

Forget Millennials. Embrace Perennials!

By
George W. Bullard Jr.
BullardJournal@gmail.com
www.BullardJournal.org

How often do you hear people in your congregation say one of more of the following things?

- We've just got to reach some young adult families with children. I walk down the preschool hall every week and I'm embarrassed with how few children I see.
- We do not seem to be able to connect with the Millennials, and we must find a way.
- I am in a panic. We lost our youth minister again. We better find someone quick, or we will lose all the teenagers and their parents, and will face starting over again.
- We are declining in membership and attendance. We have to reach younger people or we will close.
- My children and grandchildren just left our church to pursue a more contemporary church with more exciting ministry for children and youth.
- This group known as Millennials do not seem to be interested in congregations with the quality of music and preaching we have. They want more of a rock concert with no rules and no discipline.

Congregations are obsessed with the birth generation known as Millennials, and are not quite sure how to connect with them. I wonder, however, if they truly understand Millennials, have poor stereotypes about them, and actually need to look at a different target group of people who may be right in their midst.

Not everyone born during a certain 18 or so year period—typically referred to as a birth generation cohort—are demographically the same people.

Some people in a birth generational cohort are outstanding, some okay, and some wierd. Some are left-handed, some right-handed, and some ambidextrous. Some are blue-collar, some white collar, and some no collar. Some are religious, some spiritual, and some doubters of the agnostic or atheistic kind.

For at least the past seven decades, North American culture has referred to these 18 or so year cohorts by names like Builders, Boomers, Busters, and Millennials. Probably when trying to understand and connect with the Boomer generation—born 1946 to February 9, 1964—is the first time there was mass interest in understanding birth generations.

Questions arose about how to market to them, how to connect with them, and how to engage them spiritually so they end up practicing their religious faith in a congregational expression.

In the 1970s there was a lot of energy put into research, writing and strategies about how to get the Boomer generation—who appeared to drop out of church by the end of high school—to

come back to church by their mid to late 20s. Similar effort was put into how to get those who never went to church to connect with the ministry of a congregation where they could experience a Christ-centered, faith-based spiritual journey.

For the past two decades another round of research, writing, and strategies has gone into seeking to understand the Millennial generation, which I choose to say were born from around 1982 through the year that began with the Y2K experience that ushered in the 21st century.

Because this group is part of the digital age where computers, the Internet, and virtual connecting moved into the mainstream, they are unique from previous generations. They defy clear definition if for no other reason than that they—like all their proceeding generations—are not a monolithic group.

Millennials are not all the same and want the same spiritual or religious lifestyle, if they even want anything to do with seeking spiritual fulfillment or established religion. Society has stereotyped Millennials, which has driven them away from known pathways, and kept a certain percentage of Millennials from embracing any existing label for the lifestyle they enjoy.

Here Come the Perennials

Is it time to stop stereotyping people by when they were born?

It is according to Gina Pell in a post on the blog site Medium.com. Her October 19, 2016 post titled “Meet the Perennials” suggests it is “because age ain’t nothin’ but a number.” (Reference <https://medium.com/the-what/meet-the-perennials-e91a7cd9f65f>)

What she is saying is that a certain percentage of Millennials are Perennials. By this she means that some of the characteristics ascribed to some Millennials are present in people across many generations. Perennials are what she calls people with a Millennial-like collection of characteristics, but who may be of any age.

Gina Pell likes the word Perennials because the generic definition of this word includes the concepts of “enduring, perpetual, ever-lasting, recurrent, and ever-blooming.” Her definition in her post is that Perennials “are ever-blooming, relevant people of all ages who live in the present time, know what’s happening in the world, stay current with technology, and have friends of all ages.”

It is a set of characteristics that is intergenerational. It is not about being a Builder, Boomer, Buster, or Millennial. Yet it may have taken the alternative style of the Millennials for us discover the Perennials.

What Gina has declared as Perennials is really a macro psychographic category. Psychographics have been popular in social research for about the past 35 years. They talk more about lifestyle characteristics than demographic characteristics. They are less about linear definitions of people groups by the year they were born, than they are about the life patterns of people involving what they think and how they behave.

Psychographics are a richer and deeper understanding of people that describes them rather than prescribes them. Dozens of psychographic categories of people can exist in a single birth generation. That can be a starting point for seeing the actual worth and value of individuals, and

not typing them with a big brush. And, remember, as the very definition of Perennials suggests, they transcend birth generations.

This is simultaneously disturbing and great news for congregations who want to know how to reach young adult households of married couples with children under 18. It is disturbing because it means there is not one right way to reach Millennials. The great news is that congregations have the opportunity—if they choose to take advantage of it—to get to know Millennials as persons and discover their real needs and desires.

Additionally, congregations may discover they have more Perennials in their congregation than they thought. These Perennials of various ages may be the best networkers to some of the Millennial generation.

Well, that is all I have to say about this today. Excuse me while I get online, connect with a Meetup, and go to that new coffee house downtown to build community with some Perennials.