

Jeff's Jottings
November 1, 2019

The Mystery of Millennials

It's been the question of the week virtually every week I've been in this role with the Presbytery of the Twin Cities Area: *Where are the young people? Why won't they come to church? And can we get them to change their mind?*

They're good questions without simple answers. In the last couple of weeks, two new studies revealed some interesting insights, from which we might learn.

The Pew Research Center's new study tracking America's religious landscape found that, although religious beliefs and practices have been declining at a rapid pace for people of all ages, the drop-off has been most pronounced among people ages 23 to 38. In 2019, roughly two-thirds attend worship services "a few times a year" or less, and 4 in 10 say they seldom or never go. A decade ago, it was more than half and only 3 in 10, respectively. Near a quarter of all U.S. adults are now "nones" (persons stating no religious identification), a percentage even higher among younger adults than those who are older.

What are millennials doing instead? Not television (at least not the way older generations did it) or vacations or weddings (less than 20% of weddings are now in a church) or commuting to work or buying houses. And yet, a recent research paper from the Federal Reserve, "Are Millennials Different?," suggests that, contrary to stereotypes, "millennials do not appear to have preferences for consumption that differ significantly from those of earlier generations." What they have, at ages comparative to earlier generations, is less income, more student debt, and higher levels of anxiety and social isolation than did either Gen Xers or baby boomers at similar ages. A new survey from the Barna organization reported that four out of five young adults affirm—and nearly half strongly affirm—that "society is facing a crisis of leadership because there are not enough good leaders right now."

Do all these numbers and descriptions mean anything for churches? Yes. First, that something is happening in the culture around us that is far bigger than just church. There are structural factors at work reshaping today's cultural landscape that by their very magnitude can't help but impact church life. These trends are more evident among millennials than among those who are older, but true across the board, and one of the impacts is that Americans as a whole are less likely to say they have a formal religious identity, and less likely to report being frequent church attenders. That is that.

But this I also know: that as I look around this presbytery, and talk with colleagues across the country, I continue to see, time and again, the irresistible nature of generous churches: churches revived, and persons renewed, when motivated by a desire to love widely and care

deeply for those around them. In a world where caustic, narrow divisions abound and are increasing, a welcoming, inclusive, big-hearted church has a real allure.

I know it's hard to see the numbers dwindling in places we love so much. And it's hard not to think we've done something wrong to cause it, or that the people not coming are themselves doing something wrong. Instead of blame—it's not anyone's fault—what if, instead, we spent 20 minutes in a few meetings of session or PW or Hospitality Committee asking different questions. About how we are actually being a welcoming, inclusive, big-hearted church—and what those not in our presence (including millennials) would look for and want in that definition of the church? About how we might open up our own views and preferences for young people being battered by forces they don't embrace any more than you or I do?

Your numbers may or may not budge. But I wonder if your spirits and energy might.

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One other thing, if I may. This is my fifth November writing Jottings, but the first time it will actually appear on November 1st, All Saints' Day, the day we in the church intentionally remember those who have passed from this life to the next. That alone is reason enough to reflection and thanksgiving, for all the faithful who have guided us on this journey of faith and witness. For me, personally, All Saints' Day is something more: the day on which my son was baptized, I was ordained to the ministry of Word and sacrament, and, one year ago, my father died. We all have days and people and stories which mean something profound to us. This day, today, will always be special for me, in the way it ties me across generations to the life of faith.