

Millennials in Ministry

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JUDSON PRESS
PUBLISHERS SINCE 1824



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*To my parents and siblings, for teaching me
about loving and serving God*

*To Matthew, for supporting and pursuing
God's calling on our lives*

Millennials in Ministry

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Interior design by Beth Oberholtzer.

Cover design by Thom Fecik.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication data

Erlacher, Jolene Cassellius.

Millennials in ministry / Jolene Cassellius Erlacher. — first [edition].

pages cm

ISBN 978-0-8170-1752-1 (pbk. : alk. paper) 1. Church work with young adults. 2. Generation Y. 3. Christian leadership. I. Title.

BV4446.E75 2014

262'.140842—dc23

2014008418

Printed in the U.S.A.

First printing, 2014.

CHAPTER 1

Generations at a Glance

Why take the time to understand the implications of diverse generations in ministry today? The future of the church in North America demands we do so. One young youth pastor explained the situation we face: “I have seen so much devastation with young people in ministry. If they have a bad experience at a church, it almost ruins their call forever. I’ve seen it so often.” Mainstream media, bloggers, and researchers have followed and commented extensively on the phenomenon of Millennials leaving the church. While this generational trend is important to understand, the loss of Millennials in church and ministry leadership is arguably the most pressing issue facing the church in America at this moment in history. Failure to pass the mantle of leadership effectively to the next generation threatens the kingdom work older leaders have dedicated their lives to fulfill. At this critical juncture, amid drastic social and cultural change, we are accountable to engage and effectively empower those who will carry the responsibility of serving, ministering, and leading in the uncertain days ahead.

Older leaders sometimes comment that young ministers must demonstrate more maturity or commitment before they can be entrusted with ministry opportunities, or be worthy of the time

and effort required to mentor and develop them. While this might be ideal, it is unrealistic. Time is moving quickly. Most Millennials have graduated from college, and some are already taking senior leadership roles in ministry organizations and churches. Our window for engaging the calling they sense to ministry and empowering them for effective service is rapidly closing. One senior church leader confessed that three of the four Millennials who came to work at his church in the past few years have now left ministry altogether. It is unlikely they will ever return to full-time church work. This statistic is not uncommon. We cannot afford to hemorrhage young leaders at this rate.

So, how do we facilitate healthy intergenerational leadership within ministry contexts? The more mature leaders must assume responsibility to learn, adapt, and sacrifice in order to retain a generation for kingdom service. Adapting does not mean accommodating every need and desire we encounter in young leaders. It does, however, mean adjusting our expectations of where young staff members are now, in order to teach and develop them for future leadership challenges and roles. The consequences of not doing so are simply catastrophic for ministry leadership in the days to come. Furthermore, Millennials who truly feel a call to ministry must begin to contemplate the long-term consequences of their preferences and be willing to adjust their own expectations as needed. The balance of various generational perspectives allows for ultimate health within the body of Christ.

Multigenerational Leadership

Five generations coexist in the church today. Unprecedented diversity exists among the various age cohorts. Consider that the oldest of us witnessed World War II and the Golden Age of Radio. The youngest have never known a world without the Internet or without constant connection to people and events around the planet. The worldviews, perspectives, and desires represented across this expansive range of experiences are inevitably diverse. This incredible diversity elicits miscommunication and misunderstanding with devastating results, not only in the church, but in

families, communities, and culture. Too often, the miscommunication and confusion that arise between young ministers and their leaders or churches and organizations result in Millennials choosing to leave formal ministry roles permanently. Efforts to facilitate healthy and realistic expectations and relationships must begin with understanding. Toward that end, let's look more closely at the generations in the church today.

The Silent generation was born between 1925 and 1945, during the Great Depression and World War II. They were raised by parents who enforced discipline, conformity, and obedience. As a result of the tumultuous times in which they were born, they value tradition, security, hard work, and respect. Silents understand the value of patience, delayed reward, and duty. Later generations owe much to the sacrifices they, their parents, and their grandparents made during a significant period in our country's history. To them, a career represented a means of living for which they were grateful, because they understood what it meant to go without. In their seventies and eighties now, most Silents are retired but they continue to influence denominations, churches, agencies, and organizations as founders, board members, and donors.

Baby Boomers were born between 1946 and 1964. Parental trends at the time focused on nurturing and pampering children. Coming of age during a period of relative prosperity and peace, Boomers entered adulthood with great optimism and drive. As the largest generation at the time, they forced culture, government, and industry to cater to their preferences and perspectives. As a result, Boomers often embody the narcissism and entitlement that are also seen in Millennials, a generation now surpassing the Boomers in numbers. For Boomers, work and career have been a central focus in life, and their hard work has contributed to the growth of many corporations, ministries, and churches. Boomers represent the senior leadership in most denominations and organizations today. In many cases, they represent the majority of decision-making positions. As they retire in the next decade or two, many churches and organizations will be scrambling to fill critical leadership roles for future growth and success.

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Generation X was born between 1965 and 1979. As children, they experienced the explosive increase in divorce and daycare. Many paid the price for parental choices related to careers, ambitions, and relationships. As a result, they are often skeptical, independent, and pragmatic. Feeling hopeless, many checked out of society before they ever fully engaged. Generation X lives in the shadow of the larger generations preceding and following them. For many, career is a necessity that at times interferes with their lives. Nonetheless, they are realistic, balanced, competent with technology, and experienced in the workplace. Many Xers have learned to adapt and work effectively with Boomers as bosses and Millennials as colleagues. They offer much to the church as we face days of generational transition ahead.

Born between 1980 and 1995, today's young adults, also known as Millennials, constitute the largest generation in America's history to date. They are the most studied and observed generation on record. As they entered life, our society embraced the self-esteem movement, hoping a focus on building children's confidence would help negate a number of social issues. Parents put children first and supervised them closely. As a result, a generation of young people emerged that is protected, narcissistic, driven, and confident. At the same time, they are team players, willing to serve, and respectful of their parents and leaders. They differ in many ways from their older siblings and parents. (We examine more of these differences in the next two chapters.) Millennials view careers as a place to serve and find meaning. Retaining Millennials is proving to be a challenge for many corporations and organizations, including churches, missions agencies, and other parachurch organizations. This book responds to the dilemma of low retention and job satisfaction affecting many young adults in ministry today.

Generation Z, born after 1995, is still developing its cohort identity. So far, we know some significant factors affecting them and their emerging perspectives. Increasingly diverse, Generation Z will experience the end of the white majority in the U.S. during their lifetime. They are the first generation not only to experience complete exposure to technology since birth, but to have parents

and other adults in their lives similarly engrossed by technology. They are posted, commented on, and liked via social media sites before they can even smile or talk. Other factors for Generation Z include declining economic opportunities, changing family structures, and an increasingly polarized political landscape. Time will tell how these and other factors will affect them long-term. In the meantime, the church must thoughtfully and prayerfully consider how we train and equip this developing generation.

The Call to Multigenerational Ministry

The context of church or ministry teams provides powerful opportunities for the diverse generations alive today to interact with and learn from one another as they serve God's kingdom. Second Timothy 3 gives us a powerful image of effective intergenerational mentoring and leadership in ministry. In verse 10, Paul tells Timothy, "You, however, know all about my teaching, my way of life, my purpose, faith, patience, love, endurance" (NIV). The apostle effectively shared the message and work he was called to with the next generation, modeling and mentoring Timothy for the work of the ministry. In verse 14, Paul challenges Timothy, "Continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it" (NIV). Paul could make this request of Timothy because he had made a significant investment into the life of this young leader.

In the next chapter, we begin to look at some of the specific ways in which Millennials differ from older generations in their views and practices regarding religion, church, and spirituality. These differences can be challenging to engage with and understand. As we delve into these topics, mature leaders reading this book will need wisdom and courage to apply Paul's model of intergenerational leadership to our context today.

To Millennial Readers

Have you ever grown tired of answering the technology-related questions of colleagues? Have you been embarrassed by comments that seem politically incorrect or antiquated? It is easy to

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focus on what someone who is older than you does not know or understand about the world you inhabit. However, have you ever stopped to ask people twenty or thirty years older than you what job skills they had to learn in their first job? Or what perspectives were popular when they were your age? My grandma regularly sends me text messages and “likes” my comments on Facebook. It takes a lot of effort for her to set up a new cell phone, and she often has questions for us grandkids about her computer. However, when I think of the skills she has learned over the course of her life, I am in awe of the knowledge, intelligence, and adaptability her life represents! As we talk about your generation in the next few chapters, make an intentional effort to find opportunities to understand the generations in whose footsteps you walk.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- 1.** With which generational cohort do you most identify?
Why?
- 2.** Which generational cohort is most difficult for you to understand? How do the core values of your generation present obstacles in relating to team members from other generations?
- 3.** Reflect on the intergenerational relationships in your life. Where are the most meaningful learning and mentoring opportunities occurring?