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Living Lutheran,
December 2017

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Study guide

The millennial mystery

By Robert C. Blezard

You hear it in many congregations: Where are the young adults? In the 50 years since mainline churches hit their peak in membership, our culture has undergone a sweeping change. As a whole, people think differently about faith, God and religion than they did in 1967, and yet for the most part our churches haven't adapted to the new landscape. The millennial generation embodies the new attitudes about church and spirituality, and better understanding them may help us transform our congregations to help meet the needs of people in the 21st century.

Exercise 1: Who's missing?

Take an informal accounting of the people who attend worship in your congregation for a week or two, particularly with attention to the age representation. How many are from newborn to 10 years old; how many from 10 to 20 years, how many in their 20s, 30s, 40s, 50s, 60s, 70s and above 80? If your congregation is like most in the ELCA, the older members are dominant, but your results may indicate where there is particular work to do. Discuss:

- What do your results show? What is surprising about the data? What was in keeping with expectations?
- Do you have as many children, teens and young adults as you would like?
- Was there a time when there were many more younger members in the congregation? When? What changed?
- How might your congregation have to change to become more inviting/welcoming/comfortable for millennials and younger members? (A good idea would be to assemble a group of millennials and younger members and ask them what they like about church and what they would change if they had the opportunity.)
- What strategy does your congregation have to attract and integrate millennials and younger members into the life of the church? If it doesn't have one, why not?

For action: Formulate a plan for reaching out to the younger members of your congregation and community. Ask younger people for their suggestions on how to make congregational life more appealing. Draft a strategy to implement their suggestions and present this action plan to the congregation council, pastor and other leaders.



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Exercise 2: “Community” of the past

If you go to one of those funerals where the family posts photos of the departed person's life, you may be reminded of how life in the 50s and 60s was organized around clubs and organizations—not only formal institutions like the church, Lions, Elks, 4-H Club and the Grange, but also the informal bridge clubs, bowling leagues, women's groups, softball teams and so on.

- From your earliest memory, how did people generally gather for community and socializing?
- Did your parents socialize in groups? If so, how, and which ones? What did it mean to them?
- Have you ever belonged to a group that met for community and fellowship?
- How has community and socializing changed in this country? Why?
- Has the community aspect of your congregation experienced change? Why?
- Come up with five reasons why churches may no longer be attractive to millennials (better yet, engage a panel of 20-somethings and discuss it with them).
- Brainstorm five ideas for how churches might invigorate their worship and community life to appeal to millennials (again, better to engage a panel to help you explore).

Exercise 3: What do they want?

In the article, Seth Nelson suggests focusing not on why people, especially young people, are leaving the church, but rather why they would want to come to your church in the first place. With that in mind, discuss:

- When you go to an ice cream shop, you can order something plain, such as chocolate or vanilla, or something new and different, like salted caramel crunch or rocky road. If worship services, social activities, Christian education and service projects were ice cream, what flavors does your church “serve up” week after week and month after month for each?
- Why has your congregation stuck with those flavors?
- Has your congregation ever experimented with other flavors?
- When you talk to members of a desired target group, such as millennials, what flavor would they like to see in church? (If your church hasn't asked, why not? What does that say about your congregation? How could you remedy the situation?)



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- When you look at congregations that are growing in your area, what flavors do they serve? How might you learn from these congregations?

Exercise 4: Authenticity

Young adults frequently report that they want to see “authenticity” in a congregation and its leaders. Let’s explore this elusive concept.

- How would you describe this thing called authenticity (if your group consists of older members, engage some 20- and 30-somethings to help you understand)?
- What does authenticity mean in a congregational context? Where do you see it evidenced? Why? Where have other people seen it evidenced?
- Many millennials and young adults experience the opposite of authenticity in their church. How would you or they describe that? What does inauthenticity feel like? When have you seen it evidenced?
- What are some reasons or explanations behind the need for authenticity among younger adults?
- Why is the craving for authenticity not so much a problem for older adults?
- What are some ways that your congregation can improve its authenticity quotient?

Exercise 5: Leadership

In a healthy congregation, leadership on all levels is shared among people of varied interests, ages, genders, wealth levels, national origins and so on. What’s leadership like at your congregation? Make a list of your congregation council members and other top leaders and answer yes or no to the following questions:

Y/N Is there a balance of male and female leaders?

Y/N Is there a mix of young and old people?

Y/N Is there a mix of people of different economic backgrounds?

Y/N Is there a mix of people of national origins?

Y/N Does the leadership reflect your immediate community?

Y/N Does the leadership reflect differing political and social viewpoints?

Now discuss:

- What are the strengths and weaknesses implicit in every response?
- For each “no” answer, what reasons or explanations can you think of? For each “yes” answer?
- What are the implications of each “no” on decision-making at your



Study guide: **The millennial mystery** *continued*

congregation? For each “yes” answer?

- Congregation council members are usually restricted to a certain number of terms. Why is it important for leadership to change every once in a while?
- What are good reasons that other key leadership positions be subject to “term limits” of some sort?
- How do you know when leadership becomes “stale” or “burned out” in a congregation? What are the consequences on church life?
- What methods does your congregation use (or should it use) to encourage longtime leaders to pass their knowledge on to new leaders?
- What methods does your congregation use (or should it use) to groom and encourage new people to assume leadership positions?
- Why is it important to invite younger adults to take on leadership positions? What do they bring?

Exercise 6: “Radical” Jesus

It’s not a criticism exclusively among younger adults that the “Jesus” who is talked about, preached about, worshiped at many congregations is relatively “tame”—not particularly concerned about issues of the day, such as racism, sexism, income inequality, poverty, hunger, war, crime, education and so on. They yearn for talk about the Jesus they see in the Gospels, who reached out to the marginalized, fed the hungry, healed the sick, spoke forcefully against religious hypocrisy, warned about the spiritual dangers of money and modeled God’s unconditional love for all. This is the Jesus who taught us to love God with all our being and to love our neighbor as ourselves. Which Jesus shows up at your congregation?

- Which statement more accurately reflects Jesus’ call to his followers? In choosing, what Scripture passages come to mind to support your answer?
 1. Jesus calls us to tend primarily to our private spirituality and salvation, as well as the salvation of others whom God calls into our midst. We don’t have to be actively concerned about problems in the world around us or their effects on our neighbors.
 2. Jesus calls us to become spiritual people so that in his name we can engage the world, reaching out to the poor, marginalized and needy, and making the world safer and more just, while at the same time inviting others to join us in the work of the kingdom.
- What examples can you site of your congregation speaking out in the name of Christ on social issues of the day, such as hunger, violence, racism (and other forms of prejudice) and income inequality? Would

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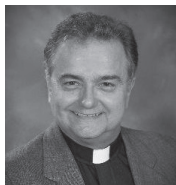
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About the study guide author:



Rob Blezard

is an assistant to the bishop in the Lower Susque-

hanna Synod. He holds degrees from Boston University School of Theology and the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg (Pa).

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Jesus be pleased with your efforts? What additional work needs to be done in this area?

- What service ministries does your congregation support or engage in, such as Habitat for Humanity, the local soup kitchen or food pantry, etc.? Would Jesus be pleased with your efforts? Are these efforts sufficient or should/could you do more? How?
- In what ways does your congregation embody Jesus' call to love God with all your being? How well is that expressed in preaching, worship, education, service and community life? How could you do better?
- In what ways does your congregation embody Jesus' call to love your neighbor as yourself? How well is that expressed in preaching, worship, education, service and community life? How could you do better?
- Does your congregation "talk the talk" of discipleship but not "walk the walk"? Explain. How can your congregation do better?

THE MILLENNIAL MYSTERY

A generation distanced from the church, yet longing for community

By Erin Strybis

Three years ago when Seth Nelson began his call at Faith Lutheran Church in Ronan, Mont., his parishioners repeatedly asked him: “Why aren’t people your age coming to church?”

Nelson, 32, didn’t know. But it got him thinking, “Why was I drawn deeper and deeper into the church while others [my age] left it behind?”

This enigma led Nelson to research, write and self-publish a book on the topic—*The Church Unknown* (2016).

“In reality, there are many, varied and complex reasons as to why a horde of young people are bailing on the church,” he said.

A 2016 Public Religion Research Institute study affirms this complexity, but notes that for those who grew up religious, “a lack of belief in the teaching of religion was the most commonly cited reason for disaffiliation.”

About American millennials

- Largest living generation in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau).
- Born between 1982-2000; age 17-35 (Census Bureau).
- First generation of “digital natives” (Pew Research Center).
- Most highly educated and culturally diverse generation in the U.S. (Pew).
- Individualistic/narcissistic (*Generation Me*, 2006).
- More socially conscious/liberal than elders (Pew).
- Detached from institutions and networked with friends (Pew).

Seth Nelson’s book *The Church Unknown* (2016) is available through Amazon.

Seth Nelson

Nelson noticed that the church isn't alone in "feeling a crunch." Both it and other membership-based institutions that thrived in an earlier era aren't being embraced by millennials in adulthood, the Pew Research Center reports.

Current records from the ELCA churchwide organization reflect this trend: 9 percent of known ELCA members are millennials while 84 percent belong to previous generations.

WHERE ARE MILLENNIALS GATHERING?

Before digital communication, the church and other institutions like it served as a central meeting place for adults, Nelson said. But today worship attendance continues to drop from its peak in the 1950s and 1960s, especially among millennials who now see church as one choice among many for how they spend their leisure time, Nelson said.

In the 2015 report "How we gather," Harvard Divinity students Angie Thurston and Casper ter Kuile argue that millennials are "decidedly looking for spirituality and community in

combination," but many are meeting this need at the gym, through special-interest groups or elsewhere.

"The personal sharing and support you might have once received in a church community, people are finding in social media groups, ultimate frisbee, you name it," Nelson added.

Brian Beckstrom, campus pastor of Wartburg College, Waverly, Iowa, has observed this in his nine years working with millennial students. "Younger adults tend to organize as people always do—around tribes," he said. He sees many millennials forming communities based on shared interests, whether that be fitness, politics, video games or music.

Brianna Lombardo, 30, who grew up Roman Catholic but no longer attends mass regularly, found her tribe through a community of yogis, both at her studio and via social media. She started practicing yoga after a "brutal breakup" and being diagnosed with clinical depression. Later, Lombardo went on to instruct classes too.

"Through [yoga], I've connected with amazing

Generational replacement helping drive growth of unaffiliated, decline of mainline Protestantism and Catholicism

| | Evangelical Protestants | | Mainline Prot. | | Historically black Prot. | Catholic | | Other Christian groups | Other groups | Unaffil. |
|---------------------------------|-------------------------|----|----------------|----|--------------------------|----------|---|------------------------|--------------|----------|
| Silent generation (1928-1945) | 30 | 22 | | 5 | 24 | 3 | 4 | 11 | | |
| Baby boomers (1946-1964) | 28 | 17 | 7 | | 23 | 3 | 5 | 17 | | |
| Generation X (1965-1980) | 25 | 13 | 7 | | 21 | 4 | 6 | 23 | | |
| Older millennials (1981-1989) | 22 | 10 | 6 | 16 | 3 | 8 | | 34 | | |
| Younger millennials (1990-1996) | 19 | 11 | 6 | 16 | 3 | 8 | | 36 | | |

2014 Religious Landscape Study, conducted June 4-Sept. 30, 2014. Figures may not add to 100% because of rounding. Don't know/refused answers not shown. "Other Christian groups" includes Mormons, Orthodox Christians, Jehovah's Witnesses and a number of smaller Christian groups.

Pew Research Center

people, not just in Chicago but all across the U.S. and world,” she said. “It has given me a sense of hope that I can overcome depression even on my worst days.”

WHAT ARE THEY SEEKING?

Rather than dwell on low numbers, Nelson asserts in his book that, in order to grow, the church needs to “stop asking why people are leaving ... and focus instead on why people would want to come and be part of our communities.”

That answer might be as simple as an invitation. Beckstrom did some research among Wartburg students on their top spiritual influences. “The major thing was friends,” he said.

Timothy Baird, 21, didn’t grow up attending church but got involved in Wartburg’s “Sanctuary” services because his fiancée, Rebecca Bennett, invited him. “At first it was simply for Rebecca’s sake, but after a while I started attending because I wanted to,” he said.

A music major and musician, Baird even began singing in Sanctuary’s worship band. “I would say ultimately what drew me toward faith was Rebecca and music,” he said.

Betsy Hedberg, 29, visited Catholic mass each Easter and Christmas with her family, but only began going to a different church regularly after her friends invited her to visit their youth group. The experience drew her deeper into a community of faith, she said. Today the Minnesotan attends

a Lutheran church with her husband and son. “Church is an important place to find community in Christ,” she said.

CRAVING AUTHENTIC CONNECTIONS

After Peter Severson, 30, relocated to Denver to work as director of Lutheran Advocacy Ministry—Colorado, he began looking for a congregation because it was important to him to care for his spiritual life. The lifelong Lutheran and former volunteer with ELCA Young Adults in Global Mission found his faith community, House For All Sinners and Saints, Denver, in the same way Baird and Hedberg did—through friends.

House is a growing, young ELCA congregation that describes itself as “queer-inclusive” and “social justice-oriented.” Many of its members didn’t grow up Lutheran, yet “it’s a liturgically and theologically orthodox community as far as Lutheranism goes,” he said.

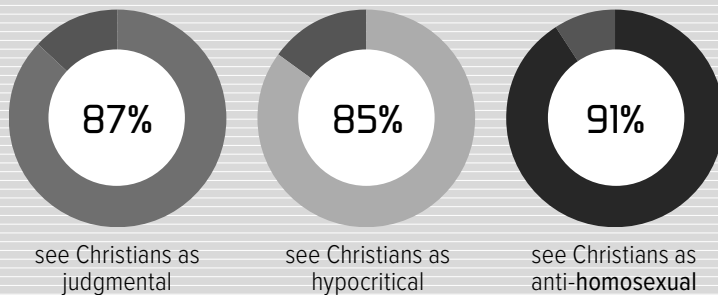
For Severson, the authenticity found at House is key. “There’s a lot to be said about the authenticity and vulnerability people feel free to experience in [this] community and how faith animates people to be free in that environment,” he said. That’s what has kept him connected, and the relationships he’s made because of it, he said.

People and places that reflect the radical, inclusive love of Jesus are what today’s young adults are searching for in a congregation, said

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Among millennials

A 2014 study of 834 millennials conducted by the Barna Group in collaboration with Cornerstone Knowledge network found that a “significant number of young adults have (deep) complaints about the church.” One-third of those surveyed who do not attend church say they see Christians as judgmental (87 percent), hypocritical (85 percent), anti-homosexual (91 percent) and insensitive to others.



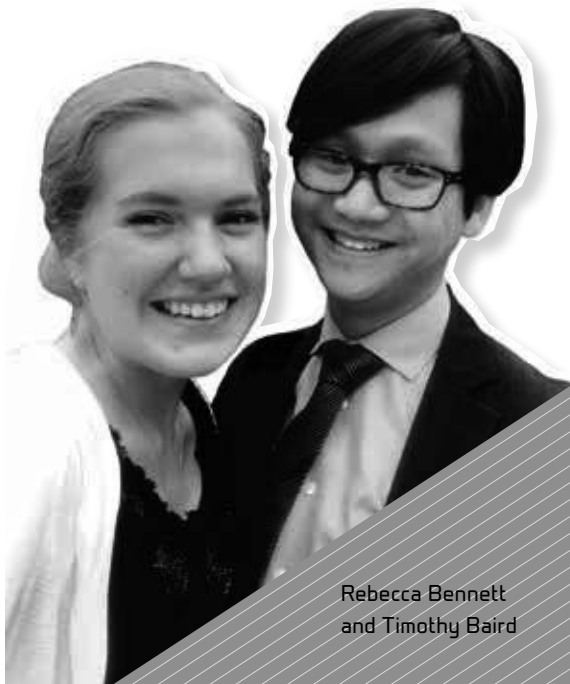
Data from the Barna FRAME Sacred Roots.

Betsy and Noah Hedberg



Millennials speak out

More than 30 millennials from varied religious upbringings lent their voices to the research for this article.



Rebecca Bennett
and Timothy Baird

Here are a few reasons why they don't attend church:

- "I don't agree with the church's stance on certain topics and I don't see that those stances embody the teachings of Christ."
—Mallory Holy
- "It's just not an experience that feels impactful to me personally. I want to be out doing good in the world."
—Grace Gold
- "The advent of social media and mass communication makes it light-years easier to organize social events and gatherings. Now we can just text, email and Facebook events to each other."
—Chris Helland
- "I like God. I don't think many places have church right."
—Shaun Hautly
- "Baby at home, working full time ... my weekend days feel precious and, to be honest, I just don't go because I don't want to."
—Emily Lehman
- "It was my transition back into North American culture (after Young Adults in Global Mission) that made me feel less connected to the church and more connected to people. ... I [am] feeding that need in other ways by volunteering."
—Amanda Tompkins

Here's why they still belong:

- "I really wanted to be involved in church but didn't know how until I found another church. Leadership ... has really opened up my faith."
—Leemu Garyu
- "I need that special time to worship God and help me grow deeper in understanding."
—Kim Zoellick
- "Church is where we receive the means of grace and join in fellowship with the body of Christ."
—Benjamin Anderson
- "I'm Catholic so like, guilt. I try to go regularly."
—Lauren Finney
- "My granny took me. ... In high school and college, church really became my tribe, my passion. I need Sunday or everything feels off."
—Blake Scalet
- "I want my children ... to know their creator and savior and one day live with him in heaven, because at the end of this life that's what's really important."
—Kristen Holz



Leemu Garyu

Don Romsa, ELCA program director for campus ministry.

“Some of our students who graduate and leave our campus ministry programs have difficulty finding a congregational home in which they feel warmly accepted and affirmed for what they have to offer,” Romsa said.

Instead, they look elsewhere for spiritual nurture. In fact, 2 out of 5 millennials say they find God outside of church walls, according to the Barna Group.

This is the case for Kimberly Compton, 30, who left the church twice (one Baptist; the other a nondenominational new start) over incongruencies in what was professed and what was actually practiced. She wants to find a church home where “what we say and do lines up, [but] it’s hard to find a church in Richmond, Va., that’s talking about social justice and Black Lives Matter. ... I find my church in a kayak on the Deans River on Sunday morning.”

In his work, Nelson has observed that some ELCA congregations struggle to create spaces for these real connections to be made because “there’s a resistance to vulnerability.”

LEADING ACROSS THE CHURCH

From an early age, Ángel Marrero was involved in the life and ministry of Cristo Victorioso Lutheran Church, Vega Baja, Puerto Rico. At 7, he was an acolyte; at 16, he served on synod council; and growing up, he preached at church events.

Now 28, the mission developer credits his home congregation and synod for entrusting him with leadership opportunities that gave him “a sense of belonging in the church.” That is why he has stayed in the church,

he said, even though many of his peers have left. While serving with the Caribbean Synod, Marrero said he never felt like “the token young person in the room,” but was treated as a vital member of the council.

Today, Marrero emulates this leadership model as pastor of Santuario Luterano, Waltham, Mass. He regularly invites millennials to fill leadership roles in the congregation, which is 100 percent Latino and includes young families.


When asked what he believes the ELCA needs to do to welcome millennials, Marrero said, “I’d like to see young adults at the center [of the church] and being entrusted with very important things in the life of the church. ... Why not let young adults be bishops?”

In his life and at Santuario, Marrero has seen the power of authentic engagement in retaining young adults.

Savanna Sullivan, ELCA director for young adult ministry, agrees: Congregations with the most active millennials “allow young adults to reach, to preach, to go to events, to plan service opportunities. The [congregations] where young adults



Ángel Marrero



Hyra Butler

Millennials in the ELCA

ELCA churchwide organization records indicate that

just 3.9%
of known lay leaders in the church are young adults.

And the majority of congregations are struggling to get **young adult ministry**

off the ground, according to a 2015 Faith Communities Today survey of 573 ELCA pastors.

Of the **62 new ELCA congregations** that started in 2016,

21%
are being led by millennials.

are in the pews are [those] that offered them opportunities to be leaders.”

For its part, the ELCA is taking steps toward change. Of the 62 congregations that started in 2016, 21 percent are being led by millennials. And through the ELCA Fund for Leaders, scholarships are awarded to aspiring rostered ministers, many of whom are young adults when they enter seminary (Nelson was one of them).

As part of Always Being Made New: The Campaign for the ELCA, grants are also being awarded to new young adult ministries. One such ministry is the Bend (Ore.) Youth Collective, where Kyra Butler, 28, is a leader.

She connected with Ron Werner, a mission developer working with the collective, a multid denominational project to help young people develop leadership skills as local activists. When Werner invited Butler to be a leader, she said “yes” immediately.

“The thing about the ELCA is that everything I’ve been hearing people say, ‘This is where we want to go; this is the kind of church we want to be—we’re trying to be more accepting, more welcoming, we want to include young people,’” Butler said. “I’m not hearing any other denomination say that.”


HUNGRY FOR JESUS

Many young adults, Romsa said, “really aren’t hungry for more church structure, or smooth

programming, or better praise bands, or fun social activities—they are hungry for the radical Jesus they discover in the Bible. In this Jesus, they see a God who is real—present on the margins, willing to shake things up, on the side of the lowly, choosing to die without status, and always radically loving us and the world.”

The more congregations that proclaim this Jesus, the more the church will find opportunities to engage millennials, Romsa said.

Although studies and articles predict the continued decline of the church, Nelson, for one, isn’t worried. Out of death, he said, comes resurrection.

“Ultimately, I’m an optimist,” he said. “The church is not a result of our ability to get it right. Our hope is rooted in the Holy Spirit. If we are a church willing to be broken and vulnerable, we will really find an audience.” 

Download a study guide by clicking on the “Spiritual practices & resources” tab at livinglutheran.org. A companion article by Brian Beckstrom on the top ways congregations can minister to young adults is also available online.



Erin Strybis is a content editor for *Living Lutheran*.