

The Millennial Mission Field

✖ Last week, research company the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life released a comprehensive report on who the Millennial generation is and how they think. This group, which is comprised of people aged 18-29, will soon be the America of tomorrow. On the surface, young people seem less religious, less materialistic, yet, less relationally anchored than previous generations. I would like to talk about what Millennials' attitudes toward faith are and what the evangelical church and social conservatives should do in response. I am convinced they can be reached, empowered and mobilized ... but not with the same old tired rhetoric and judgmental approaches. Before I give a prescription, here are some of the specifics of the spiritual views listed in the Pew report.

Abortion

Opinions on legalized abortion have shifted from earlier surveys. Previously middle age categories (those 30-49 and those 50-64) tended to support legalized abortion while young people and seniors expressed more opposition. From a 2009 survey, most groups have expressed a more conservative direction in their attitudes toward abortion. The only exception to this seems to be young people, 52 percent of which say that abortion should be legalized in all or most cases.

Pornography

In terms of views on pornography, 21 percent of Millennials believe pornography should be illegal, compared to 24 percent of Gen Xers and 22 percent of Baby Boomers. Current data for older generations is not available, but data from 1970 and later point toward the trend that people become more and more opposed to pornography, as they get older.

Prayer, Bible Reading in Public Schools

As different generations have been asked about prayer and Bible reading within the public school system, those questioned in early adulthood have given comparable opinions; 51 percent of Baby Boomers, 54 percent of Gen Xers, and 56 percent of Millennials approved the ban on Bible reading and prayer. However, as the generations have grown older, the Boomers and Gen Xers have expressed less support of the ban on prayer and Bible reading.

I believe that the above survey findings can give us important direction. The greatest opportunity for evangelicals to bring Millennials back to church has to do with messaging and outreach. In the area of outreach – as Millennials come of age, they will want to know how to raise their children and maintain their marriages and other significant personal relationships. Historically, previous

generations have returned to church when these needs became evident.

But will our churches be ready when they darken our doors? This is where messaging comes in.

In my many public appearances, especially on television, I have found that how

you deliver your message is often more important than the nuances of your point

of view. A few months ago, a clip from comments I made about health care reform

went out across the Internet with a vengeance. I was depicted as a preacher

without compassion and a legalistic sell-out because of my views on abortion

and maintaining the quality of care for life-threatening illnesses. The mistake

that I made in that presentation is the mistake that many preachers make when

engaging the culture in moral arguments. We must be clear, concise and

understand that the biblical and ethical illiteracy of our generation requires

masterful crafting of our viewpoint.

Further, what

many from the theological world believe is very, very simplistic may have to be

communicated in stages over a long period of time, even to people within our

own flocks. This communication gap is often why our young people or Millennials

don't understand the problems with pornography, abortion or divorce, for

example. Our churches have not made the sociological cases that prove the moral

admonitions against these vices have modern-day weight. Preachers are often guilty of simply banning behaviors the culture sees as normative instead of giving listeners an opportunity to make informed personal choices, which also have cultural and political ramifications.

The best example of someone who has done this right in recent months is the story we shared with you recently about Catherine David of Georgia Right to Life. People did not see her provocative billboard campaign as judgmental, but rather informative and helpful. Thus young women who most needed to make the life choice about abortion were positively affected while simultaneously promoting the political action to defund Planned Parenthood in their state.

Like Catherine David, we must personalize our faith and help new converts and younger generations understand their choices and their own needs. Today's clergy need to be a combination of biblical expositors, social commentators, and moral activists who do perform these roles with a heart of compassion for people caught up in the fast-paced rhythm of our times.

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