



What can the Church do for the Burned Out Generation?

I've never known how to explain to older church members why their children or grandchildren just aren't as involved as they are. It's not that these younger generations don't attend church, or don't profess faith, or don't want to be involved. It's that they just... aren't. They can't make it. With varying degrees of judgement, I hear grief mingled with confusion and fear in the Bible studies, circle gatherings, and council meetings.

"What did we do wrong? We raised them in church, why aren't they here? When I was young I managed to get my kids to church on Sunday morning. I was a working mother and I still showed up."

I've never known how to explain the overwhelming feeling of just not having enough time, even for things you care about, that I sense from so many people my age — and that I often feel myself. I've not been able to quantify the poundage of pressure on my generation—the Millennials—in a way that wasn't written off as being weak or whiny or self-absorbed.

Last week, an article from BuzzFeedNews suddenly popped up all over my Facebook newsfeed, shared almost simultaneously by friends who didn't know each other, who lived across the country, who had different jobs and family situations. It was [Anne Helen Peterson's "How Millennials Became the Burnout Generation."](#) For each of us, this lengthy and well-researched article named and explained what we've been feeling for the decade-plus that we have been considered "real adults."

In the article, Peterson explains that for my generation, we have been pushed to work harder, to prepare more, to fit yet another career-

building activity into our lives since we were children. She calls it “optimization,” and it is the ever-beating drum that defines our world. Unfortunately, despite a life of constantly optimizing for greater production and success, many Millennials have not seen the promised financial stability of a life of working hard and making good decisions.

Instead, we are a generation that graduated into a recession, struggled to find steady or gainful employment, and still is lagging behind. The precariousness of our financial stability, despite a lifetime of preparation, creates dissonance and shame. There is a very real psychic burden. The result of optimization, she also explains, is that we have been trained to make the best use of our time and as a result we struggle with tasks that are high-effort and low-reward, such as running errands that can’t be optimized for efficiency (think of filling out a form on paper and having to hand deliver it somewhere). There are additional pressures introduced by social media, our political climate, and the demands of work that doesn’t stop at the office door.

The reason for all of this drive to do more is, in Peterson’s estimation, about us as workers being always pushed to produce more, to turn a bigger profit. The result is a generation that is already burned out.

In my experience, the church has been guilty of buying into the pressure to optimize. Most of the conversations about reaching “young families” revolve around making church easier to engage with quickly so they can return to the rest of their busy lives. Ministries like “ashes to go” on Ash Wednesday are an obvious example of this optimization, but other trends belie our buy-in to this pattern too. In many larger, well-staffed churches, discipling children involves dropping them off to be taught by professionals for about an hour while the parents worship before going on to the next practice or meeting. I have personally written and distributed Bible studies that can be read quickly in the morning, rather than involving discussion with a group. Not only have our efforts to meet Millennials where they/we are been unsuccessful, we have unwittingly been contributing to the problem.

The work of discipleship is slow. The work of relationship is slow. The change we desire to see in the lives of our church members and the changes we desire to bring into our communities cannot and should not be “optimized.” Furthermore, the drive to greater production contradicts the truth of a God who loves us even as sinners who cannot do good on our own. It is not only a pastoral task for the church to make space for de-optimization, but it is our prophetic task as well. We must be the ones reminding all the burned-out young adults in our lives that they’re loved no matter what they do or don’t do, no matter how perfect or imperfect their lives are, no matter how successful they are or how much they struggle.

At the end of the article, Peterson asks what can be done to change this systemic problem other than overhaul our economic system. In the church at least, we can turn away from the idol of optimization and production. We already have the tools to do this in our practice of sabbath and in our emphasis on sanctification as a life-long process. Sabbath, understood as a set-aside and *inviolable* time of rest from production and the enjoyment of creativity with God, stands in stark contrast to a world where every moment must be building a brand or contributing to a bottom line. The long, slow work of sanctification is a reminder of the importance of our relationship with God and the scope of transformation. It often requires us to stop and pay attention to ourselves, to each other, and to the Spirit’s movement in the world. It is not an ingestion of knowledge (as we so often treat discipleship ministries), but a reforming of who we are into the image of Christ. It honors our created-ness and beloved-ness in a world that sees us as tools.

For our churches to have any relevance to a generation that is already burned out, we cannot contribute to or mimic what caused the burnout in the first place. The Gospel is already contrary to the message that led us here; we must reclaim and proclaim boldly that very difference.