

I recently spent time with a young man who spends enough time playing *Call of Duty* that he is ranked in the top five in the world in *Call of Duty Black Ops 2*. I've known this young man for his whole life. I'll call him Ian.

Ian is not some pasty-faced screen zombie with no life. He juggles being an honor student at school, playing violin in several orchestras, and catcher on his baseball team with this video game hobby—*Black Ops 2* being only one of the games he likes to play.

Ian is my 13-year-old nephew. His mom ensures that his “screen time” is only available after homework and violin practice are done and doesn't delay bedtime. Of course, that doesn't keep him from getting up at 5:30 in the morning sometimes and slipping down to play. He told me that is the best time to play with kids in Korea and Japan.

And that's the key, right there. That's where the eye rolling and clucking fall apart.

I had an “aha moment” when I walked in the room where he was playing—which actually is the basement. He was talking as he played, and I thought maybe the kid had gone a little nuts. That's when I realized he had a headset on. Ian doesn't play video games in a dark basement in his bathrobe by himself. He plays with a headset on and shares his experience with kids from his school in the evenings—and even from around the world at times. They play in teams to beat the computer or other teams.

Guys don't play fantasy football by themselves. They play with a group of other men where they can engage in a community around a common goal. They get to do stuff guys like to do; they meet up for the fantasy draft, talk every week about who did well and who didn't, talk trash and whine about coaching decisions. It goes on and on.

The point is this: These guys are yearning for community.

So how do we do a better job of reaching and engaging younger men in the church? I want to share a few principles with you that I think can shape our thinking by applying the No Man Left Behind Model.

Principle No 1: The Man Code. *Create an environment that is comfortable for millennials.*

What are some key components of that environment?

Authenticity. Younger men need us to be honest about our flaws. This helps guys feel safe about opening up and asking for help when they need it.

Engagement. Are you more interested in knowing or showing? Younger men want to see how to actually live out the gospel, not just know a bunch of theological concepts.

Mission. The next step is to provide opportunities to make a difference. Take those principles for living out the gospel and put them into practice.

Approachability. Provide an environment that is approachable and welcoming. You don't have to have a coffee shop in your church lobby. But remember that not everyone is familiar with how church works, so explain things; don't make people feel like they don't fit in.

Ultimately, we need to point to Jesus as the leader, not to a personality or hip speaker.

Principle No. 2: Create value. *Give young men what they need in the context of what they want.*

Young men need the gospel. They need to be discipled. They need to know Jesus.

But men are at all different stages on their spiritual journey. When a man is early in his walk with little or no understanding of the Bible or Christianity, you have to cast

the net wide. You draw men like this by meeting their “felt needs.”

Two of the biggest felt needs I have seen in men’s lives are the need to belong and to be good at something—*community* and *competency*. You see this idea in both the video games and fantasy football. Guys like to be part of something bigger than just themselves, and they like to make a contribution to the effort.

So if you want to reach a man, figure out what he wants to get good at, and then give him an opportunity to do that in a community. Create value for him by meeting his felt needs for fun, recreation, solving relationship struggles and so on.

Principle No. 3: Capture momentum.

Show them the right next step. Once we get a young man to step forward and come to our BBQ, car rally or meet us for coffee, we need to be sure to always show them the right next step. Too often we do all this work to get a guy engaged with us in some activity, and then we don’t show them what’s next.

If you meet a young guy for coffee to talk, don’t leave until you confirm the date, time and place for the next conversation. When he comes to your paintball day or joins your service project, show him exactly what the next step is and, if possible, get him to commit to it before he leaves. Then text him to remind him.

Principle No. 4: Sustain the commitment. *Get them connected.*

We need to connect guys into the longer-term discipleship opportunities in our churches, but with a very important qualification: They need to be the ones who are actually working. Don’t send a new guy to that Sunday school class that “just needs a few more people.” It’s shrinking for a reason.

This might make you uncomfortable, but as men’s leaders in

the church, we need to triage our discipleship activities. The ones that aren't working are using valuable resources that could be used more effectively elsewhere. Sometimes you can give a leader a new vision and encourage him to change. Sometimes you just have to let an ineffective ministry fade away.

But whatever you do, don't do all the work to engage in a young man's life, get him into relationship with some other guys and then send him off to some black hole of an activity that will discourage him and drive him away.

It's All About Relationships

The key to all this is relationships, and so let me leave you with this point: To effectively reach younger men—in fact, all men—we need to help churches create an environment where the Holy Spirit can inspire men to engage in life-on-life discipleship.

It takes a man to reach a man. All around us are unfathered young men who are yearning, desperate to engage in relationships that will help them become the kind of men they know in their hearts they were made to be.

We, the men of the church, must actively seek these men out, engage in life with them and show them the power of the gospel, for the glory of God.

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